



# INTRODUCTION

## THE POETICS OF PLANTS IN SPANISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

**I**n his essay “Literatura de fundación” (A literature of foundations) Octavio Paz chooses a striking botanical metaphor to illustrate the differences between Spanish and Spanish American literature: “La rama creció tanto que ya es tan grande como el tronco. En realidad, es otro árbol. Un árbol distinto, con hojas más verdes y jugos más amargos. Entre sus brazos anidan pájaros desconocidos en España” (The branch grew so much that it is already as big as the trunk. In reality, it is another tree. A different tree, with greener leaves and more bitter sap. Birds unknown in Spain nest among its branches).<sup>1</sup> Recourse to the language of plants in order to grapple with questions of cultural identity and expression is recurrent in Spanish American literature, where the pervasiveness of botanical imagery indicates the defining role of the natural world and an enduring concern about the relationship between people and plants. Spanish American writers from the late colonial period to the present have appealed to plants—to images of roots, trunks, and

branches as well as questions of vegetal life and ethics—as a means of exploring aesthetics and identity. My aim in this book is to show how plants have been fundamental to counterhegemonic identities across Latin American culture from the colonial period onward, exploring how vegetal discourses underpin local expressions of postcolonialism (Andrés Bello), feminism (Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Ana Mendieta), communism (Pablo Neruda), and posthumanism (Juan Carlos Galeano). Knowledge of the cultural histories of flora in Latin America, particularly of sacred trees such as the *Ceiba petandra*, reveals the deep connections between people and plants in Spanish American culture and facilitates counterdiscursive readings of canonical works, where plants articulate submerged histories, often at variance with those expressed by the central narrative. In this way, plant-centered readings of Spanish American culture reveal connections across seemingly disparate texts and traditions—colonial poetry, the plantation novel, the New World baroque, and feminist avant-garde art.

In this book I explore how plant imaginaries have allowed writers from across Spanish America not only to express ecological concerns but also to register their dissension with Western conceptions of nature—particularly exploitative modes of production that have underpinned capitalism in the New World from the tropical plantation to the agro-industrial expansion of soy in Argentina today. Although not always explicit, the redefinition of the relationship between humans and plants in Latin American literature is predicated largely on indigenous American modes of perception, in which the identities of humans and nonhumans are fluid and plants are considered sentient beings that we should respect and nurture. As Kate Soper notes, the entrenched Western “metaphysical” view of nature has been one in which the categories of the human and the nonhuman are held in opposition to one another. In contrast, the texts and authors considered here consistently stress the continuities and interdependencies between people and the natural world.<sup>2</sup> From the earliest days of independence, the view of nature expressed by Spanish

American writers has often dovetailed with indigenous American beliefs and, especially through their engagement with plants, prefigured much contemporary ecological thinking. In his recent *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Jason W. Moore holds up the nature/society binary as one of the great ills in Western culture, “implicated in the colossal violence, inequality, and oppression of the modern world” and “a fundamental condition of capital accumulation.” Over the past thirty years or so, as part of the spatial turn in the humanities, critics have consistently undermined the stability of this divide. Donna Haraway’s work, for instance, traces the multiple interactions between people, technology, animals, and living organisms, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing has recently explored “interspecies entanglements” via a study of the matsutake mushroom. As Bruno Latour states clearly in *We Have Never Been Modern*: “the very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures—different or universal—do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures.”<sup>3</sup>

Establishing the important role of plants in human society (a so-called plant turn) has been central to the redefinition of this nature/culture divide. The development of critical plant studies over the past decade has given rise to a number of important interventions in the question of how vegetal life relates to humans and of its influence in philosophy and literature.<sup>4</sup> In his accounts of vegetal metaphysics and plant ethics, Michael Marder has emerged as one of the most original and significant thinkers about the relationship between people and plants. Far from passive, non-moving, and noncommunicative entities, or simply as material for human use (for instance, as food or firewood), plants, according to Marder, are complex interactive beings who demand our attention and consideration. Marder’s work, especially his concept of “plant-thinking,” has been intrinsic to my understanding of how the view of plants expressed by many Spanish American writers is at variance with Western conceptions of nature.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the book I also draw on philosophical accounts of plant life by Matthew Hall, Luce Irigaray, and Emanuele Coccia to trace

how Latin American writers draw on plant imaginaries in order to foster ecological responsibility and awareness. In *Plants as Persons*, Hall notes the dearth of cultural and philosophical treatments of plants, despite the fact that “most places on earth which contain life are visibly *plantscapes*.” Through an extended analysis of the relationships between people and plants across different cultures, including in the Americas, Hall’s study helps “to locate the most appropriate human behavior toward plants” in a moment of global environmental crisis.<sup>6</sup> Irigaray and Coccia both offer extended considerations of the relationship between plants and people, including the way in which plants and humans share air. Coccia’s view of humans as immersed in a world of infinite “encounter and mixture,” with plants at its center, is consonant with the phyto-centric tendencies of much Spanish American literature.<sup>7</sup>

Key to my understanding of the transcendent role vegetation has played across Latin America are the pioneering anthropological studies of Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, especially the concepts of “perspectivism” and “multinaturalism,” which efface the differences between humans and nonhumans and stress a mutuality of culture and the possibility of metamorphosis into and out of other states.<sup>8</sup> With specific relation to plants, Eduardo Kohn’s formulation of an anthropology “beyond the human” in *How Forests Think*—the idea that “seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs”—provides an important anthropological analogue to the literary expositions of human/nonhuman encounters explored in this book.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the political ecological approach to people-plant relationships taken in Theresa L. Miller’s recent ethnography, *Plant Kin*, is a reminder of the depth and complexity of multispecies alliances in Latin America and of how such alliances might mediate ecological crisis.<sup>10</sup> Although the focus of Miller’s book is the Canela people who live on the Brazilian Cerrado and are therefore outside the geographical purview of this study, the relationships that she sets out between humans and plants closely resemble those across many indigenous communities

in South and Central America. Marisol de la Cadena presents a similar worldview in *Earth Beings* as well as in her account of indigenous “Cosmopolitics” (the appeal to nonhuman entities by indigenous movements), which she regards as having a central role to play in the reconfiguration of human/nonhuman relationships in politics and beyond.<sup>11</sup> The figure of people as intimately connected to plants in Spanish American culture—of their interdependencies, interactions, and even anatomical commonalities—not only draws out the indigenous foundations of Latin American culture but is oriented toward present and future ecologies of survival and interdependence. Plants are imbued with a political edge in Spanish American culture and have been fundamental to the formulation of countercultural forms and expression.

The reevaluation of the perception of plants in philosophy and anthropology has been complemented by recent advances in plant science, which have shown that the long-established view of plants as unresponsive and unfeeling is incorrect. As Richard Karban has demonstrated, in addition to being able to sense a wide range of stimuli including light, chemicals, touch, and temperature, plants can communicate not only with other plants but with animals and microbes.<sup>12</sup> Although it is well known that flowers interact with other species via smell (the scents of damask roses, or “Stargazer” lilies, or the stinking titan arum, popularly known as the “corpse flower”), the fact that plants have a “language” or can communicate by sound has only recently been discovered by scientists working in the field of bioacoustics.<sup>13</sup> These findings provide an important context for my understanding of many of the observations about the human qualities of vegetal life in Spanish American literature, which abounds in instances of plants talking, moving, and breathing. Anthropomorphism has been a staple of Western conceptions of nature and is often regarded as anthropocentric, but I suggest that the transformations of people into plants and plants into people in Spanish American culture should be understood not as a repetition of a Western trope but, rather, in light of indigenous animisms and also, potentially, of

now scientifically proved views of plants as intelligent, communicative, and thoughtful beings.<sup>14</sup>

Although the corpus of works considered in this book dates from the late eighteenth century, it is important to note that plants have played a significant role in the culture and society of Central and South America and the Caribbean since pre-Columbian times. Flora figures prominently in pre-Columbian cosmologies and myths, and people's knowledge of and important relationships to plants in the precolonial period are confirmed by a wealth of detailed botanical illustrations from across Central and South America, from Colombian ceramics to Maya codices.<sup>15</sup> Flower imagery dominates Nahuatl poetry, bound up in a complex constellation of meanings extending from human sacrifice to war.<sup>16</sup> As Robert Westerfelhaus notes, in the Aztecs' religious code, flowers were regarded as "symbolic vehicles capable of conveying profound spiritual truths."<sup>17</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, a Spanish friar and the so-called first anthropologist of New Spain, recorded in some detail the rituals surrounding flowers among the Aztecs, including how, during the ninth month of the solar calendar, the festival Tlaxochimaco or the "Offering of Flowers" involved the collection of every kind of flower in bloom.<sup>18</sup> These flowers were later strung together and used to decorate the god Huitzilopochtli.<sup>19</sup> One of the most significant flowers from the Aztec tradition was the marigold (*Tagetes*), known as the *cempoxochitl* and used for more than two thousand years for ritual, medicinal, and ornamental purposes.<sup>20</sup> The marigold formed an important part of Aztec rituals for the dead—explaining its popular name, *Flor de muerto*—and the flower continues to be used today during the festivities surrounding *El día de los muertos*.<sup>21</sup> Symbolic crops such as tobacco or amaranth also figure prominently in pre-Columbian and indigenous rituals.<sup>22</sup> John E. Staller has shown that maize, in particular, "was central to the mythological origins, ethnic identification, and very existence of the Mesoamerican people." In indigenous metaphysical thought, as Eleanor Wake notes, "the flesh of maize and the flesh of man were as one." Maize is one of a number

of plants identified by Miller as continuing to play a central role among contemporary indigenous people, who believe that maize plant-people can communicate with shamans as well as with other plants.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout this book I am attentive to pre-Columbian beliefs about plants, while at the same time remaining mindful of how the meanings attached to flora have shifted over time from the pre-Columbian to the colonial and postcolonial eras. Although, for instance, the Maya regarded the ceiba as the “World tree,” which, as David Carrasco notes, was believed to “embody the most essential powers of fertility, stability, and the renewal of life on earth,” for Afro-Cubans it became a substitute for the sacred iroko, a long-lived tropical tree native to West Africa.<sup>24</sup> For postrevolutionary Cuban Americans in exile in the United States, the ceiba was later adopted as a potent symbol of home. I trace the close relationship between people and plants in Spanish American culture not only to pre-Columbian beliefs about native flora but also to the heterogeneous histories of human-plant engagements that also emerged after the Conquest. Plants played a transcendent role in the negotiations between the Old and the New Worlds, with the early modern conquistadores often foregrounding American flora as a central point of difference as well as a potential source of wealth.<sup>25</sup> In the now classic account of the agrarian changes wrought by colonialism in the Americas, *The Columbian Exchange*, Alfred W. Crosby establishes the ecological as well as the cultural consequences of the Conquest, through which nonnative crops such as sugar and coffee—grown by African slaves—supplanted native plants and trees.<sup>26</sup> Nonindigenous plants were ultimately absorbed into local imaginaries, and native flora took on new meanings in the colonial era. Carlos Fuentes, for instance, adopts one of the preeminent trees of the Old World and Spain as a symbol of *mestizaje* in his 1993 collection of short stories *El naranjo (The Orange Tree)*.<sup>27</sup> And conversely, during the Amazonian rubber boom, new plant-centered mythologies evolved in tandem with historical events, as native and nonnative tappers told stories of how the “mother of rubber,” a figure with bleeding arms and legs,

would appear to workers if they were too severe in their treatment of the *Hevea brasiliensis*.<sup>28</sup>

In the book I am attentive to indigenous and local beliefs about plants, as well as to shifting plant imaginaries within colonial and capitalist contexts. I am also mindful of the different histories of plants from region to region. The biogeographic area that is the focus of this book—the so-called Neotropical realm, which includes Central and South America and the Caribbean—contains many of the world’s most important zones of biodiversity, including the Valdivian temperate forests in the Southern Cone and the vast Amazon rainforest, home to at least forty thousand species of plants alone.<sup>29</sup> Across Spanish America, flora varies markedly according to climate and habitat, and each country has a specific history in relation to plants. Whilst acknowledging differences in plants across the region, as well as in ecologies and agricultural practices, in this book I will show that Spanish American cultural engagements with plants often transcend local particularities and engage in national and continental debates about identity and aesthetics.

I also draw on and situate the book within the field of Spanish American ecocriticism. In her illuminating study, *Políticas de la destrucción/poéticas de la preservación* (2013), Gisela Heffes includes a detailed history of the development of the discipline of ecocriticism, particularly in the context of Latin American studies.<sup>30</sup> Among the landmarks of Latin American ecocriticism she includes Beatriz Rivera-Barnes and Jerry Hoeg’s *Reading and Writing the Latin American Landscape* (2009), Adrian Taylor Kane’s edited collection, *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures* (2010), and Laura Barbas-Rhoden’s *Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction* (2011).<sup>31</sup> These works have all informed my understanding of the ecological dimensions of Spanish American literature, as have more recent publications such as Scott M. DeVries’s *A History of Ecology and Environmentalism in Spanish American Literature* (2013) and Mark Anderson and Zélia M. Bora’s edited collection, *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America* (2016).<sup>32</sup> Some of these works

include considerations of plant life. DeVries discusses the trope of the forest in the *novela de la selva* (jungle novel) as well as agriculture and timber extraction. Rivera-Barnes considers deforestation and the presence of indigenous crops in the work of Neruda. More recently, in his essay in Kane's volume, Raymond L. Williams notes that Morelli in Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* proposes a mystical view of "vegetable life" as "an alternative to post-Enlightenment Western constructs of nature."<sup>33</sup>

While remaining mindful of existing ecocritical work on Latin America, I deepen the discussion of the significance of plants in Spanish American culture. As well as drawing on critical works attentive to the role of vegetation in Spanish American literature, I refer to a number of plant-centered critical works from different cultural perspectives.<sup>34</sup> The importance of plants to Western literature has received some attention, particularly over the past two decades.<sup>35</sup> As Molly Mahood has shown in *The Poet as Botanist*, plants were significant for a number of British writers, including John Clare and William Wordsworth. This was not just a case of these poets using flora metaphorically or anthropomorphically; for Mahood, these were writers "who also had some claim to be called botanists" (as I suggest of Neruda in chapter 5).<sup>36</sup> Beverly Seaton's study of European floriography is fundamental to my understanding of flower symbolism in chapter 2, as is Debra Rosenthal's concept of "floral counterdiscourse" in US abolitionist literature; Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari's formulation of the ecological dimensions of "plant horror" in US cinema clarifies my understanding of the trope in *La vorágine* (*The Vortex*) in chapter 4; and reflections on plants by figures such as Georges Bataille, Elaine Scarry, and Michael Taussig have all helped me to understand key moments in Spanish American cultural engagements with vegetal life.<sup>37</sup>

More recently, scholars have become interested in discourse that, in the words of Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira, is "attuned to the lives of plants—one that resists the figuration of the vegetal for human constructs."<sup>38</sup> This focus dominates in, for instance,

the essays included in Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira's edited volume, *The Language of Plants*, Randy Laist's collection *Plants and Literature*, and in Prudence Gibson's *The Plant Contract*, all of which seek to explore how traditional philosophical views of plants as inferior to humans are contested in literary and visual culture as well as in science.<sup>39</sup> This is an approach that I also adopt in this book, where the concern is with how representations of human-plant interactions in Spanish American culture have contributed to the destabilizing of dominant (Western) binaries such as nature/culture, or human/nonhuman, and have been an important means of expressing ecological consciousness.

As Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira note in the opening line of their recent collection: "Plants are perhaps the most fundamental form of life, providing sustenance, and thus enabling the existence of all animals, including us humans."<sup>40</sup> It is my contention that, in the case of Latin America, they are also fundamental to culture. I draw upon recent philosophical, anthropological, and aesthetic considerations of plants as well as advances in plant science to illuminate, for the first time, the centrality of plant life to Spanish American culture. Throughout, I show that plants permeate literature and visual art, from the persistent use of flora as metaphors to extended examples of "vegetal-thinking," which dissolves the differences between humans and plants and offers radical, phyto-centric understandings of contemporary culture and politics. Plants are pivotal not only to the imaginaries of particular authors, centrally Alejo Carpentier and Pablo Neruda, but also to genres such as the plantation romance and forms such as the New World baroque. Multispecies interactions have long been a part of Latin American cultural expression and central to how Spanish American writers have formulated their relationships to nature and modernity across the region. Botanically attentive texts in Latin America are often twinned with literary renovation or innovation, as is the case with Bello's postcolonial rewriting of the classical georgic using the *silva*—a strophe that in both name and form is suggestive of the tropical jungle that, on the surface, the poem aims to contain. The

works included in this book are wide-ranging, from canonical texts such as Neruda's foundational *Canto general* to the obscure eighteenth-century Latin poem the *Rusticatio Mexicana*, written in Bologna by the exiled Guatemalan Jesuit Rafael Landívar. I repeatedly show how the treatment of plants in Spanish American culture is distinctive from that in other traditions—from tropical reappropriations of the agrarian literature of ancient Greece and Rome to Creole rewritings of nineteenth-century European floriography and Carpentier's reworking of the baroque.

Although the idea that trees or flowers are sentient, communicative beings has only recently begun to be explored by contemporary philosophers and scientists, this is a theme that has long been established in Spanish American literature. This view of plants has its origins in pre-Columbian cosmologies and persists in the animistic thinking of many indigenous groups today, particularly in the Amazon. One of my main claims in this work is that animistic thinking about plants is not restricted to indigenous cosmologies but figures prominently in Creole configurations of nature from the late colonial period onward. In the *Rusticatio Mexicana* (the subject of chapter 1), the poet's apprehension about harmful agricultural practices is revealed through an extended anatomical metaphor that renders plants as maimed or bleeding bodies. Some 150 years later, during the Amazonian rubber boom, the highly celebrated Colombian novelist and poet José Eustasio Rivera revives this image of bleeding plants in his descriptions of the "white blood" of the rubber trees (see chapter 4). In the case of Jorge Isaacs's *María* (see chapter 2), the aliveness of plants is emphasized through their complex associations with the female protagonist's hair, which I relate to the Aristotelian concept of the "Vegetative soul." As I show, far from conforming to Aristotle's belief in a clear division between people and plants or animals, the presentation of *María's* hair serves to illustrate the continuities between humans and nonhumans and advances the novel's protoecological and feminist subtexts. I argue that the persistent anthropomorphism of plants and the merging of human and vegetal bodies in Spanish American culture

is evidence of a deep dissatisfaction with Western conceptions of nature and of a sympathy with indigenous and ecological patterns of thought.

I do not attempt a comprehensive treatment of botanical texts. Flora has figured prominently in Spanish American literature over the past 250 years and such a treatment would amount to little more than a catalogue of poems or novels about plants: W. H. Hudson's "El Ombú," María Luisa Bombal's "El árbol" ("The Tree"), Dulce María Loynaz's *Jardín* (*Garden*), Rubén Darío's "Caupolicán," and Carlos Pellicer's "Poema en tiempo vegetal" (Poem in vegetal time).<sup>41</sup> In this book I privilege extended consideration of botanically attentive literary traditions, such as the plantation romance, or of authors who have engaged in sustained "vegetal-thinking"—a term I apply in chapter 5 to Neruda's exploration of roots and seeds as a model for social and political transformation—rather than individual works that include reflections on plants.

The book consists of five chapters. In chapters 1 to 3 the focus is largely on Spanish American revisions to European forms or genres through recourse to botanical language or themes. Chapter 1 is an examination of how two texts from the late colonial and early postcolonial periods—Landívar's *Rusticatio Mexicana* and Bello's foundational "La agricultura de la zona tórrida" ("Ode to Tropical Agriculture")—rework classical georgics to reflect local practices and beliefs about plants that concludes with a comparison to a recent ecohorror from Argentina, Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (*Fever Dream*). Chapter 2 is an exploration of the prominence of floriography in two plantation romances, Avellaneda's *Sab* and Isaacs's *María*. It traces how botanical imagery provided the means for both political and literary contestation in the novels, including through the novelists' attraction to "flowery" language that was arguably a precursor to the New World baroque. In Chapter 3 I extend the findings of the previous chapter by setting out in detail the centrality of plants to Carpentier's conception of the New World baroque. As well as revealing the crucial importance of plants to the work of one of Latin America's

most significant authors, I offer a thoroughgoing revisionary interpretation of the New World baroque as an aesthetic movement propelled by the forms and logic of plants.

The focus in the final two chapters of this book is on a central theme in Spanish American cultural engagements with plants—the correspondences between plant and human life. This view originates in pre-Columbian cosmologies but persists in Creole representations of nature from the late colonial period on. I focus, in particular, on how twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers and (in chapter 4) visual artists pose ontological questions about the separation between plants and people, often imagining the way in which people might turn into plants and vice versa. In chapter 4 I bring the well-known Colombian novel *La vorágine* into dialogue with a number of rarely discussed works—including poetry, folktales, and a documentary film by the Amazonian writer and filmmaker Juan Carlos Galeano and the “Tree of Life” series by the Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta—to elucidate the important figure of the human-plant hybrid in Latin American culture. In chapter 5 I build on some of the philosophical questions raised in chapter 4—the concept of “plant-thinking” and ideas about vegetal intelligence and subjectivity—in my examination of the representation of plants in the writings of Neruda, particularly his *Canto general*. The afterword is a reflection on the connections between “plant-thinking” and political and ecological awareness, including through reference to Silvina Ocampo and Aldo Sessa’s collection of poems and photographs, *Árboles de Buenos Aires* (Trees of Buenos Aires).

Throughout the book, I offer a sustained consideration of the presence of plants in Spanish American cultural expression over the past 250 years and across a range of places and historical moments—colonial Guatemala, Communist Cuba, the Amazon rainforest in the 1920s and today. I demonstrate that, despite cultural and geographical differences, botanical discourse and thinking in Spanish American texts is remarkably coherent and key to the articulation of cultural imaginaries

and aesthetic forms. As I suggest in the afterword, “plant-thinking” among Spanish American writers has also been very prescient, anticipating much contemporary ecological thought. As early as the writings of Landívar and Bello, Spanish Americans were expressing concern about the environmental costs of plantation farming—concerns that only intensified for Isaacs, Avellaneda, Rivera, Neruda, Ocampo, and, more recently, Galeano and Schweblin, during the various extractive and agricultural booms to hit the extended region. I show how botanical discourse not only dominates cultural debates about identity and aesthetics in Spanish America but also, from the start, has been inseparable from ecological thinking, demanding a reconfiguration of human relationships with the vegetal and a recognition of the transcendent place of plants in the literature, culture, and environment of the region.