
BOOK REVIEW*Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century*

by Elizabeth Hope Chang (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2019). 240 pp. Hardback \$59.50.

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In positioning ‘plants as the transitory location between realism and fantasy within British fiction’ (p. 3), Elizabeth Hope Chang’s insight into the role of plants as subjects in diasporic Victorian ecologies sheds new light on the nineteenth century through a brilliant employment of contemporary ecocriticism. In *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century*, Chang encourages us to regard plants as active participants in the narratives in which they appear, personifying them as subjects through their role in the creation of the naturalised globality of ‘English nature’ in Victorian Britain (p. 1; p. 10). Incorporating the object-oriented philosophy of Timothy Morton and work on thing theory by Elaine Freedgood, Jonathan Lamb, and John Plotz, Chang deftly examines the colonial realities of the act of cultivation itself through the floral landscapes of various Victorian fictional texts. Arguing that the naturalisation of exotic flora in Britain parallels the colonisation and assimilation of commodities, people, and culture by the British Empire, Chang invites us to view plants in Victorian fiction as ‘living things fostered by human intelligence’ that act as ‘mediators between nature and culture’ and form a ‘constitutive part of the local in the British genre novel’ (pp. 20-21). Often drawing from work by plant historians and making a clear distinction between ‘botany, horticulture, and agriculture,’ Chang effectively draws readers to the crux of her argument: that plants are agents in their own right and acknowledging them as such in Victorian fiction moves the field beyond the Anthropocene. Foregrounding the importance of global trade to the British Victorian literary culture, Chang’s study seeks to offer new understandings of how diasporic plants were treated in an era that was both a site of ‘science and a site of metaphysical speculation’ (p. 181).

Describing plants in Victorian fiction as ‘[buttonholes] between fiction and reality, existing in and following the rules of both realms’ (p. 2), Chang’s study is convincing and well-written, if broad in her approach. Discussing texts by Algernon Blackwood, Charlotte Brontë, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Wilkie

Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, and Oscar Wilde, her evidence is informed by the depth and variety of examples she has identified that support her overall thesis, and her attention to some of the lesser-known works of these authors is refreshing. Even when Chang evaluates texts that have earned an extensive body of scholarship, such as Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, Chang's book breathes new life into current scholarly discussions and offers opportunities for further, overlapping inquiries in all directions. Chang begins her study with a chapter on globalism in Victorian plant culture, analysing discourses of exoticism and naturalisation and the use of plants as clues in the detective fiction of Collins, Conan Doyle, and Grant Allen. Moving from the global to the local, Chapters 2 and 3 examine the particularities of both city and country gardens in the Victorian era, pointing to the claustrophobia of cultivation and contained displacement in the image of the English greenhouse. Drifting into plants and their relationship to Victorian Gothic revival with a close reading of Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, Chang in turn invokes Burke's sublime—and, in turn, the attempt to avoid experiencing it—in the control of nature through human-centred gardens that eschew the wildness of plant life in favour of sanitised, beautiful, and fleeting rose gardens and decorative trees (pp. 75-77). Chapters 4 and 5 return to a discussion of the global and a fear of foreign, uncultivated (and therefore non-English) spaces, looking at nostalgia in an increasingly imperial Anthropocene in the latter end of the nineteenth century. With 'the fantasy of a cultivated colonial ecology' (p. 156) informing readings of Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Haggard's *Allan Quatermain*, and Kipling's 'In the Rukh', Chang draws attention to the idea of 'feral nature' (p. 144) threatening the English subject. Unfortunately skirting an in-depth close reading of the exotic origins of the Orchid and other 'jungle plants' in this chapter in favour of offering insight on the fantasy plants of Victorian exploration fiction, Chang's probe into the implications of Orientalism in the treatment of Asian, South Asian, African, and Caribbean flora disallows a purely human-centric understanding of mobility and plant migration in the global nineteenth century.

Chang's ambitious, unique, and deeply compelling study into Victorian horticulturalism and its implications draws from a broad range of texts—sometimes too broad. Chang's interpretive work here is incredible, and I found myself wanting more detail in the possibilities she raises here, particularly in her discussion of cultivation and the treatment of flora by Victorian detective fiction. It could be the intention that these threads are picked up by other scholars in the field and developed into something more detailed using *Novel Cultivations* as a

foundational text; however, given the context of the book there may have been a benefit in narrowing the field ever-so-slightly to better evaluate Chang's conclusions in more detail. For example, how does the analysis of Wilde's iconic green carnation as a 'symbol of the perversion of nature' (p. 77) coexist with the body of scholarship that approaches the enduring image of the green carnation as a signal of queerness? It is impossible to expect a scholar to approach every analysis from every possible theoretical angle, of course; however, in this case I feel that at least a passing acknowledgement on the treatment of botanicals through other lenses in some cases would have made for a stronger and more well-rounded analysis.

Speaking to a desire for more details, although illustrations are not customary in literary criticism, I feel that a lack of inclusion of botanical sketches was a missed opportunity in this edition. Chang recurrently refers to the work of plant historians and well-known Victorian horticulturalists, so if there are any illustrations available from these figures' journals, notes, or other writings, I think they would have made a marvellous addition to an already compelling piece of research—particularly considering the reliance on plant history and horticultural ethnography as a foundational concept to Chang's truly groundbreaking work.

Although I have my qualms about the breadth involved in Chang's methodology, *Novel Cultivations* is an exceptionally unique insight into ecocriticism and ecological knowledge in the Victorian literary sphere. The emphasis on a globality inherent within British genre fiction through the naturalisation and assimilation of plant life is a fascinating branch in nineteenth-century ecocriticism. It seems to be particularly generative given the connections Chang has made to other established bodies of work, namely detective fiction, the Gothic, exploration fiction, and bildungsroman. In a world increasingly focused on the Anthropocene and its consequences, Chang's work is timely and engaging as we Victorianists look to the nineteenth century for the origins of our current, industrial reality. Plants as agents, responsible for their mobility and active in their participation with humans, is a bold step in the quest for this insight, 'since a plant with narrative agency radically alters notions about sentience, mobility, reproduction, and representation' (p. 161).