**Plants Lives: Framings from Southern Africa**

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One of the small joys of working in an archive is chancing upon an actual object while plodding though text-heavy files: a swatch of fabric, a label of tinned condensed milk, a theatre ticket. From time to time, one of these objects turns out to be a bit of dried plant. A half-eaten leaf is taped to a letter from an exasperated white gardener, asking the entomology department to identify the insect responsible. Elsewhere white farmers post specimens of plants which have killed their livestock, requesting identification. In some cases, offending insects – dead or alive, in tins or pasted to paper, or in some cases, sketched – accompanied these missives.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Beyond the garden and the farm, specimens are routinely despatched along a botanical chain of command. Labourers collect material which is forwarded via clerks to officials in forestry or botany departments, botanical gardens and herbaria, both locally and internationally. In cases of suspected murder by “native herbal poisons”, specimens make their way between the departments of ‘native affairs’ and ‘justice’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I begin with these snapshots since they register the entanglements (or “embranglements” to use Banu Subramaniam’s term) of plants and the colonial state.

They suggest how plants encounter different sections of the state; how they are governed and at times deployed as models in miniature for colonial governance itself.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the same time, these vignettes remind us of the impress of plants upon the state, not least in the vast amounts of documentation they occasion whether commissions of enquiry on tobacco, citrus or agricultural labour; laws on ‘plant pests’; or the rafts of paper that followed plants as they crossed colonial boundaries (ship manifests, insurance certificates, fumigation clearances etc). On ships and in customs warehouses, plants sprouted, shrivelled or rotted, calling yet more documentation into being, as vegetal vitality encountered bureaucratic and Gregorian doggedness.

These paper lives (or afterlives) of plants unfold at the intersections of plant time and colonial time. These parameters in turn provide an appropriate framing for this seminar series on “Plant Lives: Critical Plant Humanities – Conversations from the Global South”. We begin with plant lives, rather than plant life in the abstract, and book-end these with the concerns of the global south. Or, as the rubric for the series states, “Our starting point is 'ruderal', a term which describes a plant that grows in disturbed grounds. A plant humanities for the global south take shapes at the intersection of enforced human and plant migrations and works in the wake of disturbance and damage”.  Plant lives everywhere are necessarily postcolonial, and as we indicate in the rubric, the series aims to be “a postcolonial plantarium which encompasses plantations, pre-colonial pharmacopoeias, philosophy, phytopoetics (both visual and textual) and much more”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Taking a southern African vantage point, this paper proceeds in three parts. First I discuss some themes from current plant theory and how these do, or don’t mesh with global south concerns. The paper then presents a mapping of southern African plant-attentive scholarship. Finally I offer close readings of two ‘texts’ – firstly a short story by Doris Lessing which I read for plants, and secondly, a tracking of the archival lives of a particular species, *Commelina africana*/*idangabane* where I attempt to illustrate a method of reading plants. The paper covers a wide range of issues and is in effect several papers in one. I have done this consciously in order to provide a generous framing for the series and to open as many points of entry for debate as possible.

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In *The Botany of Empire*, Banu Subramaniam calls for a polybotanical imagination, one that can explore “the labyrinth of infinite plant life”.[[5]](#footnote-5) As much of the book indicates, this imagination has to reckon with the violent shuffling and reshuffling of biota and bodies that European empires precipitated (what one might also call the ‘biocultural empire’, to use the title of a recent collection edited by Antoinette Burton, Renisa Mawani and Samantha Frost).[[6]](#footnote-6) In one of the many routes that Subramaniam provides into these themes, she suggests placing the terms diaspora and diaspore (a plant structure that facilitates dispersal) alongside each other. This juxtaposition requires us to think at different scales, taking account of plant morphology and life history alongside structures of plant and human migrations in the context of imperial dispersal and scattering.

Much recent southern African academic and creative work that is attentive to plants might be described as polybotanical, exploring the violent imbrications of plants, animals, people and ideas in the multispecies diasporas that empire and its afterlives have entailed. This work (on which more below) grapples with the interface of plants and the political, generally leaning more heavily on the latter than the former.

In the register of critical plant studies, this question of plants and politics can be framed as how to navigate between “the biosemiotics of vegetal life and human signification”.[[7]](#footnote-7) This burgeoning plant theory has started to chart the implications of vegetal sentience, intelligence and communication for definitions of the human, or rather post-human. One starting point for this scholarship is to address the marginalization of plants, or in Michael Marder’s words, to undo their location as “the weeds of metaphysics: devalued, unwanted in its carefully cultivated garden, yet growing in-between the classical categories of the thing, the animal, and the human”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Across a range of disciplines, these investigations offer rich approaches on how to think with, or amidst plants. One important emphasis has been on how plants undo the human, or ‘“render the human unidentifiable to itself”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Plant time relativizes human time; plant ‘language’ questions human ideas of speech as necessarily vocalized (“articulation without saying” in Marder’s words); plant ‘wisdom’ with its “nonconscious intentionality” redefines intelligence through demonstrating networking not based in organs.[[10]](#footnote-10) Studies of the mediation and remediation of plants in literary and visual texts illustrate the multiple ways in which these reconfigure the human, the elemental, the chemical, linking to traditions of Indigenous studies, radical Black studies and queer studies that have long relativized ‘the human’.[[11]](#footnote-11) As “green buffers of the Anthropocene”, plants occupy debate as new biopolitical and ethical subjects.[[12]](#footnote-12) As AI engages with chlorophyl, measuring the efficiency of photosynthesis for “precision agriculture”,

plants generate pressing debates – are plants as much algorithmic as AI?[[13]](#footnote-13)

Yet, there have also been critiques of this style of scholarship from researchers in, or working on the global south. In *Plant Thinkers in Twentieth-century Bengal*, Sumana Roy (who will speak on these themes later in the series) refuses to make the obligatory detour via northern scholarship: “I wanted these plant thinkers to be read independently, on their own terms, through the cosmology that they had created, instead of their thoughts being compared incessantly, and often reductively, to those whose work had found circulation in Euro-American academia and publishing”.[[14]](#footnote-14) In her discussion of the “notorious invasive” kudzu in the US South, Yota Batsaki (who will discuss this topic in the series) raises questions about situating the plant as the “abject other of Western metaphysics”. She writes: “The theoretical effort to produce the plant as a generalized concept bumps against the contingencies of its natural history in time and place, its ontological slipperiness, its ethical ambiguity.”[[15]](#footnote-15) A related critique emerges from Latin American studies where some have questioned the sacredness and religious awe with which some critical plant studies imbues vegetal life. In *Plant Theory in Amazonian Literature*, Juan R. Duchesne Winter notes: “The fact that certain forms of life are a biological precondition for the existence of all other living species does not in-and-of-itself entail that the former possess or represent a unique moral or ethical paradigm or a path for a better existence in universal terms”.[[16]](#footnote-16) This reverence at times maps onto a sentimentalized version of ‘indigenous’ plant knowledges, imagined as unchanging and untouched by institutions of power in terms of who has access to such expertise (themes which the contributions from Haripriya Rangan and Riley Snorton will explore from different locations. In her paper in the series, Nox Makunga will trace the histories of ethnopharmacology in the Greater Cape Floristic Region). Duchesne’s discussion of Amazonian plant theory construes this knowledge less as some folksy wisdom than as a “realistic philosophy” that can be summed up as follows: “Plants are great, yes, but just as potentially dangerous or beneficial as any other being”.[[17]](#footnote-17) While the new plant theory in the humanities is certainly generative, it can equally be complicated by the perspectives of the global south.

Let’s turn to a mapping of the existing southern African material, drawing out those parts that complicate plant thinking.

Some Southern African Trajectories

The term ‘plant horror’ is generally associated with pulp science fiction in which monstrous vegetal formations imperil or invade human life. Made famous by B-movies like *Day of the Triffids* and *The Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*, this genre centres plant protagonists and has become an important touchstone in the plant humanities. Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari describe the appeal of these narratives thus: “they consistently allow audiences to imagine, from within a state of delighted fear, the pleasures and pains of becoming another form of lively matter designated as vegetal”.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In a postcolonial context, the term acquires a more realist inflection. Take for instance

uMbuso weNkosi’s recent book *These Potatoes look like Humans: The Contested Future of Land, Home and Death in South Africa*. This title references brutal farm conditions for prison labour on the Transvaal highveld in the 1950s, brought to light by a series of journalistic exposés. Workers had to wear potato sacks, sleep on them and use them as bowls for food. In some cases, the corpses of labourers who had been punished to death were buried in the fields as fertilizer. An alliance of political organizations launched a boycott which mobilized around images of potatoes as embodying this bestial treatment. The potato became a central political prop whether at meetings or at funerals where activists dressed in potato sacks, wearing necklaces of potatoes, carrying coffins piled with yet more potatoes. As weNkosi indicates, the ‘eye’ of the potato was imagined as having witnessed the horrific abuses and took on an ancestral and spiritual function of ensuring afterlives for the dead, these being both ancestral and vegetal.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Postcolonial plant horror is less an anxiety about the monstrous plant taking over human life than an illumination of the circumstances that viciously yoke plant and person together. One could of course read the plants in these circumstances as monstrous: through their calorific power and portability, potatoes have enmeshed themselves with capitalist agriculture and are entirely indifferent to the human suffering entailed in their production. However, what the potato boycott indicates is that such indifference is not read as monstrous but is rather translated into allyship, forming part of a well-established tradition in southern Africa and other global south locations in which plants are enlisted as symbolic resources for political struggle.[[20]](#footnote-20) The plant simultaneously contains horror and hope.

This theme of plants as political actors has constituted an important strand in southern African social history. Case studies include the protea as an icon of white nationalism, or the eucalyptus, an imagined purifier of air for settler lungs as well as a reminder of white solidarity across the Dominions. A monograph on the prickly pear by Luvuyo Wotshela (who will speak later in the series ) and William Beinart, provides fine-grained insights on rural, labour, agricultural, medicinal, leisure and scientific themes through the lens of a plant species[[21]](#footnote-21)

Plants in southern Africa will be known by different names across a range of languages, immediate evidence of how they straddle different epistemologies, temporalities and classificatory systems. Much contemporary visual art in southern Africa takes shape at these post-apartheid, polybotanical intersections, grappling with knotted temporalities and genealogies. Lungiswa Gqunta’s 2020 Berlin installation *Benisiya Ndawoni II: Return to the Unfamiliar* features herbal material tightly bound around razor wire. As Yota Batsaki’s insightful account of the event indicates, Gqunta wanted the herb to be *imphepho* (a ritual, spiritual, cleansing and medicinal plant) but, as it was difficult to obtain in Europe, sage was substituted. A bit of imphepho was nonetheless burned, pervading the event with its characteristic aroma. This ‘barbed plant’ features elsewhere in Gqunta’s corpus and captures how indigenous plant knowledge has been twisted and contorted by colonial technoscience, so that it is difficult to access, except through blurred dreams. This mutant wired plant constitutes a further instantiation of plant horror.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This Plant Lives series features a range of visual artists who engage with the problematics of the post-apartheid plant. Like Gqunta, they manoeuvre in the tight interstices and contradictions of contemporary South Africa with its afterlives of racialized inequality. Molemo Moiloa and Nare Mokgotho (operating as Madeyoulook) have explored how the colonial inheritance of gardening has been reimagined by Black South Africans, and how these practices might inform decolonial debates, inter alia on museums. Entitled *Ejaradini*, these interventions have taken the form of an ongoing art installation and garden with iterations locally and internationally.[[23]](#footnote-23) Their paper in this series focuses on a soundscape *Mafolofolo*: *a place of recovery* arising from five years of research in Bokoni, Mpumalanga. The piece explores relationships to land and more-than-human life in the context of “violence, racism, extraction, and ongoing dispossession”. Stephané Conradie reconfigures objects found in South African middle class and working class homes, often as creolized flower arrangements that reference inter-generational memory and apartheid remains. She has added ecoprinting to her practice of “articulage” and, in her paper she will reflect “on how these storied objects (organic and inorganic) combine to form and reveal new material possibilities through ‘pressure cooker’ environments”.

In her paper, Ruth Sacks, a scholar and visual artist, discusses two edible plants, maize and black jack, tracing their different modes of cultivation and representation in “the toxic apartheid and colonial legacies of inequality that attach stigmas to different categories of plants and ways of growing”. This paper in turn emerged out of an urban farming project based in a Victorian hothouse in an inner city Johannesburg park. Sacks and Shaifali Bramdev produced an artists’ book *Kind* (2021) from the project, “a collection of plant stories” and drawings which relativize “colonial categories of nature … and the value systems they imposed”.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In literary studies, there has been a growing body of scholarship exploring the vegetal aspects of southern African literary and cultural production. As Elizabeth Hope Chang notes, colonial novels often involve “the impositions of plant management on literary settings that directs their form”.[[25]](#footnote-25) In southern African literary studies, the institution of the farm, the plantation and the garden have constituted templates for tracking literary genealogies.[[26]](#footnote-26) Plantation novels set in Natal track the imbrications of indentured workers and sugar cane; the farm as ‘protagonist’ subordinates plant and person to its trajectories; gardens feature in the textures of suburban life and in the brutalities of forced removals as beloved plants have to be abandoned and new gardens established in hostile conditions.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Jonathan Cane in *Civilizing Grass* brings the lawn into focus, tracking its dense representational lives and establishing it as a locus of southern African histories at different registers, whether of labour, urban planning or intimate histories of the suburb.[[28]](#footnote-28) The textual lives of trees as historical actants and ancestral portals have been traced as a trope across fictional forms.[[29]](#footnote-29) Helene Strauss’s paper in the series continues these conversations, drawing on a pioneering book she is writing on *Phytospheric Justice*. Luciano Concheiro San Vicente’s paper on the history of Mexico City’s large park Chapultepec examines the long and contested histories of this institution of plant management.

In terms of method, Dorothy Driver’s meticulous analysis of the plant life in Olive Schreiner’s corpus demonstrates the power of reading closely for plants as method. As she explains, this “poetics of plants delineate a material world that is assertively local, and that offers Schreiner her writing home”.[[30]](#footnote-30) Another plant-attentive southern African writer is Bessie Head whose corpus has been read for plants, most recently by Anneke Rautenbach who has used Head’s narrations of her gardening work on a Botswanan development project to elaborate the concept of “absorbent poetics” that “adopts and adapts the hopeful imagery of gardening in the semi-desert, with its requirement of humility before the ‘other’, both human and nonhuman”. [[31]](#footnote-31)

Plants of course enter narrative in manifold ways: “ground up as poisons or medicines, dissected in scientific study, consumed as delicacies, printed on wallpapers and carpets, and so on”.[[32]](#footnote-32) These multiple possibilities invite speculation on how plants might suggest broader literary trajectories across different southern African texts (and beyond). As Jane Taylor has shown, a focus on plant poisons links Sherlock Holmes (where third world poisons often feature) to accounts of poisoning of masters by enslaved people in the Cape.[[33]](#footnote-33) Dagga (marijuana) suggests itself as another trajectory, linking long genealogies of popular music, to tales of drug smuggling, to stories of altered consciousness and addiction, and not least to Jan Smuts who finessed the banning of dagga in South Africa via the League of Nations in the 1920s. As much environmental humanities has urged us to do, it is useful to think across land and sea, an intersection that points to mangroves which configure a range of genres. One would be stories of port construction in places like Durban which entailed the destruction of mangroves. The development of the port and its infrastructure in turn sought to overcome and overwrite shipwreck so as to safely usher in white settlers, one of whose imagined destinations was the farm. The sacrifice of the mangrove hence becomes one of the preconditions for genres of shipwreck, the port city and the farm. Looking north, the mangroves of the East African coast embody stories of marronage for those enslaved in the Indian Ocean world.

A Short Story: Reading for Plants

In current debates on plant theory, the notion of ‘becoming plant’ is seen as an ethically positive move, attracting attention to those literary and visual texts that attempt to portray such transformations.[[34]](#footnote-34) Doris Lessing’s short story “Plants and Girls” (set in the 1940s or 50s and written in the 1960s or 70s) speculates on what ‘becoming plant’ might mean in Southern Rhodesia.[[35]](#footnote-35) In the context of the race, class and gender regimes of late colonialism, she demonstrates how such a process would be tightly bound to, and deformed by these structures (her story in fact resonates with Gqunta’s ‘barbed plants’). Less a gesture of liberation, as some of the current plant theory indicates, ‘becoming plant’ in Southern Rhodesia would rather be a mutant exercise that compounds the fault-lines amongst which it takes shape.

The story of “Plants and Girls” is brief and the plot straightforward. The protagonist Frederick grows up in a small house on the outer edge of a small town from where he can walk into the veld where he spends his childhood days. When he is about twelve, a new suburb springs up, cutting off his direct access to the veld. He feels himself under “some spell … imprisoning him for ever in the town” and starts to identify with the solitary trees that have remained lining the street, “thinking how they drew their strength through the layers of rubble and broken brick, direct from the breathing soil and from the invisibly running underground rivers”. As he imagines this undergrounds water, he stretches out his long fingers “like roots towards the earth”.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Frederick is ‘slow’: he is five years behind in school and as an adult, works in sheltered employment on the railways. As a child, he is teased by his peers and spends most of his time alone, or with his beloved mother. His father with whom he has no relationship dies early in the story, apparently unmourned. At seventeen, Frederick starts spending time at night with a tree outside his gate: “his long fingers met the rough bark, and he stroked the tree curiously, leaning it, thinking: under this roughness and hardness moves the sap, like rivers under the earth”. He has his first sexual experience with the tree which becomes his erotic companion.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Across the road from his house lives a large family “where marriages took place between boys and girls, and there were always festivals and love-making and new babies” . One of the teenage girls starts dating Frederick, a relationship in which he passively and reluctantly participates. His mother however becomes ill; he stays home to look after her and the girlfriend leaves him: “It was like a tight string snapping from him, so that he reeled back to his own house with his mother”.[[38]](#footnote-38)

After a long illness, the mother dies, something he can’t accept as real. He visits her grave frequently, obsessively fingering the leaves of a bougainvillea that has grown there. After some time, he realizes that the plant is feeding on her, and through this knowledge comes to accept that she is dead. He again starts to spend time with a tree outside his house, this time a new one (“The authorities had planted new saplings, domestic and educated trees like bauhinia and jacaranda”).[[39]](#footnote-39)

The younger sister of his first girlfriend seeks him out, although Frederick takes her for her older sister. They become involved and their relationship soon becomes sado-masochistic: he keeps wanting to reach below her skin, seeking out her bones and biting her neck. She, Daphne-like imagines herself as a tree to survive. The story ends as Frederick kills her while they are having sex, murmuring: “‘Your hair, your leaves, your branches, your rivers’”.[[40]](#footnote-40)

In “Plants and Girls”, Lessing takes two key tropes of the colonial novel, a frontier narrative and a story of stunted adolescence or frozen youth, and complicates them with a tree as a co-protagonist. These themes play out in a favoured Lessing milieu, namely amongst the less successful strata of white colonial society.

The story starts on a miniature frontier as Frederick crosses over into the veld. This opening suggests one possible trajectory for the protagonist, namely as the hero of a frontier novel who will conquer ‘nature’ and people before him. The growth of the suburb largely thwarts this line of development for Frederick who starts to identify with the tree as a source of imaginative escape and as an object of sexual desire whom he must possess (enacting an echo of the white male adventure hero who possesses ‘nature’ and land as if it were a female body).

Trapped in a late colonial small town, Frederick’s options are to remain in perpetual boyhood with his mother, or enter compulsory heterosexuality by marrying the girl across the road. In his encounter with the first girl, he toys with the latter, but then settles for the former as his mother becomes ill. Unable initially to accept that his mother is dead, he is finally freed from this illusion – and his boyhood – by the bougainvillea. Moving into adult masculinity, he maps the tree onto the woman and must possess both, down to the sap and the blood.

As Jed Esty has argued, the trope of frozen youth arises from the impossibilities of bildung and progress in colonial situations of uneven development.[[41]](#footnote-41) This story and indeed much of Lessing’s early work falls into this ambit and explores different orders of being stuck whether in dead-end farms, or patriarchal relationships. The larger import of her early work reflects on the stuckness of late colonialism and its structures of racialized infantilization. In “Plants and Girls”, the sessility (immobility) of the trees feeds into this register and reflects Frederick’s alienated and isolated position. Any sense of forward movement, for example from boyhood to adulthood, is snarled up with the categories of colonial society which are necessarily static and rigid. For Frederick, ‘becoming plant’ represents a type of sideways movement, an attempt to find a different path through the deadness of Southern Rhodesian society, just as the trees draw water through the rubble, brick and tarmac. However, the tropes of ‘nature’ and gender are tightly intertwined, so for Frederick to ‘become plant’ is also to enter a white male heterosexuality premised on sadism, pain and fear. There are of course rich traditions of ‘becoming-plant’ fiction that represent this transition as a feminist and/or queer escape from heteronormative structures. “Plants and Girls” presents a less sanguine view, suggesting that any attempt to think one’s way out of colonial structures via vegetal life is likely to become snarled in their contradictions and fault-lines.

These contradictions of postcolonial ‘becoming-plant’ are apparent from another angle in the work of artist Mary Sibande. Her early large-scale installations and photographs engaged with the experiences of her mother and grandmother who were stuck in domestic worker positions under apartheid. Sophie, a human-size cast of Sibande herself, is dressed in ever-more elaborate and dream-like costumes which nonetheless are recognizable as starched blue and white maid’s uniform. From 2013, Sibande shifted from a predominantly blue palette to purple, exploring transfiguration for her alter-ego figure through scenes of vegetal excess. As Sarah Nuttall explains:

“Purple roots, tentacles, snakes, and suspended non-human entities emerge from the insides of a women’s body … the dream of Sibande’s semiautobiographical figure, wrestling with transfiguration, is to exit herself and finally not be like … her mother or her grandmother. This involves loss, but more particularly, giving birth to a person who is not known.”[[42]](#footnote-42) These [purple tableaux](https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2020/06/mary-sibande-sophie-installations/) might well be read as ‘becoming plant’, but like Lessing’s story point as much to the difficulties that such an imaginary entails as to its liberatory potential.

The Archival Lives of Commelina Africana: Reading Plants

In the continuum of plants and politics, much southern African and indeed other work veers towards the latter rather than a detailed engagement with the former. To explore more plant-attentive approaches, let me briefly discuss my experiments with tracking the textual lives of one species, [*Commelina africana*](https://www.mozambiqueflora.com/speciesdata/image-display.php?species_id=112570&image_id=3), a perennial, spreading herb, widely recognized for its medicinal properties, and known in English by the reprehensible term “Yellow Wandering Jew”.

This work forms part of a larger project that I’m currently pursuing called ‘Books in the Biosphere: Print Culture and the Anthropocene’. Very briefly, the project is a print culture enterprise that asks how we might think about the dry technology of the book in the coming floods and catastrophes of the Anthropocene. It takes the dry, indoor technology of the book outside and immerses it in the elements, both analytically and actually (including an experiment of burying J M Coetzee’s *Disgrace* in my garden and charting its ‘progress’). I’m tracking books that end up in water, books that are buried, books that are burned and so on. In thinking about books in the air and the atmosphere, I’ve done work on insects in archives.[[43]](#footnote-43) This focus on insects has in turn lead me to plants and their relationship with print. As much scholarship has shown us, plant and print have long been associated, materially, metaphorically, linguistically and conceptually.[[44]](#footnote-44)

My particular interest has been to think about how plants play a role in generating texts about, and around themselves. One initial case study, mentioned in passing above, has been to track documentation that plants generate as they cross colonial biotic borders (much of it coming from a particular port official called a plant inspector).[[45]](#footnote-45) Another project has been to track *Commelina africana* which I first encountered as *idangabane* in an isiZulu pamphlet advertising the remedies of Mafavuke Ngcobo who ran a large ‘muthi’ (medicine) mail order empire from Durban in the 1920 and 30s. Ngcobo’s logo, included in the pamphlet was *idangabane* (image at end of article). The pamphlet formed part of a file in the National Archives in Pretoria and contained the proceedings of a prosecution against Ngcobo, a trial engineered by white pharmacists in Durban, themselves trying to muscle in on this ‘muthi’ market, and seeking to prevent African practitioners from using biomedical procedures and requiring them to limit themselves to ‘traditional’ remedies.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Ngcobo’s choice of *idangabane* as logo made sense given that the species is extremely tenacious and can establish itself quickly on disturbed ground, summarizing the circumstances that Ngcobo himself faced. The pamphlet advertised a range of Ngcobo’s remedies, arranged rather like a textual apothecary. For those who received the pamphlet and decided to buy the wares offered, the document did more than simply convey information. Instead, it might have formed part of the therapeutic chain through which ‘traditional’ healing operates, drawing together dreams, ancestral messages, plants, ochres, animal products, patient and healer. The medicine received in the mail did not work alone but was a member of an imagined team distributed across a number of agents (Ngcobo himself, the locales from which herbs and other ingredients had been gathered, dreams and signs, ancestors etc) including the pamphlet which joins this assemblage. As such, the pamphlet constitutes a mobile and dynamic southern African literary form, in part generated by the chemical character of *Commelina africana* which meshed with human health needs as well as its ruderal character which translated into the logo.

Having encountered *idangabane* in one archival context, I then explored it in another, namely in various herbaria – the National Herbarium in Pretoria, the Kwa-Zulu Natal Herbarium, the CE Moss Herbarium at Wits University, as well as William Burchell’s specimens of *Commelina africana* in the Kew Herbarium.

How might one read these dried plant specimens, and how might this relate to Ngcobo’s logo? As Bettina Dietz has noted, the herbarium sheet constitutes one of the many “knots in the textual-visual field of botany”.[[47]](#footnote-47) Premised on the decontextualized botanical illustration which extracted plants from their settings and made them portable, the herbarium sheet translated a three-dimensional plant into a two-dimensional specimen. The dried plant matter (for the dried garden, *hortus siccus*, the original term for a herbarium) is ‘specimenized’ through the visual strategy of its layout and the galaxy of miniature texts that surround it: these include details of where, when and by whom the plant was collected, stamps of the hosting herbarium, notes in pencil, maps, tags, stickers, drawings, tiny envelopes (fragment packs) containing seeds and flowers, and more recently the name or initial of the person doing the mounting. The information of where and when the plant was collected inducts the specimen into Gregorian time and conjugates its past living life with its present dead paper life. It also immerses the specimen into English and Latin with some German, French, Italian and Afrikaans. There are vanishingly few terms in African languages although this has shifted with very recent specimens.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The details of where the plant was collected points to its life histories and journeys which can be long and multiple, as specimens moved between herbaria or as small private collections were consolidated into larger ones. Many specimens made long journeys northwards, creating the current “inverse relationship between where plant diversity exists in nature and where it is housed in herbaria” (in Subramaniam’s terms, “a global mortuary”).[[49]](#footnote-49) As these sheets travelled, they did at times carry more local meanings with them, such as popular names for the plant like “kannie dood” (can’t die) or pigweed (the species was used on some farms to feed for pigs). Descriptions like “pioneer of the ploughed field” or “cure for backache” remind us of its ruderal and medicinal properties. At times, the brief descriptions of its locale have a lyrical quality and when some of these are strung together create a poem that captures a faint echo of the plant’s presence.

Beside a stream

Weed-crawl

Leaves folded – like a small ship

Sandy soil

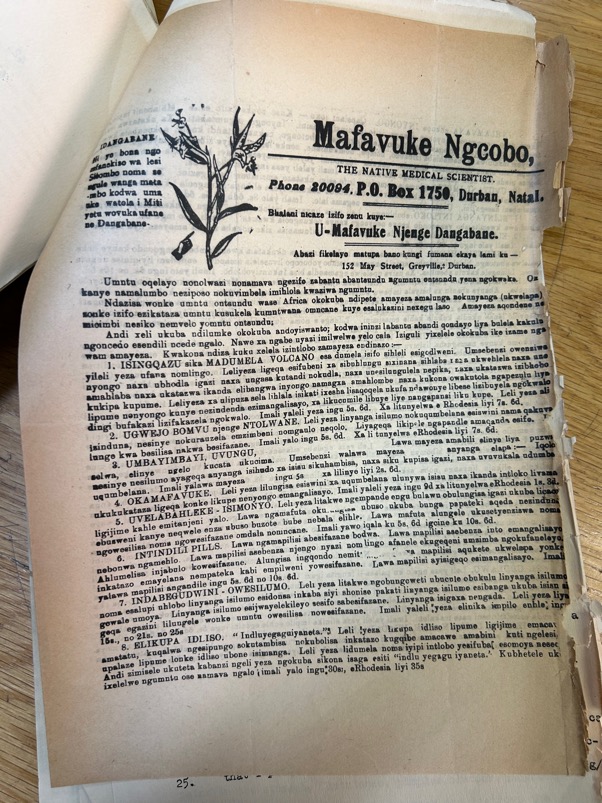
Yellow flower

The individuality of each plant can sometimes be apparent from its stubborn materiality. Despite being a largely creeping herb, some specimens are long and have to be folded over double, while others are pasted downwards or sideways, upsetting the implied model of botanical illustration where plants are always upright and neatly scaled to the page. Elsewhere plants that have not been properly dried create a ‘caul’ around themselves as the moisture seeps into the page, often buckling it at the same time. The particular size and shape of the specimen creates a varied aesthetic across the exsiccatae (collection of dried specimens). Some specimens are tiny, huddling on the page like squashed calligraphy. Others swirl like arabesques, or are elegantly minimalist like an ikebana arrangement. Yet others sprawl across the folio sheet and are pasted down with parallel pieces of tape so that it looks as if the plant is behind a fence. In some cases, the mounting seems to suggest a new species, for example where a profusion of glue dots creates the impression that Commelina africana carries white blossoms. (Images will be shown at the talk)

There is of course much more to say on these sheets but in the interests of time, let me draw some conclusions across Ngcobo’s *idangabane* and these herbarium specimens. In both instances, the morphology, chemical composition, and life history of the plant help to shape particular texts whether the pamphlet (in its several capacities as advertisement, healing agent, and as part the evidence in the case); the miniature descriptive texts that surround the specimens telling us of the plant’s journey and life histories; the aesthetics of the page with its the visual-textual knots – all these are enmeshed with the materiality of the plant itself and needs to be read in conjunction with the species in general, and certain plants in particular.

Conclusion

This paper has been something of an omnibus, drawing together different orders of debate and analysis to provide a rich array of entry points for debate in this seminar series. Using southern African material, it has suggested how reading plant material from the global south might complicate some of the plant theory debates unfolding in Euro-America. Genres like plant horror and ‘becoming plant’ acquire somewhat different valencies in the global south. In terms of method, the paper has explored ideas of ‘reading for plants’ and ‘reading plants’, and also possibly ‘reading with plants’ (although the latter was not explicitly explored). In all this material, I hope you’ve found something for yourself. See you online!



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