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“A Thorny Way of Thinking: Botanical Afterlives of Caribbean Plantation Slavery” by Hannah Cole
(Cornell University)

Hannah Rachel Cole’s dissertation “A Thorny Way of Thinking: Botanical Afterlives of Caribbean Plantation Slavery” presents a methodologically original and theoretically innovative model of comparatism. Drawing its conceptual coordinates from postcolonial ecocriticism and critical plant studies and engaging scholarship from a range of fields, the dissertation’s interdisciplinarity is complemented by its holistic embrace of literary texts from different Caribbean traditions—Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanophone.

Cole brilliantly develops her own critical lexicon about “botanical imaginaries” to designate the poetics of plants held in common among given local populations, and uses the thorny marabú shrub as a figure for a reading practice that counters the extractive thinking of the Caribbean plantation. Tracing the shifting cultural significance of Caribbean flora on the margins of the main cash crops sponsored by European empires, she compellingly argues that global capital’s recent commodification of them instantiates a latter-day incarnation of the Caribbean plantation system. Taking inspiration from Fernando Ortiz, each of the three chapters of the study centers on a dyad of plant species in literary texts from one or more Caribbean islands: Guinea grass and sugarcane; cacao and immortal trees; breadfruit and hog plum. This elegantly experimental structure is also heedful of the broader intellectual stakes of the project. Confessing to a degree of arbitrariness to the selection—suggested as it is by the flora in the literary texts—Cole construes it as one benefit of “a plant-focused method of reading” that strains against taxonomic logic. The study addresses diverse authors, including: Esteban Montejo, Lydia Cabrera, Alejandro Aguilar, Earl Lovelace, Merle Collins, Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant. Cole’s project persuasively demonstrates how innovative comparatist models continue to yield timely insights, in this case into the environmental crises of our moment.