

# Vegetable

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ONE of the Victorian period's most important books never to be published is Miles Joseph Berkeley's *Vegetable Pathology*. In over 170 "communications" under this title that "remain buried in the periodicals," as William Thiselton-Dyer lamented in 1897,<sup>1</sup> Berkeley sought to compile, "in clear and simple language," "whatever . . . has a direct bearing on diseased action in vegetables."<sup>2</sup> The "Vegetable Pathology" papers have been considered to mark the birth of a new scientific discipline. Their value to the twenty-first-century Victorianist, however, lies in Berkeley's acute understanding that "the consequences of [vegetable diseases] are so fatal to the interests not only of the cultivator *but of society in general*" (emphasis mine).<sup>3</sup> Scholars working in critical plant studies have amply demonstrated that human life and ideas cannot be thought apart from vegetables. This applies equally to the nineteenth century, when butchers' cuts were wrapped in cabbage leaves, ships' sails were made from flax, and academic communications were composed on sheets of "sloshed-together plant fibers."<sup>4</sup> Thus, while "vegetable" should indeed bring to mind Tess hacking swedes at Flintcomb-Ash, it's no coincidence that Phineas Finn leaves rural Ireland only to run into "question[s] of potted peas" in London,<sup>5</sup> or that an industrial novel like *Mary Barton* (1848) pivots on the vegetable affordances of cotton, as Sukanya Banerjee has shown. Of the mineral resources driving what Elizabeth Miller has recently termed "extractivism,"<sup>6</sup> no small part was used to process vegetable matter, and the predominant mode of extraction continued to be agriculture. Human life under Queen Victoria was built, as Berkeley's papers make abundantly clear, on vegetables, from sugarcane, tea, and cotton to indigo and opium.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, "Vegetable Pathology" serves as a reminder that these relationships were increasingly going awry, with humans, for the most part, helplessly looking on.

Although the multiple economies of certain vegetable staples have been explored in detail, the highly uneven power dynamics of the Victorians' encounters with vegetables mostly continue to be glossed

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over in terms of human appropriation and control, even as a growing body of research on Victorian horticulture is beginning to dissect the racializing history of this rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> Without downplaying human destruction of ecosystems through (especially plantation) agriculture, I propose “vegetable” as a heuristic for engaging the agencies of nonanimal growy things in Victorian studies. “Vegetable” rather than “plants,” though the terms were used interchangeably for most of the Victorian era, to avoid confusion with more clearly circumscribed contemporary categories of “plants,” salvaging instead the productive blurriness of the Victorian terminology. As importantly, “vegetable,” from the Latin verb for “vegetate,” conceptualizes these life-forms as sources of action rather than passive objects of human planting. To be clear: I don’t mean to attribute moral agency to vegetables, on the contrary. Any attempt to bring into focus how vegetables shaped human lives must attend to their species-specific, *vegetable* ways of living.

The Victorian period itself brought a bitter reckoning with vegetables *as* vegetables. It became increasingly difficult to ignore that vegetables are alive and have living agendas of their own. Vegetable pathology gained popularity in the Victorian period because only then crops started getting seriously sick, as increased global traffic disseminated live pathogens among vegetables that had been introduced into pathogen-free environments decades earlier. In the most extreme cases, as in Ireland in the 1840s or Sri Lanka in the 1880s, a single pathogen could bring whole societies to their knees. It also began to dawn on pathologists that vegetables rely on mutualistic relationships with other organisms, rendering monoculture unsustainable in the long term. On top of this, growing social unrest started to bring home the realities of imperial projects of rule being tied to organisms that had no interest in their success.

The case of English sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean illustrates this particularly well. The highly specific role that has been attributed to the sugar industry in the development of racial capitalism hinges, as has often been noted, on the fact that sugarcane has to be processed very quickly once cut.<sup>9</sup> This has to do with sugarcane’s metabolism. To ensure a sufficient supply of energy for respiration and growth at times when its leaves can’t capture solar energy through photosynthesis (for example, at night), sugarcane accumulates carbohydrates along its stalk or “culm,” mostly in the form of sucrose. The simple structure of sucrose releases energy readily when required, making things run efficiently within the plant. But it also renders the culm tissue defenseless against

bacteria and other decomposers when exposed to air—unlike honey, for instance, which bees prepare purposely for long-term storage. It is imperative to recognize that plantations were designed, down to their physical layout, to accommodate these specific vegetable ways of sugarcane—not to exculpate white Europeans from the horrific measures they took to this end,<sup>10</sup> but to help explain how, when Black people strategically withheld labor, the cane’s living agenda aligned with theirs, its perishability adding urgency to strikes. Sugarcane’s vegetable ways, then, shaped Black resistance *as well as* white projects of rule. This should not obscure the various vegetables that, in line with Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick’s theorizations of plot life, increasingly surface in accounts of Black resistance. Rather, attending to sugarcane’s vegetable ways can close some of the disciplinary gaps between plot and plantation. The point is that *all* human history was entangled with the “vegetable world,” to an extent that renders serious analysis of vegetable agencies indispensable to Victorianist scholarship.

## NOTES

1. W[illiam] T. Thiselton-Dyer, “Miles Joseph Berkeley. Born 1803. Died 1889,” *Annals of Botany* 11, no. 44 (December 1897): x. “Vegetable Pathology” appeared in *The Gardeners’ Chronicle* between 1854 and 1857, with additions until 1880.
2. Miles Joseph Berkeley, “Vegetable Pathology No. III,” *Gardeners’ Chronicle*, January 21, 1854, 36.
3. Miles Joseph Berkeley, “Vegetable Pathology No. II,” *Gardeners’ Chronicle*, January 14, 1854.
4. Joshua Calhoun, *The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), ix.
5. Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Finn: The Irish Member*, with an introduction by J. Enoch Powell (1869; London: Trollope Society, 1989), 171.
6. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 6.
7. See, for instance, Sukanya Banerjee, “Ecologies of Cotton,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 42, no. 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2020.1816089>; and Jim Tomlinson, “Orientalism at Work? Dundee’s Response to Competition from Calcutta, circa

- 1870–1914,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no. 5 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2014.982417>.
8. See especially Mary Bowden, “H. G. Wells’s Plant Plot: Horticulture and Ecological Narration in *The Time Machine*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47, no. 3 (2019): 609, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318001547>. This cross-disciplinary shortcoming is problematic in several ways, some of which Janae Davis et al. outline in “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, . . . Plantationocene? A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises,” *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (2019): 4–6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438>.
  9. The matter is considerably more complex; sugarcane’s specific way of doing photosynthesis is especially relevant. For an introduction to sugar’s histories, see Pal Ahluwalia, Bill Ashcroft, and Roger Knight’s volume *White and Deadly: Sugar and Colonialism* (Commack: Nova Science, 1999).
  10. Sugarcane’s ways are equally compatible with “small holders processing their cane through a central co-operatively-run factory” (Bill Ashcroft, “A Fatal Sweetness: Sugar and Post-Colonial Cultures,” in *White and Deadly*, 36).

