“In this powerful and original book, Jeffrey Nealon engages some of today’s urgent problems, giving us a new perspective on both the ethical issues raised by recent work in animal studies and related disciplines and the political issues at stake in any analysis of biopower and neoliberalism.”

—STEVEN SHAVIRO, WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

“Ironic but mercifully not postmodern, patient and eminently readable, Jeffrey Nealon’s book engages with and ultimately calls into question some of the guiding principles of animal studies. It is without question a singular contribution to recent research on biopolitics, animal studies, and the burgeoning field of ‘plant theory.’”

—TIMOTHY CAMPBELL, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

In our age of ecological disaster, this book joins the growing philosophical literature on vegetable life to ask how our present debates about biopower and animal studies change if we take plants as a linchpin for thinking about biopolitics. Logically enough, the book uses animal studies as a means into the subject, but it does so in unexpected ways. Upending critical approaches toward biopolitical regimes, it argues that plants rather than animals are the forgotten and abjected forms of life under humanist biopower. Indeed, biopolitical theory has consistently sidestepped the issue of vegetable life and, more recently, has been outright hostile to it. Provocatively, Jeffrey T. Nealon wonders whether animal studies as a field, which has taken the “inventor” of biopower himself to task for speciesism, has not misread Foucault, thereby managing to extend humanist biopower rather than curbing its reach. Nealon is interested in how and why this confusion predominates. Plant Theory turns to several other thinkers of the high theory generation in an effort to imagine new futures for the ongoing biopolitical debate.

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The genesis of this obscure-sounding project was actually quite simple: it started a few years ago at the annual Modern Language Association conference, where it seemed to me that an inordinate number of panels were dedicated to discussions of animal life in literature, culture, and theory. In 2009 a special cluster in the MLA’s flagship journal, *PMLA*, heralded the official arrival of animal studies in the literary humanities, and a torrent of books and articles has ensued. Going forward, it looks as if strong interest in animals among humanities scholars will continue, as there are a number of established book series and journals now dedicated to the topic. And while I like animals as much as the next person, the Foucauldian in me became preoccupied with trying to figure out how animality had somehow become the “next big thing” in the world of humanities theory and criticism. I wanted to figure out how, to paraphrase Michel Foucault, a “today” saturated with animal studies was different from a “yesterday” when, at least in the circles that I frequented in the humanities, not too many people were thinking and writing about animals. Indeed, if you had wagered in the mid-1990s that within a decade animal life was going to be an incredibly hot topic in literary and cultural theory (that there would be MLA sessions dedicated to animals in the Middle Ages, in Faulkner, or even a panel on “Cetacean Nations,” which included a presentation on narwhals), most humanities academics would gladly have accepted that bet, and offered long odds as well.¹

Nevertheless, on reflection there remains plenty of continuity within this story of rapidly shifting paradigms, insofar as the theoretical discourse surrounding animal lives emerged on the scaffolding of the Big Theory era’s master thinkers. Most obviously, Foucault’s work has been key in coming to grips with biopower (how various practices and concepts of “life” became central for power and knowledge in the modern and postmodern era), and Jacques Derrida remains a central theorist of animal studies, having dedicated several long texts to the question of animality in the canon of Western thinking. Likewise,
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari thoroughly rethought the question of life through the traditions of vitalism, and along the way they offered animal studies one of its founding concepts: "becoming-animal." (The "Cetacean Nations" MLA panel, for example, included a paper on "becoming-whale").

So on the heels of my earlier work on Foucault, I first set out to do a kind of genealogy of animal studies in the humanities, tracing its emergence out of the Big Theory era of the 1980s and 1990s. I specifically began by looking to untangle animal studies’ relations to the triumph of biopower (which filters everything through the concerns and practices of human life), starting from the plausible hypothesis that animal studies’ ascendency would turn out to be a natural outgrowth of the Foucauldian critique of biopower, a way for the humanities to begin undermining its myopic focus on human life as the only form of life worth the name. I expected to find out that animal studies became central in our era of intensified biopower precisely because animal life constitutes a visible and privileged “other” to human life: animals become a focus for critique because they lead lives that don’t count within a biopolitical regime that’s otherwise obsessively focused on questions of life. In short, my initial hypothesis was that Foucault might show us how animals’ exclusion from an increasingly triumphant human biopower was precisely what had made animals such ethically compelling figures over the past decade.

As Chapter 1 outlines, however, I did not find a confirmation of that hypothesis when turning to Foucault to unravel these problems of life and animality. Foucault in fact provides a very different explanation for intensified interest in animals within the biopolitical era: biopolitics remains invested in animals not because animals constitute our “others” but because animality provides the subverting notion of subjective desire that gives rise to biopower in the first place. Foucault argues that animals—and their hidden life of desire—have from the beginning been the privileged figures for understanding human life within the regime of biopower. Even more intriguingly, Foucault argues that it’s not animality but a primary focus on plant life that gets left behind in the era of biopower. In other words it became clear to me that the plant, rather than the animal, functions as that form of life forgotten and abjected within a dominant regime of humanist biopower.

I then turned to animal studies, and to Derrida in particular, to make sense of that abjection or exclusion of vegetable life within the voluminous work on nonhuman forms of life; instead, I found there an even more stubborn series of elisions. I found a pattern of dedicated swerves around the question of vegetable life in Derrida’s work on animals, as well as the Heideggerian work on “world” and “life” that remains so central to Derrida’s thinking on these topics. As we will see, several times both Derrida and Heidegger (not to mention Agamben) bump up against the question of vegetable life within their extensive work on humans and animals, but just as quickly and decisively, they each continue to elide the question of vegetable life, to remain focused on humans and animals. I began seeing a familiar gesture—consistently sidestepping vegetable life within the theoretical discussion of life-forms—and this led the Derridean in me to believe that I was on to something that I needed to follow out. And following this trail of vegetable life led me finally to Deleuze and Guattari, as the most famous practitioners of a plant-based rhizomatic mode of thought.

Even more surprising than that elision of plant life in recent biopolitical theory, however, was the amount of outright hostility toward thinking about vegetable life that I found within animal studies itself. For example, Cary Wolfe’s Before the Law: Humans and Animals in a Biopolitical Frame ends with a very dismissive sense of skepticism about plants’ claims to the hard-fought ethical gains of animal studies. He calls such sentiments a “cop out” and a “refusal to take seriously the differences between different forms of life—sunflowers versus bonobos.” Clearly, plants have no place in the “biopolitical frame” that remains reserved, it seems, for “humans and animals.”

Likewise, Gary Francione, the coeditor of Columbia University Press’s “Critical Perspectives on Animals” series, is having none of this vegetable nonsense. In a debate with Michael Marder, author of the inclusive Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetable Life, Francione insists that “There is . . . not one shred of evidence about which I am aware that plants suffer or have any intentional states,” so they have no “interests” and are not entitled to ethical recognition or any form of “subjectivity.” Perhaps more contentiously, Francione adds:

I should note in the 30 years I have been doing this work [in animal studies], when I discuss this issue with people who are not vegans, the conversation almost invariably turns to a sudden solicitude for the “interests” of the vegetables on our plates. We both know that the primary audience for your book will not be vegans who want to ponder whether they are under-inclusive ethically, but those who claim that we should skip over the interests of the cow and worry about whether the carrot had a tough harvesting season. If . . . this enterprise is really about putting cows and corn in the same group, then it would most certainly be an attempt to undermine veganism.
And I would add that both Francione and Wolfe are incredibly kind compared to the vitriolic fare to be found in the comment lines under numerous recent newspaper stories and blog posts concerning the growing scientific consensus around "plant intelligence." On a more personal register, I've had a vegetarian academic friend (ex-friend?) berate the idea that plants are compellingly alive as, I'm quoting here, "something a stupid frat guy would say." As perhaps the ultimate backhanded dismissal, as of this writing (January 2015), the Wikipedia page on "Plants Rights" quotes Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh as a strong defender of plant lives (suggesting that not only frat guys but mass murderers endorse this ridiculous idea that plants are worth thinking about—though to be fair, Wikipedia also has an extensive entry on Adolph Hitler's strict vegetarianism). Of course, *New York Times* articles with vegetarian-baiting titles like "Sorry, Vegans, Brussels Sprouts Like to Live, Too" and "No Face, but Plants Like Life Too," might help you understand why some animal studies practitioners get upset when the discussion turns to plant life; but from another angle, and debates about ethical vegetarianism aside, animal studies’ blanket refusal to consider vegetable life within its biopolitical frame seems to function as a subset of an old practice: trying to close the barn door of ethical consideration right after your chosen group has gotten out of the cold of historical neglect.

What do I mean by that? In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Judith Butler pointed out that the era of identity politics was haunted by an "embarrassed etc." that inevitably attaches itself to any list of social recognition categories: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, etc. Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* (1995) offered the additional insight that subaltern status or "injury" had become the coin of the realm for recognition claims within identity politics. In the wake of those powerful analyses, it was really only a matter of time before both the "etc." and the claims to "injury" decisively jumped the species line: why restrict the recognition of subaltern status to human lives? Cue, then, a robust emergent literature in animal studies.

If you have been paying attention to that recent flood of work in animal studies (and I guess even if you haven't), a certain kind of "critical plant studies" might strike you as the logical next step in the conversation about ethically compelling forms and modalities of life. Indeed, while animal life has been othered, ignored, or disrespected in most Western thinking, vegetal life has had an even rougher go of it. Saint Thomas Aquinas, that *bête noir* of animal studies, concisely sums up the philosophical prejudice: "Even brute animals are more noble than plants." But I'll stress right out of the chute that in *Plant Theory* I'm not primarily trying to put plants on the humanities' ethical, political, or theoretical map, at least in part because they've already all over that terrain so decisively. Despite skepticism concerning the questions posed by vegetable life, there exists the beginnings of a theoretical literature sprouting up around plant life and biopolitics: in addition to Marder's sweeping philosophical work in *Plant-Thinking*, there's Richard Doyle's tour de force *Darwin's Pharmacy: Plants, Sex, and the Noosphere*, Matthew Hall's political theory turn in *Plants as Persons*, Elaine Miller's feminist account of German romanticism in *Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine*, or Eduardo Kohn's posthuman anthropology *How Forests Think*, not to mention a vast environmentalist literature that takes the question of life beyond the human-animal divide very seriously indeed—everything from Timothy Morton's groundbreaking *Ecology Without Nature*, through theoretical work on climate change (like Claire Colebrook's sharp *Essays on Extinction*), via a detour through early modern studies (many of the essays in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's collection *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*) and studies in romanticism (for example, Theresa Kelley's *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* and Robert Mitchell's *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature*). All of these books are scholarly accounts published by university presses, but the winding road of plant theory also leads back to more practical, movement- and rights-based treatments of the earth, the environment, and the battle over genetically modified plants and the politics of food production (important exposés like Marie-Monique Robin's *The World According to Monsanto*, Weronah Haufer's *Foodopoly: The Battle over the Future of Food*, and Frederick Kaufmann's *Bet the Farm: How Food Stopped Being Food*). Likewise, over the past few years there has emerged an especially vigorous popular critical literature dedicated to translating the emergent hard-sciences consensus concerning "plant intelligence," or what botanist Anthony Trewavas straightforwardly calls "plant behaviour." In addition to Daniel Chamovitz's *What a Plant Knows*, Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*, and Francis Halle's *In Praise of Plants*, I've already noted several recent articles on plant intelligence in the *New York Times*, as well as extended feature pieces by Oliver Sacks in the *New York Review of Books* and by Pollan in *The New Yorker*. Chamovitz sums up this recent research confirming that "plants do indeed have senses":

Plants are acutely aware of the world around them. They are aware of their visual environment; they differentiate between red, blue, far-red, and UV lights and...
respond accordingly. They are aware of aromas surrounding them and respond
to minute quantities of volatile compounds wafting in the air. Plants know when
they are being touched and can distinguish different touches. They are aware
of gravity; they can change their shapes to ensure that roots grow up and roots
grow down. And plants are aware of their past: they remember past infections
and the conditions they've weathered and then modify their current physiology
based on those memories. . . . What we must see is that on a broad level we share
biology not only with chimps and dogs but also with begonias and sequoias.9

As a kind of clincher for the surge in interest surrounding plant thought
and action, even a summer 2014 episode of America's Got Talent had a brush
with vegetable greatness, featuring a woman who hooked up some plants to a
lie-detector-style apparatus to track their electromagnetic energy and make
beautiful music. (Several plant-generated music CDs are already available
from DataGarden.com, and the relatively simple PsychoGalvanometer necessary
to produce the music is now available for sale, as the MIDI Sprout.)10 Even
your Xbox is onto plant agency, which is prominently featured in the popular
all-ages first-person shooter game Plants vs. Zombies. (These may seem like
odd adversaries for a combat game, but the appeal to the whole family is clear:
both plants and zombies are swarms of quasi life that one can kill with a clear
conscience, insofar as they're only liminally alive in the first place.) Finally, a
plant in Japan, Midorì-san, had its own blog, with algorithmic software
designed to translate its photosynthesis and respiration into affective statements
like this: "Today was a sunny day and I was able to sunbathe a lot."11 Not
exactly Nabokov, I admit, but passable Internet fare, even though millions of hu-
mans presently updating their Facebook pages with similarly banal sentiments
would undoubtedly object to being characterized as house plants. Debates
about plants as musicians or bloggers or zombie killers notwithstanding, I'm
merely trying to highlight the fact that, both inside and outside the academy,
the questions posed by "life" outside or beyond the narrow confines of the
human remain central in today's posthuman, ecocentric, climate-threatened,
locavore world.

Plants, one might say in a kind of cryptic shorthand, are quickly becoming
the new animals. And more power to them. However, my interests here will lie
less in lauding plants or wondering about animals and will remain more di-
rected at a theoretical inquiry into vegetable life's liminal place within the wider
biopolitical focus on "life" in humanities theory today. My primary task is not
to convince you, Dear Reader, to be interested in the biopolitics of vegetable life
(because as I've noted, that interest already exists). I will rather concern myself
with the question of what (if anything) changes in our present humanities de-
bates about animal studies and biopower if we take vegetable life into account
or if we take plants to be a linchpin for thinking about biopolitics? Even more
specifically, I will focus on the roles of vegetable life in the extant high theory
of a generation ago (especially Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari),
in an attempt to suggest genealogical continuities, breaks, and roads not taken
within the recent theoretical past.

It may seem banal to point it out, but within all the discussion of biopolitics
and posthumanism, there seems a lot more discussion on the "politics" end of
biopolitics than there is rumination on the "bio" part of the story.12 Perhaps
the political questions—animal rights, climate change, mass extinctions—are sim-
ply too pressing to allow the luxury of much time to think through and critique
the constituent parts of biopower. But it's just that kind of slowing down that
interests me here and why I return to the high theory of Foucault, Derrida, and
Deleuze and Guattari in this urgent era of ecological disaster: because I think
we need to rethink these questions, about life, from the ground up.

This project is, finally, aimed not at recuperating that golden theory past
but at imagining possible futures for an ongoing and robust biopolitical de-
bate. If, as Eugene Thacker insists, "What we need is a critique of life"13 rather
than a celebration or denunciation of our intensified era of biopower, then the
critical tools we've inherited from Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari
should be crucial in helping us to further that critique. I'll likewise be arguing
throughout that as a mode of thought and inquiry in the humanities, "theory"
remains alive and well. And with its turns toward biopower and animal stud-
ies, humanities theory has trained its sights on the crucial (and "precarious," as
Judith Butler insists)14 question of "life" in the present and going forward. In the
end Plant Theory suggests that the discourses of contemporary biopolitics
may just need a little water and sunlight, and we likewise need to do some turn-
ing of the theoretical soil in which the biopolitics debate originally grew— Fou-
cault, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari. Going forward, the biopolitics debate
will need to take into account an even more robust notion of what constitutes
"life" beyond the human.