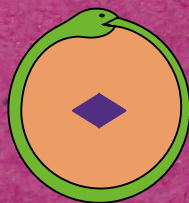
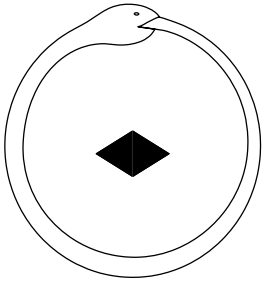


THE WORLD IS ALREADY  
INCREDIBLY ENCHANTED  
Natasha Myers



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## THE WORLD IS ALREADY INCREDIBLY ENCHANTED

Natasha Myers

This is the transcription and translation of an interview with anthropologist Natasha Myers, conducted in the context of the [Agir pour le Vivant](#) [Act for the living] festival, on August 23, 2021.

Natasha took part via video in the [panel “Être un arbre”](#) [“Being a tree”], which brought together botanist Francis Hallé and writer Alexis Jenni in person in Arles, France.

My name is Natasha Myers and I am a plant anthropologist, but I also study a whole range of other subjects. I have a history as a plant molecular biologist in the late 1990s. I studied how the floral meristem organizes itself to form a flower – and that fascinated me. I was already passionate about plants at that time, but I was also a dancer. My choreographic work and my questions about the movements of the human body quickly merged with my biological studies in a way that definitely changed my understanding of how plants grow and move.

I then began to think in terms of movement and gradually abandoned the pure sciences to become interested in the ways in which scientific practices could integrate bodily knowledge – such as the knowledge I had about the living world through my dance practice. So I began focusing on a new area of research in science and technology, which questions the way in which sciences and technologies form their knowledge. Later, I migrated to the world of anthropology and found a way to integrate my love of plants into my anthropological work. In this way, I would say that my obsessive love for plants, cultivated since the early 1990s, found its way into my scientific and creative research. My goal is to extend the field of anthropological investigation, to go beyond our own sociability, our own existences and to include us in something more than human. This is my way of thinking about the “we”, the collective formation that allows us to be human. It is a way of acknowledging that we become human through our relationships with all other living

beings, it is a gesture that allows us to envisage forms of *agency*<sup>1</sup> that we have traditionally reserved for humans, and that attempts to extend our understanding of the practices, pleasures, and desires of other life forms besides our own.

You know, the problem with humans is too often the problem of knowing what the human is and how to circumscribe that question. We really have to think about the formation of the human, but also about what lies beyond that. And there is so much to discover that goes beyond our little selves. To truly recognize our humanity is to recognize ourselves as a collective, to recognize the forces and forms of life that give us life, to understand that our nurture, our very substance, the substrate on which we live, was made by plants. They shaped this planet to make it habitable and breathable for us. How do we begin to understand their agency in our formation? It is possible to develop a much deeper sense of our own humanity if we begin to recognize that our humanity is part of a world built and dominated by plants, that is led by plants, that is organized by plants. This would generate a kind of humility before the collective life on this planet. If we ask ourselves what we can learn from plants – if we consider that we come from plants and that we are not in control or that we do not garden to decide who grows where. If we are intimately convinced that we descend from plants, we will have a very different relationship to them, one of reverence. We will then recognize what gives us life and open our minds to imagine a much larger involucre that reunites all our bodies of flesh and blood together with all the plants that sustain us.

The idea of *anthropos* is usually centered on the human being, which seems normal, but I play a little with the vocabulary, making up words that allow us to produce inclusions that recognize that the human is always inscribed, formed and nourished by plants. At the same time, the idea is not that one dominates the other: it is a relationship, and that is why I privilege the *planthropos* rather than the *anthropos* as the agent, the collective that we have to consider when making our decisions about how we move through the world, how we build our

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1. In the field of Sociology and Anthropology, the concept refers to an individual's ability to act independently (N.T.).

cities, how we interact with the territories, with our food and with absolutely everything else. Including plants in this *planthropos* gives us a broader vision of what humanity really is, but also of the impact of our actions on the world. If we had an accomplice, someone that oxygenates us, a being that gives us the breath of life and simply allows us to live, how would we care for them? How would we recognize and honor this relationship?

Most of the ideas I'm playing with today have to do with this deep connection. It doesn't make sense for humans to stand apart and withdraw from the living world to watch life unfold before their eyes while washing their own hands. I'm talking about a world of integration that intertwines our lives with the rhythms and practices of plants. It's a way of imagining the future that's radically different from those who think the world will only heal if we get rid of humans. I believe we are responsible for this huge mess, but we should stay here and rethink our relationships so we can do better on this planet.

What I like about this concept of *planthropos* is its capacity for maximum openness, but also the fact that it gives us the possibility of recognizing that we have responsibilities. It completely reconfigures the map and makes us confront our responsibility to nourish the plants in our turn. It is a call to take care of the plants that are immediately around us, to build new relationships with them – especially with the ones that live in the pots in our apartments –, to ask ourselves if they have enough water, enough light. What services can we offer them to live better in the world in which they are immersed, where they purify our air, provide our oxygen, metabolize our carbon? We need to recognize our complicity and our role in their well-being.

What I love to do, the simplest thing that can bring me joy, is to participate in the lives of plants that experience the pleasure of pollination. You can do something as simple as taking the stem of a carrot still attached to the root end and, instead of throwing them in the compost separator, plant them in the ground. They will grow, flower, set seed, and perhaps this gesture of yours will attract pollinating insects, thus feeding the plant's allies. That's what I did last summer: I rescued some carrots from my kitchen, and the caterpillars managed to find their way

to feed on the leaves until they metamorphosed into butterflies. I like the idea that we can actively participate in the relationships and pleasures that plants need to survive, and I call this concern for beings beyond ourselves “a service to the nonhuman community.”

One of the most violent things that the life sciences have done to the living world is to make pleasure, play and desire absolutely unthinkable for beings other than humans. I call this mechano-anthropomorphism because we have reduced the set of living beings to nothing more than machines, and therefore tools at our disposal, resources, raw materials for our own technologies. We turn the world into an automaton or a blind mechanism at the behest of a genetic code. All my lifelong research has focused on how the life sciences apprehend the world as a mechanism – and on the search for solutions to break this spell that shapes our way of telling stories about the living world. If we refuse the disenchantment provoked by the sciences, if we recognize that the world seen through this disenchantment is incomplete and that there is an effervescence of stories that emerge from all sides through the stories told by the life sciences, we will be able to free ourselves from this filter that sees all beings as materials available for our domination and use. For me, it is a form of activism to alter and rework the storytellings of science, to bring to light other ways of thinking about the living world and to recognize that there is a lot of effort being made to cause disenchantment. But it is precisely the failure to disenchant that allows us to recognize that the world is already incredibly enchanted. This is a concept that makes me think a lot about the brilliant contributions that Vinciane Despret’s work has brought me. It really helped me to recognize the violence inherent in scientific practices when they reduce the living world to a bunch of objects. But it is also an opening to restore the living world through a form of recognition of practices such as the pleasure, sexuality or sensuality of pollinating encounters between plants and animals, or the pleasure of nibbling on a leaf for insects, or the pleasure that plants feel when they manage to capture sunlight a little better or purify water. We thus open ourselves up to new forms of relationships where we understand that any living being that feels the world deserves our respect – and I take this from Merleau-Ponty – this form of

sensitive awareness that allows us to completely renew our relationships with plants, to understand them better in their differences. Not to consider them as ourselves, in a form of anthropomorphism, but a way of learning to *vegetalize* our own tissues in order to learn to feel and taste the pleasure that a plant can experience. We have a lot of work to do as human beings who have been so well taught to devitalize the world. My job is to be able to change this story.

I think it's really important to change this story, and I'm very interested in the ways we can change our imaginaries: how do we shift the tone, the texture, the manner, the foundations of our worldview? This requires radical experimentation, it requires going against the evidence and against what we take for granted. I'm particularly interested in our "common sense", our sense of good and evil, and in how that common sense has been influenced by a whole range of problematic thinking, from colonialism to capitalism. It's common sense, for example, to think of forests in terms of "ecosystem services". I want to break with that way of thinking and awaken new forms of imagination. And the best way to do that is not through argument. We need to be hypnotized, we need to be drawn into completely different ways of dreaming. In this sense, enchantments are interesting, or the way in which it is possible to cast a spell to break the spell that is still acting on us at the moment. And so the imagination has to be really radical, coming from a completely new horizon. Plants are incredibly generous, they give so much. You have to ask their permission when you develop your relationship with them. But when the relationship is good, they are incredibly generous with their wisdom, with their knowledge of the world, with the radical experiments they do in the world around them. They are willing to share, and so if you are open to this, in a deep way, then there is a lot to learn. If we recognize that plants are teachers, they know how to teach us how to heal the planet, how to detoxify our world. They know how to take care of the air, how to help the climate. We need to listen to them and learn to receive from them. They can tell us directly what we should do and they are the ones who, in fact, give me their instructions.

## NATASHA MYERS

Natasha is an adjunct professor in the Department of Anthropology at York University and director of the *Plant Studies Collaboratory*, an interdisciplinary group she created in 2011 that brings together academics, artists, physicians and activists to seed future *Plantropocenes*, that is, scenarios in which people form solidarity projects with plants to germinate habitable worlds. In partnership with the dancer Ayelen Liberona, she runs the audiovisual project *Becoming sensor*, which proposes a decolonial look at the living world and the (re)awakening of our attention to non-human forms of sentience through kinesthetic images and sounds.

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