

TAKING LOVE SERIOUSLY IN HUMAN-PLANT RELATIONS IN MOZAMBIQUE: Toward an Anthropology of Affective Encounters

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Behind the tall palm-leaf fences that compartmentalize domestic space in Inhambane hide luxurious gardens. Home to bougainvillea, hibiscus, crotons, impatiens, aloes, and other succulent plants,¹ these gardens are valued for their aesthetic qualities. “We grow plants because plants are beautiful, to embellish the yard,” I am told. Some gardens have flower beds lined with coconut shells or empty beer bottles buried neck-deep into the sandy soil. Others are bedecked with wind chimes made of old compact discs and hanging nuts and bolts that jingle in the breeze. Jack Goody (1993), who once observed that there were no flowers in Africa, would have been impressed had he made it to this sleepy town in southern Mozambique where ornamental plants are a visible feature of the urban landscape, albeit one that blends in more than it stands out. In the city center, the front lawns of government offices, schools, churches, and gas stations have all undergone some degree of landscaping, and most institutions have their resident gardeners. The private gardens I am interested in are usually also under the care of a specific individual who answers requests for cuttings and who seeks out, in everyday meanderings, new species to add to his or her collection. Indeed, plants are also inconspicuously present as moving objects that traverse the city from a workplace, the yard of a relative, or straight from the bush to one’s own yard, and, every so often, from several yards to the graveyard. Plants in Inham-

bane are remarkably mobile for things with roots, and they are often kept in bags, for want of flowerpots, in part to facilitate this circulation.

Plants inspire deeply romantic commentaries that speak of authenticity and attachment. In fact, gardeners articulate their engagement with plants as guided by an overriding principle: “the love of plants” (*o amor das plantas*).² They also construct their human-plant relations as markedly different from their interpersonal relationships. Unlike intimate relationships between lovers and relatives, which are seen as tainted by ulterior motives, human-plant relations are understood as far more authentic. What makes human-plant relations in Inhambane even more ethnographically intriguing is that the most romantic gardeners tend to be either young men or older women.



Figure 1. Kenneth’s garden, winter 2013. Photo by Julie Archambault.

When I first met Kenneth nearly ten years ago, he was living with his mother and younger sister, Tainha, on a small piece of land belonging to a distant relative. Kenneth had recently graduated from high school and was, at the time, “not doing anything,” as he himself put it. Like other young men in the neighborhood, he felt idle and restless. He did, however, devote much time and affection to looking after his garden. “My plants are my lovers [*Minhas plantas são*

minhas damas],” he liked to say, with a straight face. Kenneth would start the day by doing a spot of gardening, dead-heading wilted flowers or straightening the trellis used to prop up his climbers and watering the garden before it became too hot, though he sometimes entrusted the watering to Taninha. At the time, the household still relied on the public tap a short distance away for its water needs, and carting water was Taninha’s job. Tucked away behind a tall palm-leaf fence, Kenneth’s garden was strikingly beautiful. Most afternoons, young men from the neighborhood would congregate under the shade of his acacia to hang out, smoke marijuana, and lift weights. I initially found it endearing that this young man had such a soft spot for ornamental plants. Kenneth’s love of plants, like that of other young men in the neighborhood, added nuance to the mainstream model of masculinity with its expectations of virility and financial independence (Archambault 2013). What I found intriguing was not so much the fact that these young men enjoyed gardening, but more specifically how they experienced and constructed their relationships with plants as profoundly affective, as driven, as I said, by love.

To make sense of human-plant relations in Inhambane, I engage with the growing posthumanist literature on multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) and the questions it raises about human exceptionalism and how we approach our entanglements with other-than-human beings. My analysis of human-plant relations in Inhambane is informed by my wider interest in affective encounters, in the transformative potential of everyday engagement with the material world. I also draw on debates spawned by the ontological turn, namely, the renewed interest in anthropology’s commitment in taking seriously the propositions of others. Matei Candea (2011, 147), following Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, describes taking something seriously as “a self-imposed suspension of the desire to explicate the other, to verify the other’s possible world.” For example, in her work on indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes, Marisol de la Cadena (2010, 361) proposes to take peoples’ relationships with the mountain Ausangate seriously, by which she specifies that she means “literally, rather than metaphorically.” The ontological turn thus calls for an exploration into the literal rather than the metaphorical, for a suspension of skepticism. It proposes a radical rethinking of alterity by encouraging us to consider the possibility of other worlds and therefore to move beyond the more classic recognition of other worldviews (Carrithers et al. 2010, 175).

What would it entail, then, to take the love of plants in Inhambane seriously? In this essay, I frame my analysis of human-plant relations around the following

question: Should the statement “my plants are my lovers” be understood as an ontological proposition or as a metaphorical one? In other words, should the statement be taken literally or as speaking of something else? As I show below, human-plant relations in Inhambane deserve to be understood as ontological relations in their own right, even if these relations are not always with particular plants but rather with plants more generally. Gardeners may love specific plants more than others, and such preferences may vary over time, but they also see themselves as plant lovers in a more general sense. Gardeners also commonly highlight aesthetics over utility, by emphasizing that they cultivate ornamental plants for their beauty, for the love of plants, rather than for their commercial value, or for their medicinal or nutritional properties. Gardening, in other words, is pursued for its own sake. My ethnography does, however, suggest that the love of plants is also constructed as a response to the commodification of intimacy. When Kenneth described his plants as his lovers, he also meant it as a critique of the politics of love and intimacy in a postsocialist, postwar economy marred by deceit and growing inequality. Indeed, ontology and politics need not necessarily be mutually exclusive (see also [Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014](#)). Taking the love of plants seriously therefore implies understanding the statement “my plants are my lovers” both literally and metaphorically.

I start by positioning my analysis within posthumanist debates and multispecies research, and define what I mean by affective encounters. I show how the form and texture of human-plant relations in Inhambane has to be understood against the backdrop of the region’s particular social and historical geographies. One section, “Cultivating Affect,” therefore looks at human-plant relations as ontological relations, while the next section, “Unearthing the Roots of Love,” approaches the love of plants as a response to, and critique of, the commodification of intimacy. In the final section, I show how the love of plants is also productive of new social relations among fellow gardeners which are themselves modeled on human-plant relations, and conclude by proposing wider applications to the notion of affective encounters. My broader aim is to offer insight into how new intimacies, new ways of being and relating, emerge and take shape.

TAKING PROPOSITIONS SERIOUSLY

One of anthropology’s responses to the critique of human-centered epistemologies has been to start paying careful attention to everyday engagement with other-than-human beings and things ([de la Cadena 2010](#)) and to promote “multispecies ethnography” ([Kirksey and Helmreich 2010](#)). Insects ([Raffles 2010](#)),

forests (Kohn 2013), plants (Degnen 2009; Hitchings 2010), and other beings that stand at the edges of animacy, such as fungi (Tsing 2010), toxins (Chen 2011), marine microbes (Helmreich 2009), and the microorganisms that participate in the making of raw-milk cheese (Paxson 2008), have inspired an “anthropology beyond the human” (Kohn 2013) that proposes a radical rethinking of human exceptionalism. Multispecies ethnography, and posthumanism more broadly, raise pressing questions about the future direction(s) of anthropology. These are exciting times: while the move beyond human-centered epistemologies is gaining traction in the social sciences, discussions around the Anthropocene have placed humans at the center of environmental change.

Interrogating our multispecies existence, Donna Haraway (2008) highlights the intrinsically relational nature of processes of becoming and points to how engagement with other-than-human beings inspires new ways of relating. Building on Haraway’s insights, and writing against science and technology’s object-oriented ontology, Eduardo Kohn (2013, 132) insists on the distinction between objects and other-than-human beings for, unlike objects, other-than-human beings including plants are “selves, that is, beings with a point of view.” My understanding of human-plant relations is very much inspired by this literature. Like Kohn (2013, 221), who writes that “that which lies ‘beyond’ the human also sustains us and makes us the beings we are and those we might become,” I am also interested in how we “become with” (Haraway 2008, 3), in how our engagement with the material world makes us who we are. I do, however, depart from this posthumanist literature in two significant ways.

First, I make a case for the continued relevance of anthropocentric analysis. Gardeners in Inhambane recognize that plants have an effect on them and on the environment—they bring them joy and inspiration, and they purify the air—and experience their engagement with plants in profoundly affective ways. Yet although they love their plants very much, they have no interest in trying to see the world from a plant’s-eye view—and nor do I, for that matter. My inquiry into human-plant relations remains focused on human experience and by no means attempts to offer insight into the plants’ perspective(s). I prefer to bracket, as others have done when looking at interspecies interactions, questions of intentionality and agency (Candea 2010; Gell 1998; Haraway 2008). Second, while I find the distinction between other-than-human beings, or selves, and objects descriptively significant, it is, in my view, analytically more useful to consider affective encounters with plants alongside affective encounters with things. The anthropology of affective encounters that I wish to put forth not only takes ev-

eryday engagement with the material world seriously; it also pays careful attention to the product of such encounters to better understand emergent and entrenched ways of being and relating.

Affect, according to contemporary readings of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, is the "power to 'affect and be affected'" (Massumi 2015, ix; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Affect scholars understand affect as a "shared" (Berlant 2011, 15), autonomous force (Massumi 2002; but see Ahmed 2010) that exudes transformative, or at least productive, potential (McGrail, Davie-Kessler, and Guffin 2013). In Kathleen Stewart's (2007, 128) words, affects are "moving forces." A focus on affect addresses certain aspects of posthumanist critique by challenging the deep-seated view of the self-contained individual (Brennan 2004). It also opens up possibilities for thinking about the effects of other-than-human beings and things without having to engage in uncomfortable discussions around agency.

Much of the literature on affect recognizes that the capacity to affect and be affected becomes manifest through particular encounters (Stewart 2007).³ For example, in his work on Tamil films, Anand Pandian (2011, 52) explores the "autonomous powers of landscape and affect" to explain what makes some films more moving than others. For Pandian (2011, 54), affective encounters—between filmmakers and potential frames, as well as between films and spectators—are in part the product of the affective qualities of the landscape, which, as he shows, "exceed and escape the intentions of their makers." Plants, like landscapes, also generate a particular affect. That said, not everyone is moved by plants; in fact, some are left entirely indifferent. Affect, in other words, may move different people differently. Massumi's (2002, 61) distinction between affect as an autonomous force and emotion as a "recognized affect" offers a useful way of addressing this conundrum. I propose to explore these recognized affects through a focus on encounters. A study of affective encounters is concerned with the product of human engagement with this autonomous force. It recognises what Sara Ahmed (2010, 22) describes as "the messiness of the experiential" to explore "how we are touched by what comes near." An encounter, a meeting with someone or with something, is affective when it triggers some sort of effect; when it inspires, unsettles, troubles, moves, arouses, motivates, and/or impresses. If some affective encounters remain trivial, others can be life-changing. Encounters, in other words, are punctual events that can have enduring effects. Gardeners in Inhambane talk about how they came to love plants, about how they encountered plants—often after being introduced to gardening by a fellow gardener—and they also talk about more specific encounters with particular plants. Like any kind of

encounter, affective encounters never take place in a vacuum. Rather, affective encounters are shaped by the particular sociohistorical geographies within which they are embedded. An anthropology of affective encounters takes everyday engagement with other-than-human beings *and* things seriously, while also paying careful attention to what such encounters produce.

GARDENING IN INHAMBANE: The Legacy of a Particular Colonial Encounter

Gardening has been understood as an outlet for the display of status and as a site for the crafting of gender and class identity (Bhatti and Church 2001; Chevalier 1998), as epitomized by the manicured lawns of suburban America (Jenkins 1994). In Inhambane, gardening is performative of a particular urban sensibility traced back to Portuguese influence. When Jack Goody (1993) stated in *The Culture of Flowers* that there were no flowers in Africa, he meant that there were, to his knowledge, no African societies with an indigenous culture of flowers and that the rare cases of flower cultivation he had identified were the result of foreign influence. Although his thesis on the absence of flowers in Africa was deeply problematic, it did rest on a valuable empirical observation. The cut-flower industry in Kenya (Dolan 2007; Hughes 2000), like the uptake of *ikebana* in Kinshasa (Lambertz, forthcoming), to give only two examples, point to foreign influences. In Inhambane, gardeners readily recognize having inherited their love of ornamental plants from the Portuguese.

Inhambane's wide, acacia-lined avenues and decaying art deco buildings stand as reminders of more prosperous days when the city was home to a sizeable population of Portuguese settlers. Prior to Mozambique's independence in 1975, the city also had a relatively high number of *Assimilados*, or Africans who had acquired assimilation status.⁴ Many of the *Assimilados* were domestic servants working in Portuguese households, in which they would have come into contact with European gardening practices. As I attempted to trace the history of gardening in the region, the people I spoke with emphasized not so much the transmission of gardening knowledge and skills as the inculcation of an aesthetic sensibility. Even young people born after independence defined themselves as profoundly marked by this particular colonial legacy. "The Portuguese taught us many things," one man said, echoing others, "one of which was to appreciate beautiful things."⁵ The Portuguese fought hard, as part of a "biopolitics of improvement" (de la Cadena 2010, 346), against the use of roots for medicinal purposes and promoted instead a purely decorative approach to plants that was

embedded in broader ideas about household aesthetics and the promotion of the nuclear family. As such, although gardening requires a range of knowledge and skills—and there are scraggly gardens to prove it—gardening is understood as the expression of an aesthetic sensibility that can be learned and cultivated, just like one could, during the colonial period, learn to assimilate. Gardening became both constitutive and symbolic of a civilized subjectivity.

Shortly after independence, a protracted civil war (1977–1992) brought wide-scale destruction, abandonment, and resettlement that, in turn, generated new forms of cohabitation, along with unprecedented pressure on urban centers. Together with the nationalization of land under the banner of socialist modernization, the war further exacerbated the uncertainties of land tenure. When gardeners recount the history of gardening, they usually go back to the colonial period and gloss over the socialist/civil war period, which, with its displacement and destruction, as well as its emphasis on productivity, proved far from conducive to the culture of ornamental plants. But this omission also speaks of claims to a privileged genealogy, to a civilized status inherited from contact with Portuguese settlers. Today, gardening takes on new affective qualities in a postsocialist, post-war context marked by rising inequality, state retrenchment, and the ever important role of consumption in the realization of self. Just like romanticism’s connection to the industrial revolution and to the scientific rationalization of nature (Orlemans 2002), the love of ornamental plants needs to be understood in relation to wider unsettling socioeconomic transformations.

The city of Inhambane now acts as both an administrative center and a tourist hub provisioning the nearby coastal resorts that have sprung up during the past decade. It is a quaint little town nestled into palm tree groves lapped by the Indian Ocean that prides itself on being the cleanest city in Mozambique. Even the suburbs are remarkably tidy. Having absorbed most of the refugees who fled the countryside during the civil war, as well more recent waves of migrants attracted to the city in search of work and education opportunities, or simply “in search of life” (*à procura da vida*), the suburbs are, however, much livelier. It is in one such suburb that my research is based.⁶

CULTIVATING AFFECT

Like other young people throughout sub-Saharan Africa and beyond,⁷ the young men I worked with were struggling to become able and respectable adults, and more specifically, to live up to mainstream ideals of masculinity that cast men as providers. Excluded from the labor economy despite holding high school di-

plomas, their dreams of securing an air-conditioned office job, building a house, getting married, having children and perhaps a lover or two on the side were, at best, delayed (Archambault 2013). Among male gardeners, aspirations for a better future were manifest in the ways in which they cared for their plants.



Figure 2. Kenneth doing a spot of gardening, 2012. Photo by Julie Archambault.

Kenneth was frustrated but nonetheless confident that he would eventually manage to move out of his mother's household. All he needed was patience and a bit of luck. Meanwhile, he kept most of his plants in plastic bags, to "control their roots," he explained. By this, he meant two things. On the one hand, controlling roots was designed to prevent plants from spreading and taking over in the present. This was understood as good for the plants themselves. On the other hand, plants with contained roots would also be easier to move to a new location in the future. He said: "When I move out of here, I'll want to take my plants with me."

In some cases, however, the mobility of plants in bags turned into a serious disadvantage. Mundo, another young man from the neighborhood who also kept most of his plants in bags, regularly fell victim to plant theft. "Guys from the neighborhood just come in my yard when they know I'm out and take a few

plants [that they then sell] to buy gin,” he told me. The image of inebriated men peddling plants in the dead of night in the hopes of making a few meticais is rather uncanny. I never came across any of them myself, but I did witness how the memory of recently stolen plants lived on through the empty spaces they had left behind in Mundo’s garden. Gardening may not spontaneously conjure up ideas of mobility, as engagement with the landscape tends to be tied to place-making and belonging, but plants in bags, in this case, spoke of the uncertainties of land tenure and of desires of domestication, ownership, and aspirations.⁸ The way in which gardeners cared for their plants thus offered insight into how they positioned themselves socially, spatially, and temporally. It also pointed to the ways in which human-plant relations were envisaged as long-term relationships.

“My Plants are My Lovers,” Literally

When Kenneth said “my plants are my lovers,” it was meant as a critique of the intimate economy in which women peddle love and affection and from which young, unemployed men like himself found themselves excluded. Rather cynical about his limited financial prospects, Kenneth used to say that he could not afford a lover. In a sense, “my plants are my lovers” was a joke. Yet at the same time, as I came to appreciate the affective bond between Kenneth and his plants, I also understood that when he described his plants as lovers, he meant that his plants commanded the same sort of time, attention, and affection that lovers normally would. The plants, in turn, loved him back through beauty and growth. In other words, his plants were quite literally his lovers.

When Kenneth left a few years ago to take up a job in the capital, he entrusted the care of his plants to his sister, Taninha, who later told me: “Whenever Kenneth calls, the first thing he asks, even before inquiring about mother, is ‘How are my plants? Are you watering them every day?’” Taninha found it unusual, but also endearing, that her brother would ask about his plants as one would inquire about one’s relatives. She also took the responsibility very seriously. When I visited Kenneth in Maputo on my way back from Inhambane last year, he pressed me to report back on the state of his garden. He insisted that his plants remained in his heart despite the distance.

The love of plants becomes manifest through the time and energy that gardeners devote to their gardens, which often include decorative elements such as wind chimes and shaded seating areas amid the plants. I should note, however, that although gardeners commonly potter around the garden every day, gardening is not a particularly labor-intensive activity. In fact, most gardens are well looked

after and tidy, but far from manicured. Gardeners will also go through phases of more intense gardening and, sometimes, through phases of neglect. The last time I visited Paito, a young gardener I had worked with in the past, I found his garden in an awful state. A number of his plants had died, and the place simply looked and felt unkept. “I’ve been really busy with school,” he said, to justify the state of his garden. For a plant lover like Paito, an unkept garden was shameful and unfortunate, but it was not the end of the world. Paito knew that when things settled, he could collect cuttings from other gardeners and start over. Meanwhile, his love of plants remained unscathed.

Seductive Plants and the Question of Personification

Inhambane gardeners are not the only ones to personify their plants. The literature suggests that personification is rather common (Degnen 2009; Rival 1998; Gell 1998, 41). Like Kenneth, who described his plants as his lovers, other young male gardeners invariably dipped into the register of love to describe their relations with plants. For example, one said that he would never sell any of his plants, even in times of financial hardship, because he loved them all too much, while another explained that he was unable, when I pressed him on this, to identify his favorite plant because he loved them all equally. Love is, in fact, a key trope in trans-species relations (e.g., Candea 2010; Degnen 2009). Love, in this case, turned plants into inalienable possessions.



Figure 3. Paito and Pajo in front of Paito’s garden, 2014. Photo by Mia Strack van Schyndel.

One of the most romantic gardeners I had the pleasure to work with was Pajo, a man in his mid-twenties whose situation was less precarious than that of other male gardeners in the neighborhood, mainly because he had inherited a piece of land from his father, on which he was living with Jenny, the mother of their two children. Still, with little more than a few years of primary schooling between them and no reliable source of income, the couple was struggling to get by. People in the neighborhood agreed that Jenny, a feisty, well-connected young woman, nicely complemented Pajo, a man of few words famous for his lovely garden and for his love of gin. Pajo felt his plants had a soothing, almost therapeutic, effect on him. “When I’m upset, say after having an argument with Jenny,” he explained, “I just go and spend time with my plants.” Pajo used verbs such as *amar* (to love) and *gostar* (to like) in ways that spoke of profound attachment and affection to describe how he felt about particular plants. Little contraptions such as hanging baskets and raised potholders were material evidence of his labor of love. Like Kenneth, Pajo could often be found in the garden in the early morning, focused and content. When I offered him shears to thank him for collaborating in my research, his eyes welled up. He then showed me the rusty pair of scissors he had relied on for his pruning until then, and assured me that his garden would become even more beautiful.

Gardeners would recount their first encounter with plants as a conversion, as a process that could be traced back to a particular point in time, but which then evolved and developed its own momentum. Most gardeners with whom I collaborated were initially introduced to gardening by a plant-loving friend or relative, often an aunt, who offered them their first plant. But, as they recalled how they fell in love with plants, these gardeners insisted that, although the initial interest may have been sparked by another gardener, their love of plants had soon taken on a life of its own. They also emphasized being self-taught, commonly using the word *curiosidade* (curiosity) to gloss over the acquisition of gardening skills and knowledge. Plants were “autobiographical” (Degnen 2009, 162–63),⁹ as particular plants became associated with specific events in a person’s life such as a move or the beginning of a new friendship; with a time when one regularly frequented a place such as a school or an office with a garden from which cuttings were harvested; with a particular state of mind when a certain plant was acquired. Plants mapped out the passing of time. At the same time, gardens turned into repositories of social relations. Each plant had its own story, even if some were remembered more vividly or fondly than others. As they talked me through their gardens, my plant-loving friends revealed a lot about themselves. I learned about

a brother who was working in Zimbabwe, the one who had brought these rose bushes on a visit a few years ago; about grandparents who came from Guiua, a fertile area on the river Mutamba, where these impatiens were found; or about a fellow gardener who lived on the other side of town.

If plants were invested with any form of agency, it was their power to elicit wonder, their capacity to seduce—in a word, their affect—that gardeners emphasized, rather than the idea commonly found among gardeners in England, for example, that plants have a mind of their own (Degnen 2009). This was evident in the language used to describe plants as shining, for example, in the sense of standing out from the crowd, not unlike how one would speak of a beautiful woman. Detailing his love of plants, Pajo told me: “I know the plant I love the most [at any one time], because it’s the one I look after the most, the first one I notice when I get up in the morning. At the moment,” he concluded, pointing to an average-looking plant, “it’s this one. I like it because it has heart-shaped leaves.” In some cases, like in the one mentioned above, specific plants were singled out as particularly special, but in other cases, gardeners emphasized the love they felt for their plants in general. More often than not, they spoke of plants in the plural. Plants were understood to seduce the person who cared for them, and to compete for his or her attention simply through their beauty. But unlike the temptress, plants had no ulterior motives. As discussed below, the question of authenticity proved a key concern for young male gardeners excluded from the intimate economy for financial reasons.

Gardening in Inhambane can thus be understood as an affective pursuit that men and women genuinely engage in for the love of plants and human-plant relations, as ontological relations in their own right. Kenneth’s plants were literally his lovers; they seduced and commanded his love and affection. Yet as I show in the next section, human-plant relations can also be approached as a response to the commodification of intimacy.

UNEARTHING THE ROOTS OF LOVE

Unlike in other locales where human-plant relations are modeled on social relations between people (Fox 1971), in Inhambane, gardeners viewed their relationships with plants not only as fundamentally different but also as better and overall more genuine than their relationships with people. While plants were described as inspiring love, people, especially intimates, were commonly described as arousing suspicion and distrust (cf. Geschiere 2013). There also appeared to be a connection between the gender and generational fault lines of the

“intimate economy” (Archambault 2013, 89) and the uptake of gardening. On the one hand, partially owing to the unequal distribution of wealth along gender and generational lines, this intimate economy, in which sex and affection are exchanged for some sort of material gain, encourages transgenerational relationships between young women and older men (cf. Hunter 2002). On the other, the most avid gardeners—young, unemployed men and middle-aged female household heads—were also among the social categories that commonly find themselves excluded from the intimate economy. If the former lacked the financial capital of older men, the latter lacked the “bodily capital” (Wacquant 2004, 127) of younger women.

The commodification of intimacy is part commentary about rising inequality, part commentary about gender and generational hierarchies (Cole 2010; Hunter 2002; Thomas and Cole 2009). In a place like southern Mozambique, where money, sex, and affection are entangled in a complex web of expectations and obligations, young men’s exclusion from the labor economy directly impinges on their ability to participate in the intimate economy (Archambault 2013). I mentioned earlier that Kenneth complained that he could not afford a lover. Another young man spoke of a similar experience in these terms: “There was a time when you could get a girl for a piece of candy, but girls these days want flashy cell phones and designer clothes. They only have eyes for older men [who can offer them all these things], and us youths, we just can’t compete.” Despite being significantly undermined, the man-as-provider ideal, consolidated by the region’s integration into the migrant-labor economy in the twentieth century, has proven particularly resilient (Ferguson 2015). The young men did not lament the ideal’s premise—they saw providing for women as undeniably part of being a man—but rather that the material component had become so central as to supersede, instead of participating in the crafting of, genuine intimacy. I repeatedly heard paraphrased a classic Portuguese text taught in the primary curriculum: “Nowadays there are no longer women to marry” (Sebastião 1999, 50). “There are women [*mulheres*],” I was told, “but no woman [*mulher*].” Women were described as “materialist,” “corrupted,” and as privileging material gain at the expense of “true feelings” (*sentimentos verdadeiros*). Such accusations conflated women’s perceived transgression of two competing ideals of femininity: that of the respectable African woman suitable to become a wife and mother and that of the foreign-inspired girlfriend, the woman with whom one imagines building a relationship based on true love and aspirations of exclusivity, resembling Anthony Giddens’s (1992, 6) “pure relationship.”

Underpinning this yearning for genuine intimacy are competing ideals. On the one hand, young men were nostalgic of a not-so-distant past, before women became “materialist,” when marriage was believed to be a genuine and lasting union between two individuals and their families, if not always one initially based on love. On the other, they were also nostalgic of a genuine intimacy that could have been: one built on feelings of true love between a man and a woman—these are undeniably heteronormative ideals—rather than on negotiated agreements between male elders (Archambault, forthcoming). Young people found intimate food for thought in Brazilian telenovelas, Pentecostal sermons, NGO slogans, party politics, and everyday dealings with tourists and expatriates.

Although men were, by far, the most vocal, they were not the only ones to express unease with contemporary intimate relationships. In this social environment marred by profound suspicion and deceit, people agreed that it was impossible to know with certainty whether someone’s sentiments were genuine or simply driven by ulterior motives, whether one loved “for real” (*se ama de verdade*) or whether he or she was only pretending to love (*disfarçar*). While men complained that women pursued material interests above all else, women, for their part, felt that men were always trying to lure them into bed under false claims of true love. Young people emphasized the importance of proceeding with caution, of concealing one’s feelings, especially if these were genuine, as transparency would place one in a position of vulnerability. They worried that intimate relationships were inevitably characterized by deceit, as feelings were downplayed, falsified, or altogether fabricated so as to gain some sort of benefit.

While critics have argued that the commodification of intimacy need not necessarily translate into a diluted or counterfeit form of intimacy (Bernstein 2007; Constable 2009), it certainly feels this way for young people in Inhambane, especially for men too poor to play the game. Commodification unsettles intimacy in various ways and, as Peter Geschiere (2013, 67) writes, it “seems to trigger a search for new intimacies.” This is where gardening comes in. What I argue is not that the commodification of intimacy has led young men, in their search for new affections, to fall in love with plants—falling in love with plants is contingent, not reactive—but rather that human-plant relations are not only experienced and constructed in contrast to commodified forms of intimacies. They also, in turn, offer a template for new interpersonal intimacies.

Debates around the commodification of intimacy in sub-Saharan Africa have a long history. As Lynn Thomas and Jennifer Cole (2009, 23) write, “Africans have long forged intimate attachments through exchange relationships. They have

also long grappled with the ways in which monetization strains this practice.” But the shape and texture of these debates is changing as young people borrow from new repertoires to redefine understandings of intimacy. Gardening, as a profoundly affective activity, is inspiring different ways of relating and being intimate.

“My Plants are My Lovers,” Metaphorically

When taken as a metaphor, the statement “my plants are my lovers” truly captures the challenges faced by young men “too poor to afford a lover.” But what, then, is in a metaphor? In his work on sorcery, [Harry West \(2007, 36\)](#), following the linguist David Sapir, argues that “the metaphor works not only because it links two separate semantic domains . . . but also because it calls attention to the chasm between the[m]” (see also [Kohn 2013, 141](#)). The metaphor of plants as lovers offers a cynical take on men’s experiences of exclusion from the intimate economy. But it also conjures up alternative visions of intimacy. Plant intimacy, then, is not so much a substitute for interpersonal intimacy as an idealized form of intimacy. This idealization of human-plant relations also applies to relations between kin. For example, Vivi, a widowed woman in her late fifties, told me in no uncertain terms that she loved her plants *more* than her children, not *like* her children. She explained that the privileged relationship she had with her plants was a source of contention among her children, who expressed feelings of jealousy. “Mother,” she quoted them saying, “you care more for your plants than you care for us.” Unlike children who easily turn against their parents and accuse them of being witches (see also [Geschiere 2013](#)), and unlike lovers who inevitably deceive, plants seem to offer a more authentic form of intimacy, an innocuous intimacy untainted by ulterior motives.

Human-plant relations are what gardeners wish their relationships with people could be. Gardening thus not only creates meaningful human-plant relations; it also inspires novel templates of intimacy. Gardens are “bloom-spaces,” following [Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg’s \(2010, 9\)](#) apt formulation of affective spaces charged with promises (and threats). Gardens are also heterotopic spaces ([Foucault 1986](#)), spaces of affective encounters from which the contours of reality become, through contrast, more visible, and from which alternative ways of being and relating are imagined and tested. Nor does it end here. Gardening also creates social relations among fellow gardeners drawn together by the love of plants and by a shared refusal of commodification. Constantly on the lookout for new plant species, gardeners keep a mental inventory of those grown by fellow gardeners.

There is a small network of plant lovers across the city whose members exchange seeds and cuttings among themselves.

On a recent trip to Inhambane, I visited Paito, a young male gardener who, like the other gardeners introduced above, was living as a dependent in a female-headed household. It was still early in the morning, and I noticed a large sack full of fresh cuttings propped up against the kitchen wall. "I just got these from my aunt," Paito explained, preempting my question. "I already have a space reserved for them, right here," he added, pointing to the front of the yard. "I want to create a new aspect [*um novo aspecto*], something beautiful," he continued, before adding: "I wish I could cover my entire yard in plants . . . the entire neighborhood, even." Back from his gardening daydream, Paito gave details of how he had first fallen in love with plants. "It was Pajo who gave me my first plant a few years ago. But since then, I've acquired many varieties," Paito went on to specify. Both Paito and Pajo were also friends with Maria, a woman in her late forties who lived on the other side of town and was well known for her beautiful garden. Whenever they visited her, the young men would come back with a few cuttings to transplant to their own gardens. Paito was planning to offer Maria cuttings of a plant he knew "was missing from her garden," as he put it. This small network of individuals who shared the love of plants brought together young men and older women in like-to-like exchanges. The contrast with transgenerational relations between older men and younger women characteristic of the intimate economy was not lost on anyone. In a sense, the template for a more authentic form of sociality forged through human-plant relationships was being rehearsed among gardeners themselves. Gardening thus created social relations inspired by the affective bond between gardeners and their plants.

AUTHENTICITY ABOVE GROUND

The love of plants was not only imagined in contrast to the commodification of intimacy; it also inspired a refusal of the commodification of plants themselves. In this final section, I bring the two previous ones together by showing how gardeners' unease with the sale of plants constitutes both an affective, authentic response and a stance in favor of authenticity.

Not everyone in Inhambane loved plants like Kenneth, Pajo, and Paito. In fact, many could not have cared less about gardening. In contrast to her boyfriend's love of plants, Jenny's take on gardening was much more pragmatic, far less affective. In fact, she wished Pajo would agree to sell a plant or two every now and then. "I can never convince him to sell any of his plants," she told me.

“Even when people come knocking, wanting to buy, he refuses.” In his defense, Pajo interjected: “You see, each plant is unique, so if I sell one, or if someone steals one, for sure I’ll end up missing it. That’s why I much prefer to give out cuttings. That way I don’t have to part with the whole thing. If you sell your plants, you’re selling your inspiration. And a cutting, well, you just can’t sell a cutting.” Although selling a plant or two every now and then would have made financial sense, it was, for Pajo, simply inconceivable to do so. His love of plants trumped his love of gin in a powerful way. Adopting an uncompromising position against the commodification of plants, gardeners like Pajo insisted that plants should either be offered as gifts or exchanged, cutting for cutting, seed for seed.



Figure 4. Pajo and Jenny, 2014. Photo by Mia Strack van Schyndel.

The “commodification of nature” (Bhatti and Church 2001, 365) instigated by the garden industry in the North Atlantic world, and which is also visible in some parts of South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001), has made little headway in Mozambique.¹⁰ In recent years, however, a growing number of people have started selling plants for an emerging market fueled mainly by the municipal government and by a growing expatriate community. Although passionate gardeners like Pajo and Paito felt that running a plant business was a noble idea—“better than robbing for a living,” they agreed—both insisted that those who sold plants did not “grow plants for the love of plants,” as they put it. That said, plant sellers were not seen as antisocial or as morally misguided. They were understood simply to operate in ways similar to fruit and vegetable sellers. In other words,

what plant lovers emphasized was not so much the transgression of a discrete sphere of exchange (Ferguson 1990; Shipton 1989) as the reaffirmation of a personal stance, one driven by an affective connection with plants that was experienced and imagined as based on true love and that therefore precluded seeing plants for their commercial value.

In the rare cases when plant lovers did end up exchanging plants for money, they turned to the language of the gift to palliate this transgression. Tania, a woman in her early fifties who described herself as a florist, had a garden with various flowering varieties, including several rose bushes and carnations of different colors and sizes. Whenever there was a death in the neighborhood, people would come knocking on her door, asking for flowers to take to the cemetery.¹¹ Aware of the demand and feeling the strain on her own plants, Tania eventually started growing flowers in a *machamba*, a small field normally used to grow vegetables, specifically for this purpose. Before long, she was catering for much of the local funerary demand in flowers. She insisted, however, that people gave her money to thank her (*para agradecer*), and that she was therefore not technically selling flowers (*não é vender*).



Figure 5. A grave shortly after the *deposição de flores* at the municipal cemetery in Inhambane, 2014. Photo by Mia Strack van Schyndel.

Sueck, a man in his thirties who had recently started a small plant business, spoke of a similar unease with the thought of selling plants. He told me: “I can’t really say that I’m selling plants, you see, because a seed is something natural

that has been passed from generation to generation. Instead, people give me what they can afford, money for bread [*dinheiro de pão*].” The expression “money for bread” is commonly used to render certain transactions morally acceptable, socially sensitive, and to distance them from the crude logic of market principles. For example, the money a man gives his lover is usually constructed as money for something specific—money for breakfast, school fees, medicine for an ailing relative, or simply money for bread—rather than as a payment that would make the exchange feel like a transaction and therefore too much like prostitution (Archambault 2013). For romantic gardeners like Pajo, however, plants were simply meant to evade, as affectively charged other-than-human beings, these sorts of falsified exchanges.

If selling plants was out of the question, so was growing plants for anything other than their aesthetic qualities. The medicinal value of plants stood out as a key fault line separating those who shared the love of plants from those who had a more instrumental, less affective, relationship with plants. And while plants left someone like Jenny indifferent, it triggered a sense of danger among others who saw the introduction of something “from the bush” (*do mato*) into the domestic space of the yard as fundamentally transgressive. Osvaldo, a young man originally from Massinga, a rural district north of Inhambane, who grew up in the city, spoke of his unsuccessful attempts at converting his cousins back home to the joys of gardening. He told me: “Whenever I visit, I bring them cuttings of my own plants as gifts, but they don’t want to know.” To Osvaldo’s dismay, his cousins’ appreciation of plants was essentially pharmacopic, an affordance that they could easily tap into by harvesting wild plants without having to transgress the boundary between the home and the bush.

Although some of the ornamental plants found in Inhambane have medicinal properties, gardeners emphasized that they grew them first and foremost for their aesthetic qualities. “I grow plants because plants are beautiful” or “I grow plants because I love plants,” were the most common responses to questions about the rationale behind the culture of ornamental plants. By downplaying, negating even, a utilitarian rationale, gardeners made claims of authenticity and highlighted more specifically that their love of plants was free of ulterior motives. Gardeners not only experienced human-plant relations as affectively genuine but also felt compelled to honor such authenticity through practice.

There are interesting dualisms at play here. Unlike ornamental plants whose aesthetic potency lies visible, above the surface of the earth, the medicinal and/or occult properties of plants are usually contained in their roots, hidden under-

ground.¹² In a sense, the impenetrable world of interpersonal intimacy—with its suspicion, distrust, and deceit—shares features with the invisible realm of the occult. In the visible world of ornamental plants, in contrast, things are what they seem. Or, at least, things are closer to what they seem. They are above ground, authentic.

CONCLUSION

When Kenneth describes his plants as his lovers, should he be taken literally or metaphorically? Should human-plant relations be understood as ontological relations in their own right or as a response to the commodification of intimacy? How one answers these questions depends on one's theoretical inclinations. In my view, however, and as my ethnography of human-plant relations suggests, these two perspectives need not be mutually exclusive. In Inhambane, gardening is simultaneously constructed as evidence of a particular aesthetic sensibility inherited from the Portuguese, imagined as a response to the commodification of intimacy, and experienced as a profoundly affective and genuine pursuit. Indeed, a cumulative approach (cf. [Navaro-Yashin 2012](#)) not only offers a richer analysis of human-plant relations in Inhambane but it also stays true, or truer, to the ethnography. Kenneth would agree: his plants are his lovers both literally and metaphorically.

It is no coincidence that the losers in the intimate economy are also among those who take up gardening most passionately. Gardening is, to some extent, redemptive for the young men who struggle to live up to mainstream ideals of masculinity. It also offers an outlet for their desire to provide and care for others, while conferring a sense of authorship. Having said this, I believe that there is more to human-plant relations in Inhambane than a form of response to, or protest against, the commodification of intimacy. My ethnography suggests that falling in love with plants is far too affective to be reduced to such an interpretation. People in Inhambane do not fall in love with plants to fill a void. Love emerges through contingent affective encounters, albeit ones that are socioculturally inflected. These affective encounters inspire novel ways of being and relating that are articulated and contrasted with experiences of commodification and exclusion. The city's recent history, from a Portuguese settler town to a place wrestling with growing inequality and the commodification of intimacy, has participated in the construction of gardening as a purely aesthetic and intrinsically affective pursuit. Human-plant relations in Inhambane are not only ontological relations; they also

offer a template for alternative, more genuine ways of being intimate, while fostering social relations based on this alternative ideal.

As living beings, plants are particular kinds of things that possess, as Eduardo Kohn (2013, 92) points out, “distinctive characteristics that make them *selves*.” While I agree that the shape and texture of human-plant relations is influenced by the very nature of plants as living things, the anthropology of affective encounters put forth here is more interested in the product, the affect, of such encounters than in the task of classification. In my view, the transformative potential of plants, the affect they generate, makes them comparable to other non-living but also moving, affecting things. I side with Bruno Latour (2004, 205) who writes that “to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning ‘effectuated,’ moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or nonhumans.” New intimacies can emerge from various forms of encounter. For example, mass media inspires new ways of thinking about love and intimacy (Thomas and Cole 2009; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002; Larkin 1997), while digital media open up virtual spaces within which alternative forms of intimacy can be negotiated (Archambault, 2012; Bernstein 2007). But inspiration can also crop up in more unusual places, through affective encounters with things and other beings such as cuddly animals (Candea 2010), a particular Australian shepherd (Haraway 2008), or toxic toxins (Chen 2011)—even if some encounters are arguably more affecting than others (cf. Stewart 2007). Indeed, it is often through affective encounters that new (and sometimes not-so-new) ways of being and relating are imagined and explored. An anthropology of affective encounters focuses on the transformative potential of everyday engagement with the material world, with moving things and other-than-human beings, to explore what it entails, or might entail, to be human.

ABSTRACT

Behind some of the tall fences that compartmentalize domestic space in Inhambane hide luxurious gardens that are usually under the care of an individual who answers requests for cuttings and who seeks out, in everyday meanderings, new species to add to his or her collection. In this Mozambican city, gardeners articulate their engagement with plants as guided by an overriding principle: the love of plants. One gardener even described his plants as his lovers. What makes human-plant relations in Inhambane even more ethnographically intriguing is that the most romantic gardeners tend to be either young men or older women. In this essay, I engage with the growing posthumanist literature on multispecies ethnography and explore what it would entail to take the love of plants seriously. I ask whether the statement “my plants are my

lovers” should be taken metaphorically or literally. I situate human-plant relations in Inhambane against the backdrop of the region’s particular social and historical geographies—from a Portuguese settlement to a postsocialist, postwar society wrestling with growing inequality and the commodification of intimacy—and show how human-plant relations deserve to be understood both as ontological relations in their own right and as a response to the commodification of intimacy. I do not argue that the commodification of intimacy has led young men, in their search for new forms of affection, to fall in love with plants; falling in love with plants is contingent, not reactive. Rather, I suggest that human-plant relations are not only experienced and constructed in contrast to commodified forms of intimacies, but also offer a template for new interpersonal intimacies. My analysis of human-plant relations is informed by my wider interest in affective encounters, in the transformative potential of everyday engagement with the material world. I explore the transformative potential of affective encounters between plants and gardeners to start thinking about how new intimacies, new ways of being and relating, emerge and take shape. [human-plant relations; multispecies ethnography; love; affect; gardening; Mozambique; youth; intimacy; commodification; ontology]

NOTES

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1. Most households rely on some form of urban agriculture to make ends meet. Comestible plants for personal consumption are, however, rarely grown at home. Instead, they are cultivated in vegetable gardens (*machambas*) situated away from residential areas.
2. These gardeners would not define themselves as gardeners, since the term *jardineiro* is usually used in reference to professional gardeners. Some male gardeners preferred to call themselves *o homem das plantas* (the plant man). I nonetheless refer to the individuals who partake in artisanal gardening as gardeners, mainly for the sake of clarity and flow.
3. Some have explored affect as animated through human encounters (Brennan 2004; Stewart 2007) or as a force that arises between humans and the built environment (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Stoler 2008).
4. The qualifying requirements for assimilation included conversion to Catholicism, monogamy, employment, and mastery of the Portuguese language (O’Laughlin 2000).
5. Others have similarly shown how assimilated Africans, or *évolués* as they were known in Francophone Africa, were encouraged to appreciate flowers (Hunt 1990; Lambertz, forthcoming).
6. This article is based on ongoing ethnographic research in the city of Inhambane since 2001, during which time gardening was a side research interest, as well as on two months of fieldwork carried out specifically on this topic in 2013 and 2014. Although

- my analysis draws on research among both female and male gardeners, I focus here on the perspectives of young men.
7. The plight of young people struggling to live up to ideals of adulthood is the subject of a wide literature (Cole 2010; Dewey and Brison 2012; Jeffrey 2010; Mains 2012; Masquelier 2013; Vigh 2006).
 8. Tenants are less likely to plant plants into the ground than land owners. Tenants are also forbidden to plant trees.
 9. Trees are also important players in people's biographies, especially owing to their role in staking claims over land.
 10. Nature is, however, very much commoditized through the extraction of natural resources, especially since the recent discoveries of oil and gas in the north of the country. My thanks go to one of the reviewers for pointing this out.
 11. The Christian funerary rite known as the deposition of flowers involves covering new graves with freshly cut flowers. A week later, when the deposition of flowers is repeated, some of the first flowers will have wilted and died, while others will have started taking root.
 12. *Raizes*, the Portuguese word for roots, is used a generic term to refer to traditional medicine.

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