

Transatlantic Gardens and the Nineteenth-Century Botanical Exchange

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In 1887 the Englishman Albert Millican travelled through the Colombian Andes collecting orchids for the Veitch Nurseries in Chelsea. He gathered more than 10,000 plants and sent them back to England for sale to urban gardeners. Two years later, William McLane, an agent representing Rochester's Live Plant Company, signed a contract with the municipality of Bogotá to supply 30,000 plants commonly used in Europe for urban parks. In the late nineteenth century, cities like Bogotá and London became “floristic islands”, with a higher concentration of imported plants than the regions that surrounded them.

Urban ecologists have identified in the introduction of ornamental plants one of the main reasons behind the growth of “anthropogenic flora”. Considerable efforts have been made to explore how ornamental plants were introduced and acclimatized in the process of nineteenth-century urbanisation. However, these studies have usually failed to recognize in the introduction of ornamental plants an urban phenomenon of global dimensions which: (i) was multidirectional and multinodal, (ii) unfolded distinctively in different places, and (iii) had significant ecological consequences. Hence, while histories of plant hunters and botanical gardens in Europe have received significant attention, we still know little about the historical conditions that promote the appearance of plant merchants such as McLane and how they contribute to turning cities into unique gardens. Aiming to unveil the complexities involved in creating urban floras, this project examines the functioning of the transatlantic trade of ornamental plants between Europe and the biodiverse tropical Andean nations of Colombia, Ecuador, and Perú between 1820 and 1920.

In the process of transatlantic urbanization during the long nineteenth century, plants became symbols of power and ostentation. The new social role of plants was connected with the emergence of new approaches to landscape aesthetics and the management of urban life. However, ecological differences combined with neo-colonial approaches led to different outcomes in Europe and Latin America. On the one hand, European cities underwent a process of managed “tropicalisation” characterized by the introduction of tropical plants, labelled as “exotic”, which were acclimatized, maintained and exhibited in museum-like greenhouses. On the other hand, cities in highly biodiverse tropical Andes, enormously influenced by European models and approaches, underwent a partial Europeanization whereby certain non-local species perceived by the local elites as symbols of “progress” were introduced and amply used in the ornamentation of new green public spaces. This project proposes that the appetite for exotic nature in the form of plants and designs from elsewhere informed the expansion of a transatlantic botanical trade at a scale not seen since the Columbian exchange of the sixteenth century.

To examine this nineteenth-century botanical exchange, the project will dissect the transatlantic trade in ornamental plants focusing on the ensemble of human and non-human actors that formed it. Specifically, the research will draw on digital historical and botanical evidence to identify, describe and critically analyze the participation in this lucrative business of plants hunters/merchants, botanical gardens, nurseries, horticulture catalogues presses, urban planners and plants. In doing so, the research will help reconstruct historical relationships between humans,

plants, and technologies that provoked a massive redistribution of global biodiversity endowing cities with a unique botanical repertoire.