



# Labyrinth

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Ant plants are epiphytes that nestle into the branch cradles of paperbark trees. They are cousin to the milkweed, which contrarily release poisonous toxins to drive ants away. Ant plants are nonparasitic and do not bother rooting in soil. Ah, to live on fresh air and sunlight! Bulbously tuberous, the ant plants grow to form cavities, where initial tissue has decayed away. These cavities create a complex of turning tunnels. When you cut open a prickly skinned ant plant, first you have to avoid the biting ants, and then you can see a labyrinth of passages and rooms.

Labyrinths, designed by humans, mimic the same forms found in ant plants. In accordance with Michael Taussig's writing about sympathetic magic, the urge to recreate a form is a way to follow the gift principle, in which the original and the copy begin to reciprocate and inform each other.<sup>1</sup> An example of a labyrinth copy is the labyrinth maze built at Centennial Park, Sydney. This labyrinth is etched into a flat sandstone circle near the center of the park. The park copy adds affect to the original and vice versa.

This is the ant dance of knowledge. The never-ending chain of mimesis and magic, and the gift of those infinite connections, are conjoined.<sup>2</sup> Today, as I stare at the ant plants I have in my greenhouse, I feel the internal labyrinth, as an original form, but also as a copied form at the park and also as a structure that stretches beyond the plant or the park and forms part of the entire globe, on which humans perch. So, the ant plant labyrinth becomes a lesson in distributed activity.

I can live alongside my plant labyrinth friend. It is a lesson in care and friendship across species. I can do this by watering my ant plants and witnessing their genius.

1. Taussig, *Mastery of Non-mastery*, 120.

2. Taussig, *Mastery of Non-mastery*, 126.

Watching ants move across one of my ant plants gives me space to rest my mind as I imagine the inner labyrinthine workings, to linger on thoughts of the present, and to pay attention to the physicality and complexity of biotic life. The labyrinthine relation between ant plant and park maze extends to Mayan and Egyptian underground tunnels, to beehives, to land crop art, to ant hills, to urban sprawl, and so on. The sympathetic magic is not dualistic, then, but a multispecies ecology of copies and exchanges.

Daedalus built the first human labyrinth to hide the minotaur, according to classical Greek mythology. When humans create a labyrinth, the objective is to imprison a metaphorical beast or his slaves. A human labyrinth is a form of dominance because it expresses a will to create a mark, to leave an inscription, or to urge others through a difficult passage toward a certain point. It's a game, but it is also an egoistic resolve of mastery. As Karen Warren explains ecofeminism: "With colonisation begins the domination of women and the domination of nature."<sup>3</sup> It is possible to argue that this domination of both nature and women has also been accompanied by a lack of care: this is power without responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

The fungal partners in the labyrinthine ant plant team have been overlooked.<sup>5</sup> Like many other marginalized communities, the fungi in fact play a critical and widespread role as a result of their diverse abilities. "Fungi are metabolic wizards and can explore, scavenge and salvage ingeniously."<sup>6</sup> Fungus—like the slave, like the cheated, like the raped, like Ariadne (known as mistress of the labyrinth who helped save the slaves from the minotaur)—has learned how to survive in domineering environments.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, they are the perfect teachers, alongside and in partnership with the ant plant.

Ant plants soak up moisture from their friendly paperbark trees (comrades rather than hosts) during the wet season, to last during the dry. Round as a celeriac, the ant plant tubers have a small number of tiny, crater-like entry points around the circumference. The plant is happy to absorb the nutrients from any dead ants or the fungi or any detritus such as remains of prey that the ants bring back to their nest, in return for their shelter. Ants not only tolerate fungi but also prefer to live in the ant plant alongside the fungi.<sup>8</sup> Plant, ant, and fungi prosper together, snugly supported by the paperbark tree.

Plant behavior scientist Monica Gagliano has conducted and published work on two plant experiments that prove plants—mimosa and then peas—are capable of memory and associative learning.<sup>9</sup> What is most interesting about Gagliano's work is that both her experiments included a maze as part of the methodology, in which plants could choose to grow toward the light or wind. Like Ivan Pavlov and his dog experiments,

3. Warren, *Ecofeminism*, 22.

4. Plumwood, "Ecofeminism," 121.

5. Defossez et al., "Ant Plants and Fungi," 945.

6. Sheldrake, *Entangled Life*, 5.

7. Sheldrake, *Entangled Life*, 234.

8. Defossez, "Ant Plants and Fungi," 948.

9. Gibson, "Pavlov's Peas," n.p.

Gagliano worked with her plants, and they eventually associated her decoy (wind) with light and therefore survival, hence proving associative learning capacities. Human copying plant copying human copying plant.

The ant plant re-presents what many humans intuitively already know—that plants have all the answers, if we care to observe and discover. The ant plant, viewed through an ecofeminist lens, is a place of multi-identity living. Plant, ant, and fungi live together on a tree. There are four species involved at any given point in time, but carcasses of other insects can be found in ant plant labyrinths too. Different genera of ants can live in the ant plant, such as the golden ant. It is a dwelling, a caring sanctuary, a network, an ontologically equal-register entity. This leads me to suggest that, for me, as an ecocritical writer, the labyrinth represents the multitudinous difficulties of women's lives. The ant plant structure is a womb of care and renewal. It is home, it offers sustenance and harbor. It directs ant traffic through the intimate and complex passages of its form. It sits lightly on the tree structures where it thrives.

When humans copy the ant plant's labyrinth, the original is not lost but instead is made more visible and more critical. The final act of cross-species mutualism in the ant plant is that the ants (both male and female) take the plant seeds and carry them away to the waiting arms of another paperbark tree, to germinate and to create another labyrinth.

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