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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Tinctorial Cartographies: Plant, Dye & Place

Anna Heywood-Jones

And now that all the parts and members of the mortal animal have come together, since its life and necessity consisted of fire and breath, and it therefore wasted away by dissolution and depletion, the gods contrived the following remedy: They mingled a nature akin to that of man with other forms and perceptions and thus created another kind of animal. These are the trees and plants and seeds which have been improved by cultivation and are now domesticated among us; anciently there were only the wild kinds, which are older than the cultivated. For everything that partakes of life may truly be called a living being, and the animal of which we are now speaking [i.e., the plant] partakes of the third kind of soul, which is said to be seated between the midriff and the navel, having no part in opinion or reason or mind, but only in feelings of pleasure and pain and the desires which accompany them. For this nature is always in a passive state, revolving in and about itself, repelling the motion from without and using its own, and accordingly is not endowed by nature with the power of observing or reflecting on its own concerns. Wherefore it lives and does not differ from a living being, but is fixed and rooted to the same spot, having no power of self motion...The superior powers had created all these natures to be food for us.

- Plato, *Timaeus*¹

The *Tinctorial Cartographies* project emerged from the desire to undertake a focused study of Nova Scotian dye plants in the interest of creating a regional lexicon of colour. The genesis of the work came about amid the recent global revival in natural dyeing practices, yet despite this renewed interest in the field in-depth exploration into Canadian plants seemed to be largely missing from the discourse.

In my experience, the reputation of regional dye plants tends to be one of small colour range, lack of light-fastness and the historical use of harsh mordants negating the “natural” component of their being. It strikes me that the assumed inferiority of Canadian dyestuffs is in part due to our lack of easy access to blue and in some cases red dyes. However, it is also indicative of

¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 77a-c. trans. Benjamin Jowell, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html>.

dominate cultural notions of value: we attribute worth to that which comes from a place of recognized history and tradition, while we devalue that which we see as being simply *here*, born of a supposedly hostile climate and lacking in acknowledged historical significance. In other words, the colonial mindset spills outwards to encompass not only land and human beings, but also vegetal inhabitants.

To develop an accurate sense of Nova Scotia's seasonal dye palette, a selection of indigenous, naturalized and invasive plants were harvested from across the province over a twelve-month period. The research process began by identifying candidate dye plants and acquainting myself with their ecological and social significance. Over time, the project grew to involve a more intuitive and serendipitous approach, wherein fieldwork would reveal significant plants within a given area and their dye-bearing potential would be discovered upon extraction in the pot.

The act of walking and looking brought with it a highly embodied way of experiencing place, as each harvesting venture was shaped according to my encounters with vegetal life. At the time, the flora of the region was entirely new to me and over the course of the year I came to learn that the landscape itself was a repository of knowledge, and that the presence and absence of various plant species offered insight into the ecological and social complexities of the province. It was the politics of land seen through a verdant lens.

Through a process that verges on the alchemical, each harvested plant was transmuted into a viable source of colour. The dyed swatches become complex chemical records as each fibre and mordant interacts with the dyestuff in a unique manner, thus creating a colour-field of reactions and relations (see Appendix). In a way, each resulting swatch merely stands in for its source plant—as the botanical body is transposed into a textile articulation it commits the plant to material memory. The swatches also serve to map my journey through the province, marking the chemical particularities of plant, soil and season, they are cartographies of time and place.

The project is in one sense a study of the *terroir* of colour, of that which was extracted directly from the Nova Scotian landscape, yet at the same time it strives to act as a point of entry in considering the contextual meanings held within the plant life growing in the region. The fieldwork component of the project ultimately revealed the need to find a theoretical framework with which to comprehend a landscape so ripe with evidence of human intervention and exploitation. This realization spurred my investigation into the role of plants within philosophical and social contexts, from historical denegation to, in some cases, contemporary recognition. Subsequently, *Tinctorial Cartographies* endeavours to speak to the complex relationship between human and botanical spheres, articulated through the processes of harvesting, extracting and dyeing.

We live in a plant-dominated biosphere, and yet the relevance and meaning of vegetal life, beyond its contribution to human existence, is rarely considered. Botanical beings are seen as passive and unconscious, growing and dying without awareness, merely fulfilling a biological destiny. Plants serve as the backdrop to our lives, never fully noticed unless remarkable in some way. We understand their purpose in relation to our needs, yet the vegetal experience of the world seems of little consequence. This way of thinking has led many of us to see nature as external to ourselves, as “other”, as that mysterious realm beyond human experience.

Western philosophy has long assumed that the existence of plants is less complex and evolved than their human and animal counterparts. This presumption has allowed for vegetal life (and other “natural” resources) to become available for unconditional use and exploitation. To look at a plant and see an individual entity, rather than a species or resource, can be a difficult task, as a plant’s way of being is so alien to our own. Plants and humans have remarkably dissimilar sensory systems, methods of movement, and ways of communicating. Yet we coexist in the same world. Our lives reflect and impact one another as we are influenced and shaped by the same environmental and social forces.

We have inherited ways of conceptualizing the purpose of plants. It is a legacy of disregard and misconception that continues to inform our behavior towards the botanical sphere. This pejorative view of vegetal life arguably has its roots in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, who held the sphere of reason firmly above the sphere of nature. During subsequent centuries, the dichotomy between human and nature became a foundational element of our philosophical tradition, as the base hypothesis of human superiority was carried forward.² While it might be argued that the conceptual demarcations of *subject* and *object* have run their course in Western thought, and that the world should no longer be considered in human terms alone, the legacy of human/nature dualism remains alive and well and is responsible, in no small part, for the ecological peril we all face today. The structural premise of the human held above the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms continues to be reflected in many contemporary economic and political discourses and is a system of thought that has profound and devastating consequences.

Interestingly, there is current research emerging from the field of botany that suggests the vegetal world possesses characteristics associated with intelligent behaviour. Recent findings point towards forms of botanical communication, seen through complex hormone and chemical signalling, as well as social behaviours within plant communities, among many other enlightening discoveries.³ With such research in mind, vegetal philosopher Michael Marder suggests that plant intelligence should be considered in its own terms rather than in anthropological or zoological ones.⁴ He proposes that plants allow us to reconsider what we mean by intelligence in the absence of recognizable anatomical or physiological structures we tend to associate with the term and to imagine, more broadly, something like “the intelligence of life.”⁵

As in visual culture, plant life possesses signifiers and coded meanings in their contextual configurations. Subsequently, botanical literacy offers insight into environmental, sociocultural and historical narratives of place. The forests and herbaceous margins of our communities speak of a complex past, a parallel history of migration, colonization and adaptation. They also reflect the present—the current state of the world and the evolving nature of local and global systems. As anthropologist Marilyn Walker writes: “From the seed ferns that first colonized the land millions of years ago to the ornamentals we plant in our gardens today, plants have adapted to

² Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 25.

³ Michael Hall, *Plants as Persons* (Albany: State University Press, 2011), 149.

⁴ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 21.

⁵ Marder, Interview with Joe Humphreys: “The Philosopher’s Plant”. (Los Angeles Review of Books Channel. Web. Accessed: 4 March, 2015.

the changing conditions that characterize the history—ancient and recent—of a given region.”⁶

Nova Scotia, known far longer as Mi’kma’ki, resides in Mi’kmaq territory and the vegetal fabric of this region has been informed and cultivated by human hands since time immemorial. In recent centuries, European imperial and economic interests served to irrevocably alter the landscape of the area. The reverberating effects of these interventions can still be seen in the vegetation of the province, by that which thrives and by that which no longer grows there. As Walker says: “The landscape we now know as the Northeast is the end result of a complex interweaving of natural and human forces. And it is still evolving.”⁷

During the early years of European colonization, Nova Scotia’s old growth stands of white pine and other trees of commercial value were cut, first by the French and later by the British Royal Navy.⁸ Both imperial powers sought control of this resource as the forests in their own countries faced depletion due to overharvesting. The competition between France and Britain for supremacy at sea was also a key contributor to the exploitation of North American forests.⁹ Pine trees were coveted for their application as ship masts and incredibly by 1805 nearly all the mature white pines in the region had been cut down.¹⁰ Other tree species, such as spruce and hemlock, were also commercially valued. Due to demand from the tanning industry, thousands of live hemlock trees were stripped of their bark and left to die in the forest, cambium bared.¹¹ Twelve thousand years of evolving woodland complexity was disrupted and destroyed in just a few short centuries.

The removal of peak specimens from the Acadian eco-region at the height of their health and strength, leaving only younger and potentially less robust trees to spread their seeds, was a loss that has never been recovered.¹² As Dr. C. Mary Young writes in her book *Nature’s Bounty*: “tree extraction was the beginning of the opening up of the forests, allowing both the penetration of foreign species and the fragmentation of the forest, changing both water run-off and the balance of nature.”¹³ Clear-cut scrublands and decimated ecosystems are the result of these actions, initiated by colonial predecessors and perpetuated by our own actions.

As settler populations moved into North America, foreign plants of domestic and commercial value were intentionally introduced, alongside numerous weeds that were accidentally brought to the continent. Many of these plants flourished in their new environment, irrevocably altering the fabric and function of local plant communities and initiating an environmental transformation of monumental proportions.

⁶ Marilyn Walker, *Identifying, Harvesting and Using Wild Plants of Eastern Canada* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2008), 7.

⁷ Walker, *Wild Plants of Eastern Canada*, 7.

⁸ C. Mary Young, *Nature’s Bounty: Four Hundred Years of Plant Exploration in New Brunswick* (Fredericton: University of New Brunswick, 2015), 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Young, *Nature’s Bounty*, 41.

Myths of “virgin land” and “inexhaustible resources” continue to inform the land upon which we live, as each generation is born with a new high-water mark and the unfounded assumption that our surroundings have always been as they are now. In actuality, all “natural” spaces we encounter are heavily influenced by human action, both directly and indirectly. The effects of colonization, government policies, and resource-based economies are not just things of the past, as they continue to influence the landscape of the present. In both rural and urban settings, the residues of these actors can be read upon the surface of the earth.

When capitalism thrives, the cycle of development accelerates, displacing native ecosystems, and when it wanes, adaptive plants take root, not merely reclaiming land but remaking it. As research scientist Peter Del Tredici suggests in his book *Wild Urban Plants of the Northeast*: “the amount of spontaneous vegetation in a given city always seems to be inversely proportional to its economic prosperity”.¹⁴ The invasive plant is the weediest of weeds—the most loathed, the ultimate vegetal alien. These are the subversive botanicals, bent on shaking down the established order as they redistribute the occupation of land. In doing so, they often highlight the hostile actions of the human, as they follow in the wake of our destruction.

In his essay “Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons,” poet and scholar Stephen Collis speaks of the significance found within the presence of the Himalayan blackberry in the Pacific Northwest:

The bramble entangles and marks the very edges and gaps in the regime of private property. They mark lulls and failures in capital, the moments of decay and depreciation after industrial production and before gentrification. In taking to our fences, the bramble even appears to be attempting to stand *between* properties, *on* their margins, *on* that thin line that is neither *mine* nor *thine*.¹⁵

In 1885, horticulturalist Luther Burbank brought the now highly invasive Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*) to North America.¹⁶ As Collis suggests, this timeline is concurrent with the arrival of European-style capitalism in the region, and much like its human counterpart this invasive bramble displaced numerous native species as it sought to occupy new land.¹⁷ Yet Collis also posits that the Himalayan blackberry acts as a critic or as the “negative image” of capitalism as the areas inhabited by the bramble act as a kind of commons. Both in terms of their physical occupation of land and in the fruit they bear, which is accessible to all without the exchange of money. Collis is clear that while the marginal spaces that the bramble inhabits are currently void of capital interest, they also act as placeholders for future speculation and development. However, he claims that these prickly commons offer a temporary space to imagine an area outside of the current capitalist paradigm—a place that exists because of capitalism but that is not beholden to it.¹⁸

¹⁴ Peter Del Tredici, *Wild Urban Plants of the Northeast* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2010), 17.

¹⁵ Stephen Collis, “Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons,” Yumpu: Forum on Public Domain, 2013. Accessed January 5, 2015, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/20946062/of-blackberries-and-the-poetic-commons-stephen-collis-simon->.

¹⁶ Collis, 1.

¹⁷ Collis, 3.

¹⁸ Collis, “Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons,” 4.

While the case of the Himalayan blackberry is a particularly cogent illustration of the vegetal subversive, many plants (native, naturalized or invasive) occupy areas of capital vacancy. They are visual markers of current social and economic conditions, echoed through verdant bodies. This collection of weedy botanicals, disliked for their rapid proliferation, has arguably evolved into an essential element of the urban ecology. They are a cosmopolitan array of species that often reflect the natural and cultural histories of the area.¹⁹ In the context of Nova Scotia, the vast majority of naturalized and invasive plants originate from Europe, while a handful hail from Asia and fewer still from other parts of the world. Opportunistic native plants also exhibit patterns of growth associated with invasive behaviour, as species such as alder and goldenrod actively inhabit recently disturbed landscapes.

The presence of invasive plants, such as the Himalayan blackberry, is a point of contentious debate within many communities. Some believe that these plant species should be eradicated from local ecosystems, given their tendency to displace fragile native plants, while others call for a more lenient approach. It must be noted, once again, that the majority of invasive plants only grow in areas where humans have recently disturbed or altered the landscape. As Del Tredici says: “A native flora once grew where the city now stands, but the idea that this vegetation can somehow be restored to the site is both ecologically and evolutionarily impossible.”²⁰ He argues that just as globalization has irrevocably altered local economies, it has also destabilized long-standing ecosystems and catalyzed the creation of new ones.²¹

Our cities have become the adopted habitat of many early successional plant species that insert themselves into the spaces left behind by human endeavour. Such sites of temporary neglect are wastelands of capital interest yet also operate as vegetal havens. As Del Tredici suggests, this heterogeneous collection of resilient plants has come to be the common vegetation of the urban environment. These plants exercise agency through their very adaptability and proliferation, they stand between the past and the future, fixed in the present.

The time has come to expand our conception of plant relevance. The need to develop new ways, or perhaps old ways, of considering the botanical world has become a moral imperative, as we seek to mitigate harmful behaviors towards potentially intelligent non-human life, and to secure a future for our own species. It must be acknowledged that the actions of harvesting, extracting and dyeing ultimately utilize plant bodies as a purely material resource. Subsequently, *Tinctorial Cartographies* enters into direct dialogue with problematic notions of human use placed above vegetal purpose. However, to cease using plants altogether is an inappropriate and frankly impossible response to addressing the issue of instrumentalization. Instead what is needed, is a philosophical levelling of the “hierarchy of beings,” since the ways in which we think undoubtedly influence our actions. With this in mind, perhaps the most meaningful approach is to view myself, the making process and the resulting dyed swatches as being as much a part of nature as the plant bodies they represent. From this perspective, the plant, the textile object and myself are all equal partners in an ongoing dialogue.

Rendering a plant into a swatch quite literally gives the botanical body new form, however in

¹⁹ Del Tredici, *Wild Urban Plants of the Northeast*, 9.

²⁰ Ibid., 16.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

doing so, only one element of its perceivable self is made present. As the living complexity of the plant's being is lost in translation, it enters into a lexicon of colour. It is a process of reduction and loss. However, the swatches held in *Tinctorial Cartographies* offer a mediated encounter with a vegetal entity within a systematic vocabulary that sits outside of taxonomic classification. It is a method of organization that endeavours to subvert the notion of absolute knowledge as presented by the discipline of botany and proposes another way of representing, considering and relating to botanical existence.

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<http://www.annaheywood-jones.com/#/tinctorial-cartographies-the-archive/>.

APPENDIX

The textile swatches used in *Tinctorial Cartographies* were handwoven with linen, cotton, tencel, silk and wool. Each of the five fibres is represented using three mordanting variables: ferrous sulphate, potassium aluminum sulphate and no mordant. Therefore, in each swatch there are three groups of five fibres in both the warp (vertical) and the weft (horizontal). From left to right in the warp: unmordanted section (linen, cotton, tencel, silk, wool), alum mordanted section (linen, cotton, tencel, silk, wool), and iron mordanted section (linen, cotton, tencel, silk, wool). This configuration is mirrored in weft. Top to bottom: iron mordanted section (wool, silk, tencel, cotton, linen), alum section (wool, silk, tencel, cotton, linen), unmordanted section (wool, silk, tencel, cotton, linen). All fibres are mordanted prior to weaving, therefore the swatch comes off the loom white in colour, it is then placed in one dye bath and two hundred and twenty-five blocks of colour emerge.

The fibres and mordants used in the construction of the swatches were selected for their common use in contemporary natural dyeing practice and the design of the swatch was an attempt to glean as much information as possible from each dyebath while maintaining limited variables. It must be noted that there is much research to be done into the chemical relationships between local dyestuffs and fibre substrates such as alder, ash, reeds, porcupine quills etc. in context of Nova Scotia, and other regionally specific materials across the continent. I acknowledge that the use of wool, silk, tencel, cotton and linen reveal a specific set of interactions from which only so much

insight may be gathered. These are largely fibres of European and Asian origin, which have their place in Nova Scotian textile traditions, hence, in part, their use in this work, yet in no way provide a full picture of natural dye utilization in the area, particularly in reference to work made by Mi'kmaq artists and makers, both historically and contemporaneously.

Common toadskin: Lasallia papulosa. Native species. Harvested: Purcell's Cove, Halifax County, January 25.

Anna Heywood-Jones, 2016.

Labrador tea: Rhododendron groenlandicum. Native species. Harvested: West Quoddy, Halifax County, June 19.

Anna Heywood-Jones, 2016.

Striped maple (bark), Acer pensylvanicum. Native species. Harvested: Blomidon Provincial Park, Kings County, July 18.

Anna Heywood-Jones, 2016.

Striped maple (leaves), Acer pensylvanicum. Native species. Harvested: Blomidon Provincial Park, Kings County, July 18.

Anna Heywood-Jones, 2016.

Yellow loosestrife: Lysimachia punctata. Introduced species. Harvested: Sydney Mines, Cape Breton County, August 10.

Anna Heywood-Jones, 2016.

Bloodroot: Sanguinaria canadensis. Cultivated native species. Harvested: Halifax, Halifax County, August 20.

Anna Heywood-Jones, 2016.