

What is the wild?

The wild 'is synonymous with unkempt, barbarous, unrefined, uncivilised, unrestrained, wayward, disorderly, irregular, out of control, unconventional, undisciplined, passionate, violent, uncultivated and riotous' (Cullinan, 2011, 29-30). There are many adjectives which can be used to describe the term 'wild' and it is applicable to the animate and sentient, animal and vegetable, immaterial and physical and the human and non-human alike. How then can the wild be described and understood?

Humans view something as wild when it is not within our control and therefore becomes potentially dangerous, like an undomesticated animal. I argue that in line with this, those spheres of life that have historically been subjected to political, social and physical means of control, take on a quality of the wild after becoming uncontrollable, undomesticated and therefore a threat. This essay will approach the wild through case studies and contemporary art which examine the historical relationship between women and nature. This is because both parties have historically been oppressed and domesticated yet have also shown resistance and reclaimed a measure of agency and freedom, moving beyond the controlling power structures which seek to dominate them.

In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1995), Carolyn Merchant describes how medieval understandings of the world were displaced by increasingly scientific and rationalised modes of thinking. Cultural values shifted during the 16th century from seeing the earth as an organic organism to viewing it as a

machine, which sanctioned the exploitation of natural resources. 'Central to the organic theory was the identification of nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother' which meant once this conception was 'undermined and replaced by a mechanically oriented mentality [it] either eliminated or subdued female principals in an exploitative manner' (Merchant, 1983, 2). There was a second image present in pre-sixteenth century ideologies which involved a 'wild and uncontrollable nature' associated with the female, here ideas of mastery and domination gained root and permeated modern conceptions of nature (Merchant, 1983, 2). Once the earth was no longer seen as an organism it allowed for it to be territorialized and sectioned off systemically as property. Enclosures, the privatisation of land and the development of agricultural processes led to the propagation of the farm. This process of exploitation can also be seen in the 'mechanisation of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers' (Federici, 2004, 12). Subsequently, both nature and women became subordinate resources and were seen as sites for (re)production, both land and the female body became farm and factory to manufacture and drive progress.

The first artist to be discussed is Joscelyn Gardner, whose work will help examine how both nature and women have resisted the domesticating effects of farming practices.

This line of enquiry will be continued through looking at the work of Candice Lin to consider how historically women were demonized as wild witches in order to eliminate power from female figures in society who had knowledge of the natural world. The work

of Anicka Yi will then be discussed to consider how bacteria and fungi possess their own wild agency and how this is mirrored in the threat feminism poses for dominant societal power structures. Although this essay approaches the question of wildness from an ecofeminist standpoint, it also discusses the farm in relation to colonialism and its subjects. Yet, this avenue is only touched upon as it could not be done justice within the restricted space of this essay. However, the farm still provides a helpful starting point because it shows us what is certainly not wild. Following this strain I will discuss the ways in which these environments of cultivation inadvertently produce wildness.

The history of the term 'wild' is bound up with ideas of the 'wilderness', our understanding of which stems from Immanuel Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgement* and the 'terrible' sublime. However, 18th Century romanticism had the effect of domesticating those natural 'untouched' landscapes and the wilderness was increasingly sought out 'as a spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed for its great beauty' as an antidote to urbanisation and industrial modernity (Cronon, 1995, 6). In addition, within the artistic tradition of landscape painting, 'in pastoral imagery, both nature and women are subordinate and essentially passive' (Merchant, 1983, 8). This is because, as the sublime became domesticated, it also came to be viewed from a position of mastery and domination over nature and the earth, which is historically associated with female principles (Merchant, 1983, 2-3). Moreover, territorialisation, the creation of national parks and the displacement of indigenous peoples, raises the question of whether a contained and constructed wilderness is really wild. For these reasons, this

essay will not search for the wild in the 'wilderness' but in its opposite, the farm or plantation. This essay does not contest that 'the farm becomes the first and most important battlefield in the long war against wild nature' (Cronon, 1995, 14), but discusses whether wildness can still be found within the systems which seek to domesticate it.

The wild is often defined in opposition to the domestic. However, this binary understanding perhaps excludes much of what can be considered wild. The works of nineteenth Century philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) still help inform contemporary discussions of the wild, texts such as *Walden* (1854) advocate a simpler way of life and can be seen as an attempt to escape domestication and the 'ills' of modernity. However, Thoreau did not necessarily believe in a dichotomous relationship between the wild and domestic, but considered that which is domesticated such as fruit, vegetables and animals to retain a measure of original wildness. Barney Nelson in '*The Wild and Domestic*' (2000) describes Thoreau as believing that the world requires a 'balance between the "wildness" he is attempting to define and the constraints placed on it by society, education, government and religion' and what 'he is defining [is] the spirit that rises when power structures become oppressive enough' (Nelson, 2000, 5).

This description of a spirit of resistance is important in considering how the domesticated can become wild. The farm is where 'life worlds are remade as future

assets' (Tsing, 2016, 2) but as well as producing for the future, the farm also has a past in the form of the plantation and the exploitation of slave labour. Caribbean Canadian, Joscelyn Gardner (b.1961), uses her artistic practice to discuss how 'under patriarchy and colonialism the lives of all Caribbean women have been shaped by mastery' (Gardner, 2008, 116). Gardner's work includes a series titled *Creole Portraits III: "bringing down the flowers"* (2009-2011), a term referring to the return of menstruation after aborted pregnancies. The work (see figure 1 and 2) is a series of lithographs of imagined portraits of real women who worked on Caribbean plantations as slaves. The portraits are named with two words, the name of the woman and the plant used as an abortifacient, information Gardner found in British and Caribbean archives. The pregnancies were usually the result of non-consensual acts of sexual violence by slave owners and the women chose to end their pregnancies or kill their newborns as 'an act of political resistance against their exploitation as 'breeders' of new slaves and to protest the inhumanity of slavery' (Joscelyn Gardner, 2017). Despite the atrocities suffered through acts which aimed at reducing human beings to machines, these women refused patriarchal and colonial power by not allowing their children to be born into slavery. I argue this 'spirit of resistance' which rebels against domestication and removes control from dominant powers is an act of wildness.



Figure 1: *Veronica frutescens* (Mazerine), 2009, Joscelyn Gardner, lithograph on frosted mylar, (91.5cm x 61cm).

Gardner's portraits depict afro-centric hairstyles viewed from behind merging with the plants which were used as abortifacients (see figure 1 and 2). The women are also wearing collars which were used as punishment for denying slave owners new slave labour. The portraits are effective because they refuse to be portraits; the faces are turned away in an act of refusal which also testifies to the overlooked and hidden stories of these women. Moreover, the delicacy of the line work, and inferred sensory softness

of petals, jars against the violence of the history and the bodily trauma involved in ending a pregnancy. Today, flowers are used in gendered products to reinforce traditional concepts of what in popular western culture is deemed 'feminine'. These portraits undermine those attitudes through confronting the viewer with a very different relationship between flowers and women, the colour of the flowers reclaims a vitality and agency against the dull brutish collars which restrained and mute the head.



Figure 2: *Convolvulus jalapa* (Yara), 2010, Joscelyn Gardner, lithograph on frosted mylar, (91.5cm x 61cm).

In *Earth Stalked by Man* (2016), anthropologist Anna Tsing describes the plantation, or farm, as 'modern proliferation' (Tsing, 2016, 5). She discusses how the cultivation of land into 'simplified ecologies' in the pursuit of capital, facilitates technological and industrial production which has led to anthropogenic climate change (Tsing, 2016, 4). Whether human induced climate change began during advancements in agricultural processes or during the English industrial revolution, the environmental crises being experienced today are bound up with the cultivation and exploitation of the earth and its natural resources. Therefore, serial domestication on an increasingly global scale has led to a change in planetary conditions which threaten the continued life of many species, humans included, for 'as we impair these natural relationships we diminish the Earth's capacity to maintain the conditions conducive to life' (Cullinan, 2003, 36). In a metaphorical way, it can be seen as the earth's wildness, a refusal of compliance with the domesticating demands of man. Here a change or refusal to sustain life unites women and the earth in resistance to domination, attempted mastery and imposed domestication, similar to Thoreau's description of a spirit of resistance, as a characteristic of wildness.



Figure 3: Sycorax's Collections (Herbarium), 2012, Candice Lin, etching with watercolour and dried plant, (27.9 x 33 cm).

The Witch, historically villainised as 'unkempt, barbarous, unrefined [and] uncivilised' has many qualities of wildness. 'Witches' were viewed as dangerous because they were outside of patriarchal control. The 16th-17th century witch hunts in both Europe and the New World involved the persecution of healers and herbalists, women who could 'help control a community's rights to abortion or contraception', or 'outspoken women who fought against issues of religious or feudal power abuses' (Vikram, 2015). Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) describes how their prosecution removed knowledge and subsequently control of reproduction from the sphere of women, a

means of destroying female power which threatened patriarchal dominance. This also had the effect of consigning women to unpaid domestic and reproductive labour, casting them as 'breeders' of the new workforce (Federici, 2004, 12). Federici argues the oppression of women and their exploitation through unpaid labour is what facilitated the rise of capitalism. Figure 3 shows an etching by the artist Candice Lin (b.1979), titled 'Sycorax's Collections (Herbarium)', which depicts a female figure laden with a range of plants, vegetables and animals. Lin is interested in 'imagining a narrative about Sycorax that gave voice to these feminist struggles' and helps acknowledge this overlooked history (Vikram, 2015). Sycorax is a character taken from William Shakespeare's "*The Tempest*", mentioned only briefly as a witch and the mother of Caliban. The blue colour of the skin and the somewhat haggard appearance of the figure paired with the labelling of the flora, shows how women's knowledge of plants was entwined closely with the demonising of female figures in society. It seems important that the artist didn't just draw but stuck real specimens of plants onto the work, figure 4 shows the same work once the plants have dried and turned light brown in colour. The physical presence of the plants emphasises the close relationship between the history of these plants and that of women's bodies. This is further emphasised in how Sycorax seems almost in a process of metamorphosis with the vegetables she carries, or at least appears to have plants growing from her body. Perhaps the 'witch' was also feared because of her close association with nature and the plant kingdom which was seen as uncivilised and wild in a society with an increasingly disconnected relationship to the earth.



Figure 4: Sycorax's Collections (Herbarium), 2012, Candice Lin, etching with watercolour and dried plants, (27.9 x 33 cm).

However, unfortunately, this is not a narrative confined to historic examples, as there has been a resurgence of witch hunting in Brazil and South Africa (Federici, 2004, 11) as Federici summarizes, 'the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation ha[ve] accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one' (Federici, 2004, 12).

The idea of an uncontrollable entity is quickly paired with the wild and its connotations of danger and unpredictability. The monocrop is dangerous in the sense of reducing biodiversity, an example of which can be seen in the case of Fordlandia, a 1920-30s failed rubber plantation in the Brazilian Amazon, an endeavour of entrepreneur Henry

Ford. Due to low genetic variation and the close proximity of the rubber trees, a fungus (*Microcyclus ulei*), killed all the trees and led to whole enterprise being abandoned. The absence of other tree species in the plantation context meant the monocrop facilitated 'fungal proliferation' and quickened the spread of the fungus (Tsing, 2016, 9-10). In this way Fordlandia can be understood as an example of capitalism reaching a natural limit, as an attempt to control and organise nature, had the opposite outcome. Examples of when nature reclaims control such as plant pathogens, desertification, extreme weather conditions, floods, fires and the consequences of invasive species on existing ecosystems are all testimonies to the wild unruliness of nature that cannot be totally regulated by manmade institutions.



Figure 5: Grabbing At Newer Vegetables, 2015, Anicka Yi, plexiglas, agar, female bacteria, fungus, (214.6 x 62.2 cm).

South Korean artist, Anicka Yi (b.1971), works with the medium of bacteria, in her 2015 New York show *You Call me F* (figure 5) at The Kitchen, the artist collected samples from one hundred women within her personal and professional network and with the help of MIT microbiologist Tal Danino created controlled environments for the cultures to develop (O'Neill-Butler, 2015), the 'F' in the title of the show is thought to stand for 'Feminine'. During the course of the exhibition the smell of the bacteria increased, which paired with the idea of contamination, acts in conflict with that which is traditionally considered feminine (Wyma, 2015). There is a parallel between the wild manner in which bacteria spreads through cross-contamination and how the idea of the 'female' can no longer be a contained construct but is something fluid that can traverse boundaries. Yi describes the work as drawing an analogy between "the fear of pathological contagion" and the "enduring patriarchal fear of feminism and the potency of female networks" (Wyma, 2015).

Candice Lin likewise looks at how valid the categorisation of gender is within contemporary society, 'our bodies, like plants, have both [types of sex hormones], but we aren't accustomed to think[ing] outside of this binary setup' (Vikram, 2015). Lin looks to the natural world for examples of nature's wildness and species in which the human distinctions of sex are less clear, such as the *Neotrogla*, a genus of insect where the female penis retrieves sperm from the male (Valdez, 2017). In addition, similar to Yi, Lin is interested in bacterial growth, her 2015 show at the François Ghebaly Gallery, aimed to alter the 'human centric view with one that has bacteria at the centre, and in which

animals are intertwined with one-celled organisms, fungi and plants' (Mizota, 2015). Both artists exemplify a contemporary strand of thought which is interested in that which cannot be constrained by human categories or regulation but has its own wild agency. Pathogens present a threat to not only human industry but also directly to the body, from food poisoning to endemics. Yet, bacteria are essential to our survival, from out-competing alien pathogens at skin level to maintaining basic body functions in the gut. We use nature's resources at increasing rates yet climate change threatens our continued survival. Women can be seen by the patriarchy as a threat, and as a result become labelled as dangerous and villainised such as the case of the witches. Anything that spreads beyond control is labelled as dangerous and wild.

To conclude, the wild can be defined as that which is outside of human control. Within the context of studying the relationships between women and nature, we see examples of both resistance and reclamation of the wild. Joscelyn Gardner uncovers forgotten and overlooked histories of women, who despite suffering under imperial rule in conditions of slavery, rebelled by using plants to reclaim a small measure of freedom and control. Candice Lin's work also exemplifies how knowledge of herbs and plants were seen as a threat by the patriarchy, and how as a result, women were demonized as wild witches and systemically targeted and persecuted. Anicka Yi, however, exemplifies how feminist networks are now uncontrollable, and spread with a wild agency similar to bacterial and fungal proliferation which is damaging the farming system. Val Plumwood wrote of the wild after her 1985 near death experience in which a crocodile attacked her. Although

mass media distorted the narrative casting her as a helpless female against the masculinised crocodile, she survived due to her own knowledge of the outdoors (Plumwood, 2000). She describes how when the crocodile attacked, she 'glimpsed a view "from the outside" of the alien, incomprehensible world in which the narrative of self has ended' (Plumwood, 2000). This is relevant because, in keeping with the case studies in this essay, it demonstrates that when wildness is involved, 'Man' cannot assert himself at the centre of things. We tend to put human action centre stage, which is what makes climate change so frightening, it is that indifferent wild world Plumwood describes, flooding in beyond human control. That is why the wild is useful, it removes subjectivity and can allow for a more ethical relationship with the world by reminding us of what we didn't create, what we cannot predict and what we shouldn't attempt to control.

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