Living Matter, Living Memory: Seeing Plant-Based Artistic Practices through Craft in Contemporary Canada

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A Thesis in The

Department of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

(Art History) at Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2026

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: Living Matter, Living Memory: Seeing Plant-Based Artistic Practices through Craft in Contemporary Canada

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Art History)

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Abstract

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This thesis examines how contemporary artists in the territory currently known as Canada engage vegetal matter as both primary source material and collaborator in place-based practices. It focuses on the practices of Anita Cazzola, Ginnifer Menominee, and Anahita Norouzi, who mobilize plants in acts of resistance that preserve cultural memory. It argues that these works can be understood through the lens of craft as a decolonial and interspecies method of knowing and making with living matter, showing how these artists challenge colonial categorizations of plants that have historically stigmatized "undesired" species in ways that echo processes of othering applied to human populations.

Drawing on craft theory, Indigenous decolonial thought, and new materialist approaches, this thesis positions plant-based artistic practices as forms of embodied knowledge that foreground material agency. It demonstrates how the seasonal, attentive labour of working with vegetal matter resists its reduction to inert resource.

Divided into three sections, the thesis first traces how modern botany participated in the colonization of sensory and relational engagements with the vegetal world, contributing to forms of ecological violence. The second section examines how craft-based practices offer a response to this history by attending to the instability and temporality of foraged and cultivated plants. The third section considers the paradox of exhibiting living or once-living matter within museum and gallery spaces, arguing that while such contexts attempt to fix plants in time, the works retain relational histories that exceed institutional containment and function as forms of counter-archive.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Elaine Cheasley Paterson, for her enthusiasm and invaluable feedback. Thank you as well for introducing me to many perspectives through your reading recommendations.

To my second reader, Dr. Gabrielle Moser, thank you for your thoughtful suggestions and generosity. I am grateful for the knowledge you shared in your course on Reparative Art Histories and Curating Difficult Knowledge, which opened new questions for me to explore in this thesis.

I would like to thank my parents for their support, which I have felt even from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Merci de m'avoir donné le goût des musées dès mon plus jeune âge. Ce travail n'aurait pas existé sans la sensibilité au monde et aux autres que vous m'avez transmise.

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Introduction

> *"Il suffit d'abaisser notre prétention à dominer la nature et d'élever notre prétention à en faire physiquement partie, pour que la réconciliation ait lieu."*
> — Francis Ponge[1]

Plants do not exist outside of the relations that sustain them; they are inseparable from land. In *Making Love with the Land*, Oji-Cree/nehiyaw, Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer poet and novelist Joshua Whitehead, drawing on Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle, writes that "the land is an archive, is a library, is a genealogy—a body of land is a body of literature," in other words, land holds stories.[2] Maracle describes memory as something that "stretches back thousands of years," and Whitehead notes that when we set foot on land, we encounter "past, present, and future" at once. "Trees remember," and in their wounds they bear witness.[3] When artists work with plants, then, they enter into a relationship with a living archive: in encountering plants, plants also encounter the artists.

This thesis stems from the observation that artists working in what is currently known as "Canada"[4] are increasingly integrating plants as the very medium through which their projects unfold. It argues that contemporary plant-based artworks can be understood through the lens of craft as a decolonial and interspecies method of knowing and making with living matter. Situated within the context of ongoing colonial occupation, where land and resources remain sites of contestation, this study examines the creative practices of three artists who

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1. Francis Ponge, *Méthodes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 205. "It suffices to lower our claim to dominate nature and to raise our claim to be physically part of it for reconciliation to take place." (Translation mine.)
2. Joshua Whitehead, *Making Love with the Land: Essays* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2022), 74.
3. Whitehead, *Making Love with the Land*, 74.
4. I use quotation marks when referring to "Canada" because the term erases the long-standing presence of various Indigenous peoples. In the 16th century, the word *kanata* was taken out of its local context ("village" or "settlement" in Huron-Iroquois) and applied more broadly to a territory that was not acquired rightfully. Jean-François Lozier, "Canada: The Complicated History of a Name," *Canadian Museum of History Blog*, November 3, 2025, https://www.historymuseum.ca/blog/canada-the-complicated-history-of-a-name. For more on the naming of places, see Ange Loft, "Remember Like We Do," in *Indigenous Toronto: Stories That Carry This Place*, ed. Denise Bolduc, Mnawaate Gordon-Corbiere, Rebeka Tabobondung, and Brian Wright-McLeod (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2021), 17–28.

mobilize plants in acts of resistance that preserve cultural memory and cultivate forms of collective hope.

Among these artists is Anita Cazzola, a textile and installation artist based in Guelph, Ontario. She completed her BFA at OCAD University in 2018, where she studied Sculpture and Installation with a minor in Material Arts and Design focused on textiles. Cazzola has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions across Ontario, including at the Art Gallery of Guelph, Abbozzo Gallery, and Nuit Blanche Toronto. Her practice intertwines textiles, wild plants, geography, and the built human environment. Through natural dyeing and textile processes, she explores the material and metaphorical capacities of cloth and plants, using these to reconsider assumptions that frame decay and disintegration as loss rather than as potential sites of resistance and healing. This intervention exposes a central paradox of capitalism: even as it devalues processes of decay, often treating them as a loss of utility, it depends on them, from the production of planned obsolescence to the designation of certain materials and, where these materials are living, certain lives as disposable, as Judith Butler suggests in her account of "ungrievable" lives: lives that are not recognized as fully valuable and therefore not considered worthy of mourning.[5] Extending Butler's argument that precariousness is "a condition that links human and non-human animals,"[6] this logic of disposability can be understood as operating across both the human and the more-than-human, structuring relations with plant life, which is likewise rendered vulnerable and negligible within a capitalist system.

Anita Cazzola's *Botanical Reclamation* (2020-2021) is a multi-site project centered on a series of naturally dyed textile works, most notably flags, produced using pigments extracted from plants harvested in what Cazzola terms "Sad Spaces," or more optimistically,

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5. Judith Butler, "Judith Butler: Precariousness and Grievability," Verso, November 16, 2015, https://www.versobooks.com/en-ca/blogs/news/2339-judith-butler-precariousness-and-grievability?srsltid=AfmBOopjiQDfib6Vmx1fbveYLBg08yrNvC4taDqwQSJIUEk3DGb8IOmn.
6. Butler, "Precariousness and Grievability."

"Curious Spaces." These include sites shaped by quarrying, waste disposal, and environmental disruption, such as the former Lafarge Quarry in Guelph, the Eastview Landfill, the Eramosa River, and the grounds of the Ontario Reformatory. Despite the varied functions of these places, Cazzola observed that they share a common state of reclamation: undervalued and mistreated plants have returned following prolonged human intervention. Through the gentle harvesting of plants and an experimental dyeing process in which the artist allows herself to be surprised by the colours the plants produce, *Botanical Reclamation* brings to the fore what Cazzola describes as "generative disobedience": the capacity of plants to assert their presence within environments designed to eradicate them.[7]

One of the earliest installations within the project, *A Flag for the Plants I* (2020) (Fig. 1), exemplifies this concept of "generative disobedience." Installed on the former Lafarge Quarry site, the flag was mounted on signposts that once displayed development proposals for the land. Composed of a patchwork of fabric fragments in varying colours and sizes, the piece is suspended between two poles, its loose textile surface shifting with the wind like a flag. Flags conventionally signal identity and territorial claim, organizing space through symbols of authority and belonging. In Cazzola's installation, the flag redirects attention toward vegetal life that has reclaimed the quarry, asserting its history and legitimacy within a landscape shaped by extraction.[8]

As part of *Botanical Reclamation*, Cazzola also organized the communal intervention *A Ceremony in Defiance for the Plants* (2021) (Fig. 2). In response to renewed construction activity at the quarry in August 2021, community members pinned naturally dyed fabrics across the site's entrance. This gesture echoes the use of orange flags strung along telephone wires at construction sites, where they mark boundaries for territory being transformed by

7. Anita Cazzola, "*Botanical Reclamation*," accessed February 11, 2026, https://anitacazzola.com/botanical-reclamation.
8. Anita Cazzola, "*Botanical Reclamation*."

heavy machinery. Activated collectively, the textiles transform a visual language of industrial activity into a shared act of care and resistance.[9] Textiles, often plant-based materials that exist in intimate contact with human bodies through garments, sheets, and other everyday uses, mediate relationships between bodies and their environments. For instance, fashion historian and feminist activist Elizabeth Wilson describes dress as "the frontier between the self and the not-self" that links "the biological body to the social being."[10] Cazzola mobilizes this liminal space to cultivate affective, sensory connections between participants and the plants with which they collectively work.

Where Cazzola's practice operates at the scale of local reclamation and communal action, Anahita Norouzi's work expands the perspective historically and geographically, tracing the colonial circulation of plants and the knowledge systems that govern their classification.

Anahita Norouzi is a multidisciplinary artist originally from Tehran, who left her home country due to the political nature of her work, and has been active in Montreal since 2018. She holds advanced degrees in Fine Arts and Graphic Design from Concordia University, and her research-driven practice draws on marginalized histories shaped by colonial scientific inquiry, particularly in the fields of botany and archaeology. Working across sculpture, installation, photography, and video, Norouzi examines how plants, people, and cultural objects are redefined in their host country.[11]

This is indeed the central concern of *Troubled Garden: Study for Migratory Roots*, an exhibition of Norouzi's work curated by art historian, critic, and independent curator Bénédicte Ramade, who specializes in historical and contemporary environmental and ecological issues in art. The exhibition was presented at the Grantham Foundation for the Arts

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9. Anita Cazzola, "*Botanical Reclamation*."
10. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 2.
11. "About – Anahita Norouzi," AnahitaNorouzi.com, accessed January 11, 2026, http://www.anahitanorouzi.com/about/.

and the Environment in Saint-Edmond-de-Grantham from May 7 to June 26, 2022. Developed during Norouzi's residency at the Foundation, where the artist lived on site, the exhibition is a meditation on family memory of migration and the losses that accompany it. While rooted in experiences of displacement, the work avoids spectacle, cultivating instead a sense of both attentiveness and softness. This is evident, for example, in her two-channel video installation *All Our Relations* (2022), in which a Persian rug is placed beneath a television displaying surveillance footage (Fig. 3). Invited to write in the exhibition's *Cahier*, Cheryl Sim, Director and Chief Curator at PHI in Montreal, characterizes this invitation to quiet reflection as "political sensuousness," which she defines as "an aesthetic and critical strategy wherein issues, subjects, and narratives are examined through a critical lens while presented in a way that is formally appealing and inviting."[12]

Norouzi's project investigates the role of botany in the commercial and territorial expansion of Europe beginning in the eighteenth century, tracing the journey of Heracleum persicum, commonly known as Persian hogweed. Sim traces the plant's "origin stories": native to Iran and traditionally used as an aromatic spice, it was introduced to Europe as a prestigious ornamental species, cultivated in imperial gardens, and later brought to North America after the Second World War. But over time, its status shifted dramatically. Once valued within systems of botanical diplomacy and exchange, it has since been stigmatized as an "invasive species" in Quebec.[13] Norouzi situates this devaluation within broader regimes of classification that establish hierarchies for both plant and human bodies. Throughout the exhibition, Norouzi draws parallels between the botanical journey of Persian hogweed and human experiences of migration and diaspora. In *Constellational Diaspora*s (Fig. 4), for example, Persian hogweed seeds brought from Iran by the artist's mother are enclosed within

12. Cheryl Sim, "Origin Stories: Diasporic Encounters of the Botanical Kind," in *Exposition/Exhibition: Anahita Norouzi, Cahier 03* (Saint-Edmond-de-Grantham, QC: Fondation Grantham pour l'art et l'environnement, 2022), 25.
13. Sim, "Origin Stories," 25.

small blown-glass spheres and dispersed across the gallery floor. These seeds function as diasporic fragments that carry memories of the artist's cultural inheritance across distance.

Migration is also the inspiration at the root of Ginnifer Menominee's *Migrating Seeds* (Fig. 5), presented from February 11 to March 11, 2023, at Gallery 101, an artist-run centre located in Ottawa whose mandate focuses on exhibiting self-representations of decolonizing, feminist, and intersectional counter-narratives.[14] The exhibition was curated by Amin Alsaden, a curator, educator, and specialist in art and architecture whose work examines solidarities and transnational exchanges across cultural borders.[15]

Ginnifer Menominee is an Anishinaabe (Potawatomi/Ojibway) interdisciplinary artist and educator from Wasauksing First Nation, located within Anishinabek territory under the Robinson-Huron Treaty. Self-taught, Menominee's practice is shaped by their Two-Spirit identity, their travels across Ontario and parts of the United States, their engagement with plant medicines, and their dialogues with knowledge holders in their community. Thematically, Menominee is interested in liminal spaces and often addresses the intergenerational trauma produced by the disruption of long-standing relationships between Indigenous communities and their relations to land. Indeed, *Migrating Seeds* is rooted in family and community history of forced displacement resulting from settler-colonial expansion on Turtle Island. Menominee's family traces its lineage to Anishinaabe ancestral territory in what is now Wisconsin and to the Potawatomi Nation, Bear Clan, known as justice and medicine keepers.[16]

Following the War of 1812 fought by the United States and its allies against the United Kingdom, Menominee's family was forcibly displaced and walked north into what is now

14. Gallery 101, "Gallery 101," accessed February 6, 2026, https://g101.ca/gallery101.
15. Gallery 101, "Amin Alsaden (he/him)," accessed December 12, 2025, https://g101.ca/artists/amin-alsaden-hehim.
16. Ginnifer Menominee, Menominee.ca, accessed January 12, 2026, https://menominee.ca/.

"Canada," seeking refuge with the Ojibwe people while losing access to their home territory.[17] *Migrating Seeds* links the treatment of humans and the vegetal in this story of exile. Manomin, or wild rice, meaning "the good seed," occupies an important place in the exhibition. Growing naturally in clean water and gathered by boat during late summer months, this aquatic grass seed functions as a source of nourishment, cultural identity, and spiritual connection to land and water.[18] Threatened today by water pollution, wild rice stands in *Migrating Seeds* as both material and symbol. Through sculpture, photography, beadwork, and installation, Menominee mobilizes manomin as a marker of continuity and healing, thereby highlighting its role as a living archive of Indigenous knowledge carried across different places.

To better understand the link between craft and plants in contemporary art, my methodology combines interviews with artists whose work I analyze in this thesis, alongside close formal analysis of their work. During the initial phase of my research, I became increasingly aware of the limitations of conducting research exclusively through textual and visual analysis of photographs, particularly when working on practices that are deeply place-based and processual. When plants serve as artistic media, they participate, or at least have participated, in lifecycles that are difficult to account for in exhibition texts, which rarely address what happens to the works beyond the moment of documentation. The interviews I conducted provide access to the artists' relationships to the plants they work with, as well as

17. Following the War of 1812, shifting imperial control in the Great Lakes region and the formalization of the U.S.-British border through the Treaty of Ghent (1814) profoundly disrupted Anishinaabe territorial life. As Michelle K. Cassidy demonstrates in her PhD dissertation, the border imposed by the United States and British Canada was largely artificial from an Anishinaabe perspective. In the aftermath of the war, the British relinquishment of key sites such as Fort Michilimackinac intensified pressures on Anishinaabe communities aligned with Britain, prompting some families to relocate northward into what is now "Canada," including into Ojibwe territories, in order to avoid U.S. surveillance, coerced loyalty, or removal. Cassidy understands this movement as a strategy of survival within a settler colonial context that increasingly sought to fix Indigenous peoples within national borders and sever their access to ancestral lands. Michelle K. Cassidy, *"Both the Honor and the Profit": Anishinaabe Warriors, Soldiers, and Veterans from Pontiac's War through the Civil War* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2016), 17–22.
18. Klaus Lorenz and Daryl Lund, "Wild Rice: The Indian's Staple and the White Man's Delicacy," C R C Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition 15, no. 3 (1981): 281–319.

to the "afterlives" of their works—that is, here, what occurs following their display. They also offer insight into the sensory and embodied dimensions of both making and exhibiting, which are difficult to apprehend from a distance. By foregrounding the artists' own accounts, interviews make it possible to better understand how these practices are experienced, both in the process of their making and in their encounter with audiences.

Although I did not know the artists personally prior to this research, Ginnifer Menominee and Anita Cazzola generously agreed to speak with me about their practices via individual videoconferences. Interviewing the artists allowed me to better understand how their works are shaped by their labour and consciousness to their environments. Excerpts from these conversations are incorporated throughout the thesis and are treated as situated forms of knowledge rather than definitive explanations of the works. They are analyzed in relation to the material and formal qualities of the artworks, as well as to their broader conceptual and ecological frameworks. I chose not to conduct an interview with Anahita Norouzi, as her exhibition was extensively documented through a detailed *Cahier d'exposition* that included contributions from curators and researchers. I therefore based my analysis on this material, which offered a rich and carefully contextualized account of her work.

This thesis is informed by three primary theoretical frameworks: craft theory, ecocritical art history, and Indigenous decolonial theory. I use craft as a theoretical framework rather than as a category of objects or makers. Following American craft scholar Glenn Adamson, I understand craft as historically produced: "craft is itself a modern invention."[19] Craft, in this sense, has functioned as a system of value structured through binaries such as "hand/machine" and "traditional/progressive,"[20] which have organized a hierarchy of the arts in which Western artists are placed at the top. Adamson shows that craft has been operating

19. Glenn Adamson, "Introduction," in *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xiii.
20. Adamson, "Introduction," xiii.

within the "theater of imperialism" to racialize and devalue Indigenous making.[21] As Korean American fiber and social practice artist Aram Han Sifuentes similarly argues, these hierarchies depend on "simplistic representations of people" and on false distinctions between the "traditional" and the "contemporary," distinctions that allow "contemporary artists" to appropriate from "traditional artisans" while remaining uncited and structurally privileged.[22] Sifuentes insists that these terms are not antithetical, as "there are contemporary practitioners of traditional crafts," and cautions against the modernist fantasy that craft exists outside of history.[23] This issue came up in my conversation with Menominee, who described being open to their work being understood as craft because it involves "a slow learning of a skill," while also emphasizing that Indigenous artists have had to struggle for their work to be recognized as art rather than dismissed as craft.[24] For this reason, I do not use craft as a label—it is not my place to decide whether the works I study should be called craft—but I use it, in the context of analysing plant-based works, to centre processes of growth and decay, and to shift attention away from the finished object and toward the lifecycles of materials.

In answer to the question "What Is Contemporary about Craft?", American scholar, curator, and writer Julia Bryan-Wilson responds that "handmaking maintains its integrity in response to and in opposition to industrialization," and that craft's distinctive ontology lies in "its very connection to the past, to the entire rich terrain of thrift and ingenuity, to knowledge production passed down through the hand, and skilled legacies."[25] Craft, she emphasizes, "embodies its histories in its materials."[26] This attention to process has paved the way for investigations of obsolescence, the transparency of labour, methods of production, and what

21. Adamson, "Introduction," xvii.
22. Aram Han Sifuentes, "Steps Towards Decolonizing Craft," *Textile Society of America*, accessed February 12, 2026, https://textilesocietyofamerica.org/6728/steps-towards-decolonizing-craft.
23. Aram Han Sifuentes, "Steps Towards Decolonizing Craft."
24. Ginnifer Menominee, interview by author, December 11, 2025.
25. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Eleven Propositions in Response to the Question: 'What Is Contemporary about Craft?'" *The Journal of Modern Craft* 6, no. 1 (2013): 8.
26. Bryan-Wilson, "Eleven Propositions," 8.

Jane Bennett calls the "vibrancy" of matter.[27] Bryan-Wilson highlights that feminist craft in the 1970s, including collective projects, distributed authorship, and process-based works that exposes unfinished or leftover traces of effort, has "driven contemporary art [and] motored some of its most groundbreaking tendencies."[28] Craft is therefore a particularly relevant framework for understanding works that engage plants, as these practices attend to materials as living entities.

I also situate this thesis within the broader field of ecocritical art history, which similarly challenges human exceptionalism by recognizing the agency of nonhuman life. Alan Braddock defines ecocritical art history as emphasizing "issues of environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice in cultural interpretation," while also noting that such approaches remain marginal within the discipline.[29] Timothy Stott argues that for art history to contribute meaningfully to the environmental humanities, it must meet the challenge articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty: to think across planetary and local scales, moving from a "shared sense of catastrophe" to the specific cultural and ecological conditions in which the environmental crisis is experienced.[30] These arguments motivate my decision to approach plant-based artworks as practices that unfold within specific socio-historical contexts. They also inform my commitment to situating this research explicitly against ecofascism, an ideology that, according to Sylvia Wynter, misattributes responsibility for climate crisis to communities of colour.[31]

Throughout my research, Indigenous decolonial theory, particularly the writings of Robin Wall Kimmerer and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, provided me with a framework

27. Jane Bennett, "Preface," in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xvii.
28. Bryan-Wilson, "Eleven Propositions," 9.
29. Alan C. Braddock, "Ecocritical Art History," *American Art* 23, no. 2 (2009): 26.
30. Timothy Stott, "Ecocritical Art History," *Art History* 43, no. 3 (2020): 640.
31. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260.

for understanding the relationships that the artists in my case studies maintain with the land on which and with which they work. These texts also guided me as I reflected on my own position. Writing this thesis requires me to acknowledge the privilege of choosing my research topic, as well as the privilege of contemplation and metaphor. The discipline of art history is deeply invested in symbolism. Therefore, the influential claim by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, founders of the grassroots collective Land Relationship Super Collective, that "decolonization is not a metaphor"[32] poses a colossal challenge to the discipline's interpretive habits. If decolonization cannot be reduced to metaphor, how might art participate in decolonization without evacuating its material stakes? How might craft, frequently associated with softness, remain politically generative? And might this very softness constitute a form of power?

Tuck and Yang are unequivocal that decolonization cannot be collapsed into epistemic critique alone: they define decolonization literally as "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life."[33] As they argue, "decolonization as metaphor allows people to equivocate these contradictory decolonial desires because it turns decolonization into an empty signifier," even as these trajectories continue to "walk all over land/people in settler contexts."[34] In settler colonial contexts, decolonization must involve "the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically."[35] While Tuck and Yang do not dismiss the importance of critical consciousness in curricula and pedagogy, they caution against allowing it to substitute for material change. Drawing on Fanon, they remind us that "decolonizing the mind is the first step, not the only step," and warn that an exclusive focus

32. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.
33. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," 5.
34. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," 5.
35. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," 7.

on epistemic transformation can function as a "settler move to innocence."[36] While the first part of this thesis addresses epistemological questions, I hope that approaching these practices through the lens of craft in the following sections will allow the analysis to exceed metaphor by attending to artists' material engagements with land, such as seed saving.

This thesis does not claim that art, on its own, can enact decolonization in the sense articulated by Tuck and Yang; however, it pushes against dismissing art on this basis alone by attending to the ways contemporary artistic practices can produce, and can themselves be sites of, material change. As Métis painter, curator, and writer David Garneau emphasizes, art occupies a paradoxical position: it is "not essential to our survival but integral to our humanity."[37] For Garneau, beauty produces "extra-rational, noninstrumental and overwhelming" feelings that can lead to resistant acts.[38] Beautiful art, much like beautiful nature, is "nonpropositional," contradicting the expectation to be immediately useful.[39] For this reason, beauty can be unsettling within a settler colonial worldview that places utilitarian value on both art and land at its core.

Because this thesis addresses settler colonialism in the Canadian context and includes as a case study *Migrating Seeds* by Ginnifer Menominee, who is Anishinaabe (Potawatomi/Ojibway) from Wasauksing First Nation in Anishinabek territory, I commit to following the methodological recommendations articulated by Inuk art historian and curator Heather Igloliorte and white settler scholar Carla Taunton who advocate centering "Indigenous and allied methodologies, epistemologies, and ontologies" in art historical research, drawing on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's insistence that research protocols must be "built

36. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," 19.
37. David Garneau, "Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization," *Fuse* 36, no. 4 (2013): 16.
38. David Garneau, "Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization," 16.
39. David Garneau, "Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization," 16.

into" the work and shared "in culturally appropriate ways."[40] Again, this means approaching plant-based artworks as embedded within specific land relations and knowledge systems that must be named and engaged rather than abstracted.[41]

At the Roots: How Modern Botany and Ecological Violence Colonized Sensory Relations to the Vegetal World

> *"We begin with the recognition that the Earth is wretched. This is not a metaphor."* — Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh[42]

In *Troubled Garden*, Anahita Norouzi traces the intertwined histories of two plants from the same botanical family: Persian hogweed and Giant hogweed. Guest curator Bénédicte Ramade explains that although closely related and visually similar, the two carry opposite reputations. Because Persian hogweed is often confused with the highly invasive Giant hogweed and given the severe measures taken to eradicate related species in "Canada," its proliferation has likely been greatly reduced. In Iran, Persian hogweed is cultivated for its seeds, which are used as a spice (*golpar*), and the plant is valued for its medicinal properties, including wound-healing, antiseptic, digestive, analgesic, and anti-inflammatory effects.[43] In "Canada," its relative, the Giant hogweed, is framed as a dangerous invasive: it is monitored

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40. Heather L. Igloliorte and Carla Taunton, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Art Histories in the United States and Canada* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 1.
41. In line with these commitments, I follow Igloliorte and Taunton's other recommendation that scholars writing Indigenous art histories engage closely with Cree author Gregory Younging's *Elements of Indigenous Style*. Younging provides a detailed discussion of Indigenous-determined writing models, conventions, and best practices. In particular, I adhere to his advice regarding appropriate terminology and his insistence that language is inseparable from colonial histories of governance and translation. As Younging explains, English terms used to describe Indigenous Peoples and land relations often emerged through legal and legislative contexts in the twentieth century, and their widespread use reflects both encroachment by Canada's dominant culture and the enforced primacy of English through the residential school system. I remain attentive to the inevitable loss produced by translation, a loss that cannot be fully repaired within academic writing. I also follow Younging's recommendations concerning capitalization, which deliberately counter the historical denial of Indigenous Peoples' legitimate national identities, institutions, and collective rights. Gregory Younging and Warren Cariou, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and About Indigenous Peoples* ([S.l.]: Brush Education, 2025).
42. Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh, "The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions," *Third Text* 32, no. 2–3 (2018): 164.
43. Bénédicte Ramade, "Botanical Sisterhoods," trans. Susan Le Pan, in *Exposition/Exhibition: Anahita Norouzi, Cahier 03* (Saint-Edmond-de-Grantham, Québec: Fondation Grantham pour l'art et l'environnement, 2022), 16.

by eradication teams, mapped by drones, and described in martial language, casting humans as soldiers in a war against an insidious vegetal "enemy."[44] By tracing the divergent fates of what are, in many ways, "twin" plants, Norouzi's work illustrates how botanical value is constructed. These moral labels, the "good" twin and the "evil" twin, reveal less about the plants themselves than about the classificatory systems that shape which species are welcomed, controlled, or condemned. The divergent trajectories of Persian and Giant hogweed raise broader questions: through what histories of botanical classification, land control, and epistemic authority are certain species rendered desirable while others are deemed dangerous? How has visual culture shaped the way we imagine plants, and how do contemporary artists challenge our (dis)connection to what we see and experience of the vegetal world?

Contemporary plant-based artistic practices in the territory currently called "Canada" cannot be understood apart from the botanical violence and land dispossession that rendered the Earth "wretched." Drawing on Frantz Fanon's 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh emphasize that the landscapes and vegetation are "not simply the backdrop against which violence and dispossession unfold, but are mobilised as the very medium of violence."[45] In this sense, "the botanical garden can be understood as a laboratory of empire,"[46] a site that since the sixteenth century has made the world's plant life legible, ownable, and exchangeable within an imperial episteme. The very concept of land ownership did not previously exist for indigenous peoples; it was introduced "in the process of settler colonialism," as Tuck and Yang argue, in order for settlers to claim these lands as their home.[47]

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44. Ramade, "Botanical Sisterhoods," 17.
45. Gray and Sheikh, "The Wretched Earth," 164.
46. Gray and Sheikh, "The Wretched Earth," 166.
47. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," 5.

Indeed, colonial botany provided the epistemic foundation for what American political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott identifies as the state's long project of *legibility*: the reorganization of unruly ecologies into standardized forms, or monocultures, that could be governed and taxed. Early systems of grain control established the template for later imperial regimes that sought to regulate the movement and value of plants.[48] The living world became increasingly organized by laws dictating what could and could not be cultivated, what was permitted to grow and to appear on our plates and in our palates. This regulation also operated through systems of visual organization, such as herbariums, illustrations, maps, and collections, that rendered plants legible to the European imperial gaze. Through this visual reordering, the vegetal world was reorganized as an object of knowledge, fundamentally reshaping how plants were understood. Ros Gray and Sheikh's proposition is that, in order to fully understand Fanon's diagnosis of "the wretched of the earth," we must also confront how the earth itself was made wretched through "the destruction of 'ecological' relations with the earth."[49] Eco-feminist scholar and environmental activist Vandana Shiva, in *Monocultures of the Mind* (1993), shows how colonial capitalism imposed a homogenized, utilitarian worldview that displaced the diverse ecological knowledges rooted in local and Indigenous practices. By valuing plants only for their productivity or exchange value, these "monocultures" narrowed the horizon of what counted as life worth cultivating, and therefore worth knowing.[50] Similarly, CNRS researcher Samir Boumediene, based at the Institut d'histoire des représentations et des idées dans les modernités (Lyon), traces in *La Colonisation du savoir* (2016) how European empires seized and translated Indigenous medicinal plant knowledge, transforming it into property through the classificatory violence

48. James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 23.
49. Ros and Sheikh, "The Wretched Earth," 165.
50. Vandana Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology* (London: Zed Books; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Third World Network, 1993), 90.

of modern science. For Boumediene, taxonomy, disguised as a means of understanding nature, was in fact a mechanism of domination that has reduced living beings to specimens within an imperial order of knowledge.[51]

This colonial logic of naming and ordering continues to shape perceptions of the nonhuman. As image theorist, practitioner, and curator Gwynne Fulton observes in *Esse*'s "Agriculture" issue, the very language of agriculture carries the marks of conquest. In the place now known as the Americas, first called Abya Yala (meaning "land in full maturity" or "land of vital blood"[52]) by many Indigenous nations, colonial taxonomies imposed new ontological divisions, such as the separation between water and land, where they have been considered inextricably linked in ancestral knowledge. These linguistic and conceptual boundaries reinforced hierarchies that mirrored those applied to human populations, transforming ways of knowing the environment into tools of domination.[53] In the colonial garden, "alien" plants and peoples alike have been disciplined into productive order. The term "alien" itself, as Silvia Bottinelli argues, is analogous in the political and the botanical realms. Her analysis of contemporary discourses around phytosanitary law and seed circulation exposes how the categories of "beneficial" versus "weed" echo broader anxieties about citizenship and purity versus contamination. In her interview with Montreal-based artist and researcher Natalie Doonan, Bottinelli points to the paradox of contemporary ecological governance: while international regulation restricts the movement of seeds in the name of protection, corporate and state actors continue to exercise unchecked control over global ecologies.[54]

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51. Samir Boumediene, *La Colonisation Du Savoir: Une Histoire des Plantes Médicinales du Nouveau Monde (1492-1750)* (Vaulx-en-Velin: Les Éditions des mondes à faire, 2016), 29 (my translation).
52. María Julia Mayoral, *Abya Yala: Una Visión Indígena* (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 2011).
53. Gwynne Fulton, "Uncommoning Agriculture," ed. Sylvette Babin, *Esse*, Winter 2024, 17.
54. Silvia Bottinelli, "Confronting Technology in the Field," in *Artists and the Practice of Agriculture: Politics and Aesthetics of Food Sovereignty in Art since 1960* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024), 92.

This paradox of moralized ecological hierarchies is reflected in Anita Cazzola's *Botanical Reclamation* project. Cazzola engages with "Sad Spaces" or "Curious Spaces" that have been severely disrupted by human activity. Cazzola describes these spaces as "natural spaces that have experienced human-inflicted environmental disruption, but have begun a return to a natural state through the re-introduction of indigenous and invasive plant species," spaces of "transition, of transiency, of loss, and of regeneration."[55] The quarry in particular, located behind her house in Guelph, exemplifies a site of industrial extraction where the land itself bears the marks of colonial exploitation. As she notes in our interview, "I was noticing all these plants that were growing in this space that had been totally ravished by machines for many years… it was just really exciting for me to be in that space and resonating with those plants."[56]

The *Botanical Reclamation* project also intervenes in the classifications raised in Anahita Norouzi's work that render some plants desirable and others "invasive" or "weeds." Many of the species Cazzola works with, such as buckthorn (Fig. 6), are framed as undesirable in Ontario, yet she emphasized during our interview that "the plants themselves didn't do anything wrong… they just got transplanted here by the humans who were coming." She reflects, "finding ways to love plants that are… considered 'bad'… is a nice way to kind of level the playing field… they're all contributing to this palette that is… creating an identity for that space that has experienced some sort of turmoil."[57] Colonization and industrial exploitation leave their marks not only on human societies but also on the landscapes we inhabit. By paying attention to the persistence of plants in post-industrial spaces, the *Botanical Reclamation* project reveals how histories of extraction continue to shape what survives and what is erased. These "Curious Spaces" offer a lens for understanding how

55. Anita Cazzola, "Dye Plants in Curious Spaces," accessed December 3, 2025, https://dyeplantsincuriousspaces.com/.
56. Anita Cazzola, interview by author, December 17, 2025.
57. Cazzola, interview by author, December 17, 2025.

ecological hierarchies are produced, and how both land and life are entangled in broader systems of human domination.

To situate these practices within the historical conditions that have shaped human-plant relations under settler colonialism, this section turns to theoretical frameworks that reconceptualize climate change as inseparable from histories of extraction and racial violence. Fields and quarries marked by colonial and industrial exploitation set the stage for the large-scale ecological transformations that underpin what we now call climate change. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, both professors of Geography at UCL, identify the Anthropocene, the epoch in which humans became a geological force, as beginning around 1610, immediately following European colonization of the Americas and the Columbian Exchange. The forced movement of species to new continents, the deaths of approximately fifty million Indigenous people (most within a few decades due to smallpox), and the large-scale reforestation that followed caused measurable changes in the Earth's carbon cycle, marking the first human-driven global environmental change. In short, they write that colonisation marks the beginning of the Anthropocene.[58] Read through Donna Haraway's concept of the Plantationocene[59] and Malcolm Ferdinand's Negrocene,[60] the Anthropocene is revealed as a product of slavery, racial capitalism, and ecological domination. The plantation was a system that bound together the fates of the vegetal and the human, choreographing their forced movements within a grid of extraction. Before petroleum was extracted from the ground,

58. Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," in *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 318.
59. The term *Plantationocene* is used to emphasize that contemporary ecological devastation is not the result of a universal "species act," as implied by the Anthropocene, but rather the outcome of specific historical and colonial formations. As Donna Haraway argues, the Anthropocene obscures "situated historical conjunctures" of ecological simplification, forced labor, and extractive violence that are "genocidal and extinctionist," rather than evenly distributed across humanity. Anna Tsing further defines the plantation as the site where the discipline of plants and humans converged, producing scalable systems of extraction whose logics persist today. See Gregg Mitman, "Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing Reflect on the Plantationocene," *Edge Effects*, October 12, 2019, https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/.
60. Malcolm Ferdinand, "The Hold and the Negrocene," in *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022), 58.

energy was extracted from enslaved bodies, establishing what Malcolm Ferdinand describes as "an unjust way of inhabiting the Earth where a minority feeds upon the vital energy of a majority."[61] Donna Haraway argues that this logic did not end with the abolition of slavery but endures as the structuring principle of the Plantationocene, our present world organized through monoculture and the violent simplification of life.[62]

Contemporary calls for reparations reveal how these legacies persist, as the scale of historical exploitation has been quantified in economic terms. In the U.S. context, American economist William A. Darity Jr. and American folklorist A. Kirsten Mullen argue that racial wealth disparity functions as "the best single indicator of the cumulative impact of white racism over time."[63] On this basis, they propose the wealth gap itself as the baseline for reparative justice, estimating that, when adjusted for household size, the Black-white wealth disparity amounts to roughly $350,000 per person. As they conclude, providing an equal payment to the approximately 40 million Black descendants of those emancipated in 1865 "will require a total of at least $14 trillion," underscoring both the magnitude of historical extraction and the insufficiency of symbolic or partial redress.[64] Moreover, in *Reconsidering Reparations*, American philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò suggests that reparations must extend beyond financial compensation to address the climate crisis itself, since the communities least responsible for global warming are those most affected by its consequences and least able to adapt.[65] As Táíwò explains, "climate vulnerability is largely determined by fairly general aspects of how advantages and disadvantages have been distributed," and because "the global

61. Ferdinand, "The Hold and the Negrocene," 58.
62. Donna Jeanne Haraway, "Making Kin: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene," in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin with the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 100.
63. William A. Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen, "Introduction: Standing at the Crossroads," in *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022), xi-xii.
64. Darity and Mullen, "Introduction," xi-xii.
65. Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, "What's Next: Why Reparations Require Climate Justice," in *Reconsidering Reparations*, ed. Darrel E. Rowbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

racial empire is responsible for that distribution, the connection between global racial empire and climate vulnerability is clear." Because colonial economic and political systems generated both the accumulation of greenhouse gases and the uneven concentration of wealth, infrastructure, and protection, "the colonizing parts of the world are now much less vulnerable to climate change than the regions they colonized," making climate justice inseparable from reparative justice.[66]

These global frameworks are explored in a Canadian context in Taryn E. Goff's MA thesis, "Genocide in the Garden: Landscape Change, Botanical Colonization, and Ecological Alienation in Western Canadian Residential Schools, 1880s-1920s." Goff argues that residential school gardens operated as instruments of assimilation, framing their cultivated grounds as sites of botanical colonization that enacted cultural genocide through processes of ecological alienation. She defines ecological alienation as "both the physical separation from the culture-defining ecosystems that sustain life and the resulting sense of disconnection from one's own culture and from the processes of the natural world."[67] Goff reads the cultivated grounds of residential schools as microcosms of empire, designed to impose both behavioural and ideological discipline. On the Prairies, the extermination of bison and the fencing of land extended this logic outward, transforming mobility, as in the cases above, into something to be eliminated.[68] The colonial desire for fixity becomes visible in vast uniform monocultures and in the formal geometry of fences and garden plots. The "ecological alienation" Goff identifies was sensorial on multiple levels, not only visual, as food engages multiple senses.[69]

In the chapter "Hyperesthesia, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism," David Howes, a Canadian anthropologist and a key figure in the interdisciplinary field of sensory

66. Táíwò, "What's Next," in *Reconsidering Reparations*.
67. Taryn E. Goff, "Genocide in the Garden: Landscape Change, Botanical Colonization, and Ecological Alienation in Western Canadian Residential Schools, 1880s–1920s" (MA diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2024), iii.
68. Goff, "Genocide in the Garden," 75.
69. Goff, "Genocide in the Garden," 99–100.

studies, responds to scholar of transatlantic literary and cultural modernity Margaret Cohen, who argues that "one of the great unfinished tasks of twentieth-century Marxian theory has been to write a materialist history of the senses."[70] She frames this task through a series of questions: "How have the senses been organized by relations of production and exchange?" and how has this organization "shaped capitalist society's cultural pursuits?"[71] Drawing on the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in which Marx asserts that "the forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present,"[72] Howes emphasizes that sensory capacities themselves are historically produced. Under a capitalist system which is oriented toward extraction and accumulation, "every organ of sense is injured."[73] Howes further emphasizes that, for Marx, sensory alienation under capitalism is not confined to the industrial proletariat. Even among the bourgeoisie, Marx argues, "all of the capitalist's senses are ultimately fixed on one object—capital," such that the accumulation of wealth comes to supersede sensory pleasure itself.[74] Developing Charles Fourier's diagnosis, Marx locates the alienation of the senses in the dehumanizing regime of private property, envisioning instead a world in which "the transcendence of private property [would entail] the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities."[75] Only through the negation of capitalist property relations, Marx argues, could "senses capable of human gratifications" be cultivated and brought into being.[76] Read in this light, residential school gardens reshaped Indigenous children's sensorial and cultural memory—which exists through the senses—by enclosing land within forms of private property that had not previously existed. This enclosure alienated children from how they could see the land, taste and smell its

70. Margaret Cohen, "The Art of Profane Illumination," *Visual Anthropology Review* 10, no. 1 (1994): 44.
71. Cohen, "Art of Profane Illumination," 44.
72. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 109.
73. David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 282.
74. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 118–19.
75. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 139.
76. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 108.

harvests, and understand its seasonal rhythms; read through Marx, such "ecological alienation" is fundamentally dehumanizing.

I suggest in this thesis that artistic interventions can work toward the reparation of this trauma by restoring plants to their place within histories of survivance. Reparation, Zimbabwean-American sociologist and activist Zoé Samudzi writes, demands the imagining of

> not simply a world that does not exist, but one that could be fabricated through attempts to repair historical harm and trauma. The imagining of hypotheticals, the meaningful address of genocidal harm, always demands an ontological shift. Because the world that accommodates a reparation — a wound remedy demanded by an aggrieved party — is not a world that presently exists, it is one that has to be created.[77]

In their practice, Ginnifer Menominee proposes ways that artistic interventions may function as forms of reparation. For instance, *Migrating Seeds* illustrates the cultural rupture experienced by their ancestors through a representation of the community's forced displacement. At the centre of the exhibition is a long red carpet strewn with manomin (wild rice), which Menominee describes as tracing their family's history of migration following the War of 1812 (Fig. 7). In the aftermath of the war, intensified settler expansion and treaty pressure in the Great Lakes region forced many Potawatomi communities to leave their homelands; while some groups were compelled to move south, others, including Menominee's family, migrated northward, often fragmenting as they sought refuge among Ojibwe nations. As Menominee explains, "there was just too many of us… families had to break off into chunks," leaving a dispersed pattern of settlement that the carpet visually echoes.[78] The distribution of rice across the carpet is deliberate: it begins as a dense field, representing what Menominee calls "the plentifulness of wild rice," before gradually thinning until "there's only a couple seeds," and then slowly reappearing as practices of harvesting are

77. Zoé Samudzi, "Reparative Futurities: Thinking from the Ovaherero and Nama Colonial Genocide," in *The Funambulist: Politics of Space and Bodies* 30 (July/August 2020): 30.
78. Menominee, interview by author, December 11, 2025.

taken up again by subsequent generations. Menominee describes the red carpet as marking "blood ties" and "this ancestral flow," insisting that "these are my ancestors, they're in the wild rice itself."[79] The red-carpet installation represents mobility as an expression of "survivance," a term articulated by Anishinaabe cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor to describe "an active sense of presence" that refuses narratives of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.[80]

Across the practices of Norouzi, Cazzola, and Menominee, a common thread emerges: their attention is directed to plants that are often underappreciated. These artists see what Glenn Adamson calls "value of the valueless," giving care and attention to matter that is frequently written off as disposable.[81] In Cazzola's *Botanical Reclamation* project, for instance, the unpredictability of a plant's colour in dyeing and its persistence in post-industrial landscapes co-constitute the work; the plants themselves participate in shaping both process and outcome. By considering the possibility of an agency for these overlooked vegetal beings, the artists model a form of relational pedagogy that listens to matter, responds to it, and acknowledges its temporal rhythms.

Vegetal Matter Thought Through Craft: Plants as Co-Makers Against Alienation

To consider plants as co-makers or collaborators in a creative practice is to recognize that colour, texture, scale, durability, and even the timing of a work emerge from the biological and ecological behaviour of vegetal matter itself rather than from the artist's will alone. As a theoretical and pedagogical lens, craft names a mode of making in which the creative outcome emerges from sustained, responsive engagement with materials that have their own rhythms and capacities. The alienation produced by colonial botanical practices and extractive land management, which sever plants and humans from their ecosystems, relies on

79. Menominee, interview by author, December 11, 2025.
80. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), vii.
81. Glenn Adamson, "Fewer, Better Things," in *Fewer, Better Things: The Hidden Wisdom of Objects* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018), 84.

precisely the opposite logic, treating living matter as inert and standardized. By working with found and foraged plants whose instability cannot be ignored, Norouzi, Cazzola, and Menominee situate their practices within a field of negotiation rather than control, where knowledge emerges through touch, repetition, and sustained attention to more-than-human agency.

Craft literature, particularly studies of ceramic and clay practices, often frames making in a similarly relational and enactive way. The artist, curator and visual arts professor Nurdian Ichsan, for instance, "examines the complex relationship between materials and humans interceded through making" and shows that in the practice of Indonesian ceramist Albert Yonathan Setyawan, "making experiences fostered … personal sensitivity and understanding, not only of material properties but also of the logics of specific forms and methods, along with the metaphorical possibilities of these. This sensitivity and understanding form the personal knowledge of the artist-maker, which can only be gained through direct experience."[82] He contrasts this with material culture approaches, which "examine the materiality of an object and [are] not concerned with the material itself," emphasizing instead that clay can only be comprehended through "extensive and intensive engagement with the process," where objects "record not only traces of the physical involvement of the body but also the state of mind of the maker."[83] Ichsan goes further, framing clay as an "active agent with respect to humans," whose softness, plasticity, and responsiveness generate "clay impulses"—bodily urgencies to shape that precede intention and resist full cognitive control.[84] Techniques such as pinching, in which "the shape is not entirely a projection of the artist's ideas but is the result of a perfectly controlled rhythmic pattern of movements," illustrate how

82. Nurdian Ichsan, "Clay to Shards: The Role of Making in Albert Yonathan Setyawan's Artistic Practices," *Craft Research* 16, no. 1 (2025): 55.
83. Ichsan, "Clay to Shards," 56.
84. Ichsan, "Clay to Shards," 57.

form emerges from attunement to material behaviour.[85] For Ichsan, these processes collapse long-standing dichotomies of craft: "mind and matter, head and hand, making and knowing."[86] Following this logic, it can be tempting, and occasionally useful, for example in cultivating the viewer's empathy, to anthropomorphize plants, yet their rhizomatic and distributed qualities resist such projection. If we acknowledge that plants possess a form of agency, it challenges Cartesian assumptions that equate consciousness or reason with the mind and devalue bodily or relational forms of knowledge, since plant agency is dispersed across the organism rather than localized in a singular "self."[87] In this respect, I would argue that the blurring of boundaries between human and plant mirrors what happens in craft, where ideas of autonomy, intentionality, and hierarchy are often challenged.

What becomes especially visible across Norouzi's, Cazzola's, and Menominee's projects is that the plants they work with are not cultivated for the sake of their art practices but encountered in the world. This distinction matters because, as environmental educator Zabe MacEachren argues, material engagement only becomes ethically meaningful when it is grounded in embodied relations with land. For her, "crafting experiences aid environmental education because they serve as a bodily-based practice for forming a relationship with the natural environment."[88] She frames this relationship through eight "guideposts"—*origin*, *seeking*, *harvesting*, *making*, *resonance of motion*, *utility/use*, *community celebration*, and *returning back*—which together describe how a material moves from the land into a human practice and eventually back into ecological cycles.[89] Read this way, craft becomes about how materials are encountered, handled, shared, and allowed or not to have a dignified afterlife,

85. Ichsan, "Clay to Shards," 57.
86. Ichsan, "Clay to Shards," 57.
87. For more on plant consciousness in contemporary art, see: Emma Lansdowne, "The Question of Plant Consciousness in Contemporary Art," *ESSE Art + Opinions*, 99th ed. "Plants," Spring/Summer 2020, https://esse.ca/en/the-question-of-plant-consciousness-in-contemporary-art/.
88. Zabe MacEachren, "Crafting as a Practice of Relating to the Natural World," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* (CJEE) (January 1, 2000): 187.
89. Zabe MacEachren, "Crafting as a Practice of Relating to the Natural World," 195.

including whether their extraction and use leave their ecosystems damaged or intact. Norouzi's *Remains* (2021) (Fig. 8) is included in the exhibition *Troubled Garden*, with its wall label focusing specifically on the guideposts of *origin*, *research*, and *harvesting*. As Sim recounts in the exhibition's *Cahier*, the work grew from the artist's "fond recollections of foraging for the Persian Hogweed with her grandmother," however when Norouzi searched for the plant in Quebec she found that, "despite its alleged invasiveness," it was difficult to locate because of its "confusion with the Giant Hogweed, and the severe measures taken to eliminate it." What she ultimately encountered in Bas-Saint-Laurent was "the remains of a castrated plant—its flowers removed."[90] Rather than cultivating a new specimen, Norouzi worked with what she found, casting the damaged plant in plaster and transforming it into a series of reliefs that, in Sim's words, "tell a story but one with many gaps," in which "the spaces she leaves between each section speak to the impossibility of reconciling the fragments of loss that entail the migratory experience."[91] The work's fragmented form echoes the interrupted lifecycle of the plant itself, keeping the violence of its uprooting materially present. This attention to the material's origin is intensified again by the exhibition's site. *Troubled Garden* was presented at the Grantham Foundation for the Arts and the Environment, located within a forest on the unceded Traditional Territory of the W8banaki Nation. The surrounding woods remain visible through the gallery windows, so the works are continuously accompanied by the surrounding trees. By disrupting the alienation of the gallery from the outside space it nonetheless occupies, two histories of migration and land claim intersect: Indigenous presence rooted in W8banaki Territory and a settler colonial order that has positioned diasporic subjects like Norouzi as both implicated in settlement and excluded from its full privileges.

90. Sim, "Origin Stories," 26.
91. Sim, "Origin Stories," 26.

In this context, Norouzi's practice is not guilty of what MacEachren criticizes in eco-art that prioritizes spectacle over material accountability, warning that "too many art projects … serve as a disguise for an event that creates litter."[92] By working with a plant already subjected to eradication, Norouzi ensures that the history of its regulation is built into the material form of the work itself. Her practice thus aligns with MacEachren's claim that "to make something using some element of handwork can be considered a form of resistance," [93] insofar as it sustains a slow, incorporated, and ethically attentive relationship to a living world that colonial land management has sought to render disposable.

MacEachren grounds this argument in a critique of industrial production, writing that "By choosing to participate in handwork, we reclaim and reaffirm a sense of body time or pace of the hand. This opens us to the possibility of relating to the world in an ancient manner that is not presently encouraged in industrial growth-based societies, where what can be written about or commodified is preferred."[94] However, craft scholarship has also cautioned against assuming that handmaking is inherently resistant. As art historian Noni Brynjolson argues in *The New Politics of the Handmade*, the contemporary valorization of the handmade often functions within capitalist economies as a marker of distinction and exclusivity. Artisanal goods have become "hot commodities, primarily for wealthy consumers who want to distinguish themselves from the ordinary consumer of cheaper mass-produced goods," making it "easy to view the handmade and the artisanal as 'ethical' or 'good' in and of themselves, and to overlook the ways in which these modes of production act as markers of exclusivity within capitalist economies."[95] From this perspective, the notion that "simply

92. MacEachren, "Crafting as a Practice of Relating to the Natural World," 189.
93. MacEachren, "Crafting as a Practice of Relating to the Natural World," 198.
94. MacEachren, "Crafting as a Practice of Relating to the Natural World," 198.
95. Noni Brynjolson, "The Making of Many Hands: Artisanal Production and Neighbourhood Redevelopment in Contemporary Socially Engaged Art," in *The New Politics of the Handmade: Craft, Art and Design*, ed. Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020), 113.

making and selling handmade goods is going to produce noticeable change" is "simplistic and misguided."[96]

Yet the same text insists that craft can still be politically generative under specific conditions. According to Brynjolson, successful socially engaged craft practices place equal emphasis on object and process ("on 'craft' as both noun and verb"), foregrounding hands-on practices as forms of non-alienated labour, through collective participation. They also work within existing economic and social constraints to "concretely benefit the everyday lives of residents," emphasize collective production, and function as gathering spaces grounded in shared time, skill, and use value.[97] Therefore, an example of a successful socially engaged craft practice can be found in Anita Cazzola's *A Flag for the Plants I* (2020) (Fig. 9). Composed of naturally dyed silk made from plants gathered on-site, alongside wool, linen, and cotton, the flag was displayed on signposts that once displayed development proposals for the land. Installed in a former quarry that nearby residents had reclaimed as a space for walking and gathering, the work intervened directly in a contested site that had come to matter in the community's everyday life. In 2019, when an extension of the Lafarge Quarry was proposed, residents expressed opposition, citing not only the site's social value as a place for walks and shared views of the sunset, but also concerns over water security.[98]

Through this site-specific engagement, Cazzola's broader project of botanical reclamation demonstrates how plant-based art can function as a form of craft-based knowledge, in which understanding emerges through site-specific engagement. Rather than beginning with a fixed visual outcome, Cazzola describes her practice as growing out of attention: she started by "making little flower bouquets for [her] house," which gradually

96. Brynjolson, "The Making of Many Hands," 115.
97. Brynjolson, "The Making of Many Hands," 115.
98. Susan McSherry, "Letter: Possible Impacts of Proposed Lafarge Quarry Extension," *GuelphToday*, June 2, 2020, https://www.guelphtoday.com/letters-to-the-editor/letter-possible-impacts-of-proposed-lafarge-quarry-extension-1596713.

became "building some relationships with these plants."[99] This mode of working constitutes a form of "material intelligence," which Glenn Adamson defines as "a deep understanding of the material world around us, an ability to read that material environment, and the know-how required to give it new form."[100] In Cazzola's case, this intelligence is cultivated through walking, observing, testing leaves, flowers, and roots for dye, and patiently translating vegetal properties into textile form. Creation becomes, in Tim Ingold's words, a way of "telling by hand," in which knowledge does not precede the act of making, instead being generated by the very act of working with materials.[101]

This "telling by hand" becomes a way of working with the inherent unpredictability of living materials. Natural dyes respond to soil minerals, water chemistry, seasons, climate, and plant physiology, requiring the artist to embrace a certain degree of surrender and an ability to constantly adapt to the materials she encounters (see Fig. 10). As Cazzola explains, her work involves "letting plants … take more space and sort of inversing the … 'humans are dominant and plants are just a material' [assumption] that … has this utilitarian value."[102] This relational dynamic gives her work a particular epistemological force: it produces knowledge not by extracting information from plants but by remaining responsive to their behaviour over time. Bennett uses the term "thing-power" to describe the "curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle,"[103] and she insists that agency is always distributed across assemblages of human and nonhuman actants. Cazzola's textiles exemplify this distributed agency. As Bennett writes, political and aesthetic force arises when

99. Cazzola, interview by author, December 17, 2025.
100. Glenn Adamson, "Introduction: Engaging with the Objects Around Us," in *Fewer, Better Things: The Hidden Wisdom of Objects* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018), 8.
101. Tim Ingold, "Telling by Hand," in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 109.
102. Cazzola, interview by author, December 17, 2025.
103. Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things," in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

material assemblages "redeploy powers of affect and effect,"[104] a claim that becomes visible in how Cazzola allows vegetal processes to co-author the work. Indeed, although the artist recognized many of the plants from growing up in Guelph, she had "never worked with them for dyes before," and often proceeded experimentally: "some of them I just thought like, let's see what colour it gives… what different colours do each of these parts of the plant make?" She describes the process as "a really beautiful exercise in trust… that something is going to happen… even something super subtle is still exciting."[105]

What Cazzola did decide, however, was the spatial arrangement of the textiles that comprise the multiple installations within the *Botanical Reclamation* project. For example, in the first installation from 2021, *Infinite Balance* (Fig. 11), she arranged her dyed flags in a quarter-turn formation corresponding to the seasonal cycle, explaining that "a quarter turn … felt like a nice representation of a quarter turn of the year."[106] Defying linear logic, this rotation situates the installation within what Salazar et al. describe as the "critical zone," the living layer of soil and atmosphere in which human and more-than-human life are entangled.[107] Read through their proposal to "think-with soils," the installation shifts attention away from plants as resources measured by productivity or yield and toward what Salazar et al. call soil as "bioinfrastructure," a set of material conditions that quietly sustain life over time.[108] The rotation of the flags does not represent ecological repair so much as it makes this alternative temporality perceptible.

As Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer, musician, and academic Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical*

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104. Jane Bennett, "Political Ecologies," in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 109.
105. Cazzola, interview by author, December 17, 2025.
106. Cazzola, interview by author, December 17, 2025.
107. Juan Francisco Salazar et al., *Thinking with Soils: Material Politics and Social Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 3.
108. Salazar et al., *Thinking with Soils*, 3.

Resistance, this pace can be in direct contradiction with the demands of the creative industries. Simpson insists that Indigenous resurgence does not require a return to a supposedly pristine or rural land, noting that "everyday acts of resurgence sound romantic, but they are not."[109] In a similar way, Cazzola's use of "undervalued" vegetal matter and her willingness to get her hands dirty by harvesting plants from sites she calls "Sad Spaces" might not sound romantic, even when the resulting textiles are visually compelling. Simpson also observes from personal experience that "repetition is a bad thing [to editors] … yet rhythmic repetition is at the base of Nishnaabeg intelligence."[110] This non-linearity is further reinforced through the spatial experience of *Infinite Balance*. Viewers encountered the installation without a predefined entry or exit point, moving among the flags in an open, non-sequential manner. At first glance, the installation could be thought to be located in an ordinary field of grass. However, this openness becomes especially charged in relation to the site where *Infinite Balance* was installed: the former Ontario Reformatory lands in Guelph. As documented in the Guelph Civic Museum exhibition *Darkness and Light: Inside the Ontario Reformatory* (2025), the institution's more than century-long history is marked by what curator P. Brian Skerrett describes as a "complex and uncomfortable" duality.[111] Although Provincial Secretary William Hanna originally conceived the reformatory in the early twentieth century as a site of humane treatment and reform through productive labour within expansive rural grounds, this ideal shifted over time. Following the 1937 riot driven by growing inmate unrest and resulting in over $200,000 in damage, the prison's emphasis moved decisively from

109. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 195.
110. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 200.
111. Joy Struthers, "Guelph Civic Museum Presents Exhibition *Darkness and Light: Inside the Ontario Reformatory*," *Guelph Mercury*, January 12, 2025, https://www.guelphmercury.com/news/guelph-civic-museum-presents-exhibition-darkness-and-light-inside-the-ontario-reformatory/article_5dce2b97-db60-5a75-9c6c-cf80cff8dadf.html.

rehabilitation toward punishment. By the mid-twentieth century, the reformatory was widely regarded as one of the harshest jails in Canada.[112]

The lack of enclosure or visible order in Cazzola's installation unsettles the land's legacy as a space structured by controlled and limited movement. As Angela Y. Davis famously argues in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, prisons operate ideologically by regulating bodies through spatial containment, enclosing those deemed "undesirable" while obscuring the broader social conditions that produce incarceration.[113] Seth Adema's PhD dissertation, which examines the function of corrections as a colonizing tool in Canada, emphasizes that prisons operate as settler-colonial institutions designed to discipline bodies and reconstruct subjects according to liberal colonial norms, rather than to address the structural violence that produces incarceration.[114] By contrast, *Infinite Balance* does not isolate the body from its environment but allows it to wander freely, incorporating the viewer's movement into the ecological relations unfolding on the site.

What appears antithetical to the "algorithm of the Nishnaabeg world"[115] described by Simpson is the colonial logic of modern botany that Robin Wall Kimmerer critiques in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Against this logic, Kimmerer proposes an ethics of "seeing as an architecture of relationships."[116] Her account of the Three Sisters, corn, beans, and squash, offers a concrete model of this relational ontology. Planted together, these crops support one another materially: beans fix nitrogen in the soil, corn provides a climbing structure, and squash shades the ground to retain moisture.[117] This interdependence forms what Kimmerer calls a "blueprint for the world," an ecological ethic in which flourishing is collective rather

112. Struthers, "Guelph Civic Museum Presents Exhibition *Darkness and Light*."
113. Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 16.
114. Seth Adema, *More Than Stone and Iron: Indigenous History and Incarceration in Canada, 1834–1996* (PhD diss., Wilfrid Laurier University, 2016), 4.
115. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 24.
116. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Asters and Goldenrod," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 54.
117. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "The Three Sisters," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 129.

than competitive.[118] Cazzola's textiles can be read through this same relational logic. The colours of her woven flags emerge from an assemblage of multispecies relations among soil, water, weather, vegetal properties, and human labour, rendering the very idea of a singular authorial gesture untenable.

This relational epistemology is deepened by the social and pedagogical dimensions of Cazzola's *Botanical Reclamation*, particularly through her plant walks, dye workshops, and conversations with an Indigenous Elder about seeds and migration. As Cazzola recounts, "it's a delicate balance," because while introduced plants can be ecologically disruptive, "the plants themselves didn't do anything wrong … they just are doing what they're designed to do."[119] Cazzola summarizes her conversation with the Indigenous Elder by explaining that the latter reframed the history of plant migration by acknowledging the vulnerability of the first settlers who carried these seeds: "they were coming to a new place, and they had no idea how they would feed themselves … of course, they would bring seeds with them for things that they know they could eat." This narrative provides some nuance to the idea that seeds cause ecological disruption; as Cazzola puts it, seeds are people's "livelihood," companions in human movement under conditions of uncertainty.[120] This allows me to think about seeds and plants as craft materials, in that they are embedded with comparable social meanings. Writing about textiles in "Crafting Community," Professor and Director of Museum and Curatorial Studies in the Department of Visual Arts at Western University, Kirsty Robertson, and scholar, artist, and educator Lisa Vinebaum emphasize that textiles function as markers of group identity through "pattern and design, embellishment and adornment, color, and the wearing of distinctive garments and dress." As they note, "cloth is easily transportable and can connect us to place, even those to which we cannot easily return."[121]

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118. Kimmerer, "The Three Sisters," 129.
119. Cazzola, interview by author, December 17, 2025.
120. Cazzola, interview by author, December 17, 2025.
121. Kirsty Robertson and Lisa Vinebaum, "Crafting Community," *Textile* 14, no. 1 (2016): 7.

Similarly, Ginnifer Menominee's *Migrating Seeds* shows how manomin has constituted concrete way for their ancestors to survive forced displacement as they were uprooted from their homelands and pushed across the borders imposed by settler colonialism on Turtle Island.[122] Included in the exhibition are photographs documenting Menominee's first return to wild rice harvesting at Curve Lake First Nation Territory (Fig. 12), an experience they describe as a "homecoming." They explain, "I had heard about a family in Curve Lake that harvested the wild rice, but they also allowed people to come in and learn about the wild rice and actually participate in harvest… I brought a whole bunch of community people and I invited family as well… and out of that really was just this deep dive into manomin and the cultivation of it."[123]

When Menominee purchased "three big 50-pound bags of green rice" and carried them to "streams and slow-moving bodies of water," the artist was performing what they explicitly called "an act of reclamation." As they explain, "I decided to dump all these seeds out as an act of reclamation… to make a point of saying 'we were here and our food source was here and now it's gone.'"[124] This redistribution of manomin intervenes in colonial food regimes that, in the Canadian context, have undermined Indigenous food sovereignty. As Barbara Benish and Nathalie Blanc note, when communities are "denied access to their native practices of foraging, hunting, and growing food," they are forced into nutritionally depleted, market-controlled food deserts that entrench dependency and dispossession.[125]

Against this backdrop, Menominee's practice materially reactivates Indigenous relations to land through food itself. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's insistence that "birch

122. "Migrating Seeds," G101, accessed January 10, 2026, https://g101.ca/exhibits/migrating-seeds.
123. Menominee, interview by author, December 11, 2025.
124. Menominee, interview by author, December 11, 2025.
125. Barbara Benish and Nathalie Blanc, "Decolonizing Land and Body through Food Culture," in *Art, Farming and Food for the Future: Transforming Agriculture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 275.

trees are not resources, they are relatives" and that harvesting must ensure regeneration[126] names precisely the ethic Menominee enacts through manomin. It is therefore coherent that they returned the manomin to waterways after the exhibition, treating seeds as beings embedded in their ecosystems rather than as raw material for display. As they recall, the exhibition curator, Amin Alsaden, urged them to "stop worrying about how it's going to look" and to "just let the works… come out the way they need to"[127]: a surrender to material agency that echoes Simpson's argument that "the land must once again become the pedagogy."[128] As Benish and Blanc suggest, contemporary practices that work with food and gathering create spaces where "the materiality of the plant world that keeps us alive" is foregrounded as a site of collective repair.[129] Menominee's wild rice thus reestablishes relations between people and land, asserting, through its very movement and germination, that Indigenous foodways remain materially present and politically generative within and beyond the gallery. Like clay that bears the memory of specific geological deposits, manomin cannot be abstracted from its ecosystem without losing its meaning. Read through craft, Menominee's practice sits alongside the other case studies as part of a broader material ethic in which making is inseparable from place.

Transplanting Cultural Memory: Counter-Archives and the Paradox of Exhibiting Living Matter

Plant-based art occupies a paradoxical space: it stages living, relational matter while simultaneously restraining it within institutional contexts. As members of The Synthetic Collective (Ian Arturo, Sara Belontz, Patricia Corcoran, Heather Davis, and Kathleen Hill) write, museum collecting is driven by "the goal of arrest[ing] time through the twin processes of collection and preservation," producing "an unnervingly static past-in-the-present" that

126. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Nishnaabeg Anticapitalism," in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 76.
127. Menominee, interview by author, December 11, 2025.
128. Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," 157.
129. Simpson, "Embodied Resurgent Practice and Coded Disruption," 282.

persists even within contemporary art institutions that "nestle a resistance to changing environments and unwavering humidity levels" while presenting themselves as cutting-edge.[130]

The wild rice that Menominee carried into the gallery no longer grows during the time it is exhibited, yet in this suspended state it continues to hold the relations that brought it into being. Under conditions of settler colonialism, where Indigenous foodways and histories have been systematically disrupted, seeds and plants function as counter-archives, preserving knowledge of how land has been lived with and understood. Menominee includes a canoe made collaboratively with students and the Algonquin canoe maker Chuck Commanda. The artist places two baskets full of wild rice inside (see Fig. 13), this way highlighting the relational and communal dimensions of their community's knowledge of manomin. Although in the gallery the rice cannot complete its natural cycle, it retains a history of kinship and survivance that exceeds, and thereby resists, the museum's logic of containment. I would argue that it is precisely this resistance that sustains the continuity of the community across time.

Some recent work in plant science and art historical research goes beyond the purely symbolic representation of plants as vectors of memory. It becomes possible to speak of plants as organisms with a literal capacity to preserve and transmit traces of past relations. Aideen McGinn (BSc Zoology), Lorna Donlon (textile and installation artist), and Joanna Kacprzyk (lecturer in plant science) show that plants function as what they call "memory anchors" within everyday life, based on their analysis of *In Memory of Plants*, an interactive exhibition developed for the Alternative Kilkenny Arts Festival, where visitors were invited to write

130. Ian Arturo, Sara Belontz, Patricia Corcoran, Heather Davis, and Kathleen Hill, "PLASTIC HEART: A DIY Fieldguide for Reducing the Environmental Impact of Art Exhibitions," *The Synthetic Collective*, last modified 2021, 8.

"plant memory postcards" in response to specific species encountered in a garden setting.[131] Revealing the sensory, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions of human-plant relationships, nearly half of these postcards referred to a particular person, most often mothers and grandmothers, and were tied to ordinary plants such as roses, thyme, and sweet williams. The postcards demonstrate how ecological memory is deeply entangled with cultural memory, and how plants serve as mnemonic devices that carry intergenerational transmissions of knowledge.[132] Smell, taste, and touch played a central role in these recollections, a pattern the authors link to the "Proust phenomenon," in which sensory cues trigger vivid autobiographical memory.[133] But do plants and soils themselves possess a capacity to remember? Drawing on ecologist Monica Gagliano's experiments with *Mimosa pudica* (also called sensitive plant, touch-me-not, or shy plant), environmental studies scholar Prudence Gibson notes that this flowering plant initially folds inward when dropped but, after repeated drops, stops doing so, retaining this learned response for up to a month, which Gagliano interprets as evidence of vegetal memory.[134] In this account, the concept of memory as a capacity specific to animals, and from an anthropocentric perspective particularly developed in humans, is called into question, as it appears that it is also a physiological process in plants. The implications of this extend beyond individual plants to soil and seeds, which retain the imprint of past conditions through chemical residues, altered nutrient profiles, and patterns of regeneration shaped by cultivations and ruptures. In landscapes structured by settler colonialism, these material memories are formed through histories of enclosure, monoculture, forced displacement, and pollution. Plants therefore carry forward not only the intimate,

131. Aideen McGinn, Lorna Donlon, and Joanna Kacprzyk, "Plant Memories: Art Co-Created with the Public as a Tool for Investigating How People Build Lasting Connections with Plants," *Plants, People, Planet* 7, no. 3 (2025): 753.
132. McGinn, Donlon, and Kacprzyk, "Plant Memories," 758.
133. McGinn, Donlon, and Kacprzyk, "Plant Memories," 759.
134. Prudence Gibson, "The Wasteland and the Wilding: The Aesthetic of Abandoned and Reclaimed Green Spaces," in *The Plant Contract: Art's Return to Vegetal Life*, edited by Prudence Gibson (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 8.

intergenerational memories described in the postcards but also harm, with heirloom and colonial violence coexisting in the same living tissues. Recognizing plants and soils as sentient witnesses to layered histories opens a different way of understanding why harvesting and seed saving matter in contemporary art. Jane Bennett's distinction between "consumerist materialism," in which "the sheer volume of commodities and the hyper-consumption of resources dulls the senses and inhibits ethical responsiveness,"[135] and a materialism that heightens attentiveness to the affective presence of matter helps clarify the significance of these practices. In working with vegetal matter, artists engage in the same temporal, tactile processes that structure harvesting and seed saving, activating cultural memory through embodied contact and repetition with living matter.

So what happens to the agency of vegetal matter when it is immobilized within the gallery or museum? Ian Hanesworth insists that seed keeping must be understood as a form of cultural production, writing that "a collection of seeds is as much a cultural body as a museum."[136] For Hanesworth, the stakes of collecting lie not simply in preservation, but in what kinds of relations are sustained or severed when living material enters archival space.[137] In Menominee's *Migrating Seeds*, manomin is carried into the gallery and temporarily withdrawn from circulation. Read through Christina Battle's assertion that seeds "are of great value, but only if utilized,"[138] manomin risks becoming what she warns against: a kind of archival disconnection, in which biological matter is preserved at the expense of the social, ecological, and cultural relations that give it meaning.[139]

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135. Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things," in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 12.
136. Ian Hanesworth, "Sowing Memory: Collecting Art and Saving Seeds," Mn Artists, March 10, 2022, https://mnartists.walkerart.org/sowing-memory-collecting-art-and-saving-seeds.
137. Hanesworth, "Sowing Memory."
138. Christina Battle, "Seeds Are Meant to Disperse [to Get to the Future, a Return to the Past]," in *Ecologies in Practice: Environmentally Engaged Arts in Canada*, ed. Elysia French and Amanda White (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2024), 66.
139. Franziska von Verschuer, a sociologist in the Biotechnology, Nature and Society research group at Goethe University Frankfurt, acknowledges existing critiques of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the world's largest backup facility for seeds, noting that much of the scholarship isolates the Vault from the

Menominee, however, does not present manomin as an isolated specimen. Instead, they saturate the gallery space with the relations that sustain it. The wild rice is surrounded by objects that embed the seed within Anishinaabe cultural lineage: earrings referencing subsistence relations with animals (Fig. 14); a textile featuring a bear in reference to Menominee's bear clan; a plaster cast of a bear footprint used in ceremony (Fig. 15); sage and sweetgrass placed inside the canoe (used to prepare people for ceremonies and teachings, sage and sweetgrass are, alongside red cedar and tobacco, two of the four plants considered sacred by First Nations and Métis Peoples[140]) (Fig. 16). Menominee explains that they "wanted to really embody all of who [they are] as an Indigenous person and what really brings [them] home." Through this dense constellation of materials, the work resists what Hanesworth calls "protective destruction," the paradox by which archiving inevitably degrades meaning at the moment of preservation.[141] Although manomin is immobilized, its agency persists through proximity to the craft practices and tools that exceed the museum's logic of containment.

Menominee's engagement with manomin can also be understood as part of the broader field of Indigenous seed-saving. Nicole Davies, a researcher at the University of British Columbia working in the field of Indigenous food sovereignty and climate adaptation, considers the conservation of Indigenous seeds as three things: a method of adapting to climate change, "a front line of self-determination," and an exercise of intergenerational knowledge transfer.[142] According to Davies, settler colonialism has fractured seed knowledge

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broader, historically contingent global system of agrobiodiversity conservation in which it is embedded. She recognizes that these accounts often overlook the histories of agricultural modernisation and agrobiodiversity loss, as well as the diverse human actors and power relations that co-shape the Vault's politics. Building on these critiques, von Verschuer calls for attention to the Seed Vault's "worldly entanglements," emphasizing its ambiguities and its potential to support more-than-human relations beyond biocapitalist and biocolonial frameworks. Franziska von Verschuer, *Collecting Seeds, Assembling Worlds: An Inquiry into Agrobiodiversity Conservation through the Svalbard Global Seed Vault* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025), 12.

140. "The Four Sacred Medicines," Anishnawbe Health Toronto, December 2017, https://aht.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/FourSacredMedicines.pdf
141. Ian Hanesworth, "Sowing Memory: Collecting Art and Saving Seeds."
142. Nicole Davies, "Indigenous Seed Keeping and Seed Climate Adaptation," Canadian Climate Institute, June 21, 2024, https://climateinstitute.ca/publications/indigenous-food-climate-sovereignty/.

across generations, leaving only a small number of "seed knowledge holders" responsible for both safeguarding and transmitting cultural seed practices, while "new and emerging seed keepers" face structural (economic, temporal, and pedagogical) barriers to accessing the depth of learning required for meaningful climate adaptation.[143] Menominee's work operates as a counter-archive: rather than extracting the seed from its cultural ecology by bringing manomin into the gallery, the installation intervenes in ongoing genealogies of pedagogical and place-based practices. The work retains the potential to germinate once Menominee takes it outside the gallery after the exhibition ends. The same applies to the canoe, which is made from wood with minimal processing. Once the exhibition is over, the canoe will remain functional and can be used to harvest wild rice.

Anahita Norouzi's *Constellational Diaspora* (2021), included in *Troubled Garden*, stages a comparable negotiation between preservation and loss. Norouzi has previously experimented with glass in her practice,[144] and the use of hand-blown glass here likely references the long tradition of glassmaking in Islamic art.[145] In this installation, Persian hogweed (Heracleum persicum) seeds are sealed inside roughly 350 hand-blown glass spheres, immersed in varying shades of blue resin that evoke the Atlantic Ocean (Fig. 17 and 18). Each seed is fully immobilized and unable to germinate, meticulously protected by the glass, yet that protection is compromised by the material's inherent fragility and by the seed's exposure through the glass's transparency. Battle's observation that seeds, once "a freely exchanged, renewable resource," are now "privatized and monopolized"[146] deepens the question, as the Persian hogweed seeds are sealed within glass and exhibited within the

143. Nicole Davies, "Indigenous Seed Keeping and Seed Climate Adaptation."
144. See for example her exhibition *Displaced Garden* (2020): "*Displaced Garden*," Anahita Norouzi, accessed February 18, 2026, http://www.anahitanorouzi.com/work/displaced-garden/.
145. For more on glass in Islamic art, see Qamar Adamjee and Stefano Carboni, "Glass from Islamic Lands," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 1, 2002, https://www.metmuseum.org/fr/essays/glass-from-islamic-lands.
146. Christina Battle, "Seeds Are Meant to Disperse [to Get to the Future, a Return to the Past]," 70.

private foundation that is the Grantham Foundation for the Arts and the Environment. However, the seeds were carried to "Canada" by the artist's mother, transforming botanical material into an intimate diasporic inheritance shaped by displacement and interrupted transmission. Like Menominee, Norouzi does not allow seeds to appear as isolated objects by embedding them within thick networks of relation which include familial memory and transatlantic migration.

Anita Cazzola's *Botanical Reclamation* shifts the archive out of private institutional walls and into the land itself and the hands of the community. If Menominee and Norouzi demonstrate how seeds can function as counter-archives within institutional space by saturating it with relational memory, Anita Cazzola's *Botanical Reclamation* relocates the archive to the land itself, specifically to sites deemed degraded.

Dye Plants in Curious Spaces (2021) is the freely accessible online archive that Cazzola developed to document the plants that persist in her so-called "Curious Spaces." The platform situates each plant within its living milieu. Illustrated by local artist and farmer Jenna Kessler, the entries document growth conditions, dye processes, ecological relationships, and site histories. For example, the entry for Canada Goldenrod describes it as a "loving companion plant to the New England Aster which blooms around the same time" (see Fig. 19), emphasizing how these species support one another and sustain pollinators through their overlapping life cycles.[147] It is precisely asters and goldenrod that Robin Wall Kimmerer invokes in *Braiding Sweetgrass* when she reframes beauty as an emergent property of interdependence rather than a formal ideal. Observing the harmonious juxtaposition of the asters' purple and the goldenrod's yellow in fields and roadsides, she asks whether science and traditional knowledge might be "purple and yellow to one another."[148] Similarly, within

147. Anita Cazzola, "Dye Plants in Curious Spaces," 2021, accessed December 12, 2025, https://dyeplantsincuriousspaces.com/.
148. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Asters and Goldenrod," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 54.

Cazzola's archive, plants are presented as participants in ecologies and cultures that exceed the frame of the archive itself. By making the online archive free and reproducible, Cazzola enables botanical knowledge and memory to circulate beyond private institutional spaces, ensuring they remain in motion.

Kirsty Robertson and Lisa Vinebaum observe that "making things together helps to foster social bonds," particularly in contemporary fiber practices that foreground skill-sharing as integral to the work itself. In addition to demonstrating how textiles are made, such pedagogical gestures create spaces for dialogue across social difference.[149] A democratic logic structures Cazzola's practice, both in the detailed process notes she shares through her website—where she documents dye baths, colour uptake, and step-by-step lake pigment recipes—and in the public intervention *A Ceremony in Defiance for the Plants* (2021), during which she publicly indicated which plants she used to dye each textile in advance of the event (see Fig. 20).

By inviting community members to pin up fabrics, dyed in her studio using locally gathered plants, across the entrance to the former Lafarge Quarry following renewed construction in August 2021, the project transforms a degraded industrial site into a participatory, living archive. In so doing, Cazzola's practice aligns with what Robertson and Vinebaum describe as a broader shift in contemporary art, "away from that of the solitary artist, towards that of co-learner, facilitator, [and] social transformer."[150] Rather than positioning authorship as an individual quality, such practices foreground shared learning and collective responsibility. Here, authorship might be said to include not only Cazzola and the participating community members, but also the land itself in the form of both medium (the plants) and site.

149. Robertson and Vinebaum, "Crafting Community," 7.
150. Robertson and Vinebaum, "Crafting Community," 6.

At the same time, Robertson and Vinebaum emphasize that the participatory potential of textiles is not simply a contemporary phenomenon: it is rooted in the medium's long social history. As they write, "textiles have always operated at the intersection of individual practice and group activity,"[151] and even as contemporary artists chart a movement "from private to public, and from the individual to the collective," this shift must be understood in relation to the "extensive social histories of textiles." Embedded with social meanings, textiles "serve to bring people together and to foster social bonds," connecting people to families, communities, and places.[152] On this basis, Robertson and Vinebaum cite cultural theorist Milada Burcikova's argument that craft has historically functioned as "a vehicle to think about self-sufficiency, self-empowerment, communal experience and happiness in work, as well as a tool for fighting poverty and oppression."[153] From this perspective, "the history of craft is replete with projects that could also fall under the rubric of today's social and participatory practices."[154]

Seen through this lens, *A Ceremony in Defiance for the Plants* activates a historically grounded logic of textile-based community formation. The participants' gesture echoes the visual language of construction-site flags, which typically mark interdiction and signal caution; here, however, this vocabulary is repurposed to centre plant agency rather than machinery or ongoing destruction. Installed on behalf of the plants themselves, the intervention expands archival practice beyond institutional confines by drawing on relational and socially engaged art while foregrounding the agency of non-human actors: the shared labour required for this installation positions the community as co-archivists.

Taken together, these three case studies suggest that cultural memory is embedded within land itself, even in places dismissed as waste. Seeds, soils, and so-called "degraded"

151. Robertson and Vinebaum, "Crafting Community," 7.
152. Robertson and Vinebaum, "Crafting Community," 7.
153. Robertson and Vinebaum, "Crafting Community," 7.
154. Robertson and Vinebaum, "Crafting Community," 7.

environments hold the material traces of interrupted foodways, dispossessed territories, and severed relations with plants and waters. These three forms of botanical reclamation through craft practices become ways of retrieving broader histories that have been rendered illegible within dominant archives.

Conclusion

> *"This was the more sinister legacy of Eden: the fantasy of perpetual abundance. I was beginning to see what a poisoned fruit it truly was. So many of our most ecologically deleterious behaviours are to do with refusing impermanence and decay, insisting on summer all the time. Permanent growth, constant fertility, perpetual yield, instant pleasure, maximum profit, outsource the labour, keep evidence of pollution out of sight."* — Olivia Laing[155]

Through close reading of the three case studies of *Migrating Seeds* by Ginnifer Menominee, *Troubled Garden* by Anahita Norouzi, and *Botanical Reclamation* by Anita Cazzola, this thesis demonstrates that contemporary artists working in "Canada" engage the vegetal world in ways that are inseparable from and actively sustain the cultural memory of the peoples who have inhabited this land. Their practices affirm that cultural memory must remain dynamic, evolving through encounter and adaptation in order to sustain the possibility of a future. In this way, these exhibitions challenge the modern impulse to collect and archive as if cultural and biological life could be stabilized indefinitely. As demonstrated by the Synthetic Collective's critique of museums' "fundamentally paradoxical relationship to time,"[156] museums have long engaged in what might be described, following Laing, as an Edenic logic: the attempt to secure objects and knowledge outside of time, decay, and relationality. When seeds are sealed in vaults, plants are pressed into herbariums, or artifacts are hidden in storage, life is halted in the name of preservation.

The artists examined here are likewise deeply invested in preserving cultural memory, yet they do so through a radically different temporal framework. Rather than denying death

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155. Olivia Laing, *The Garden Against Time: In Search of a Common Paradise*, 1st American ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024), 279.
156. Arturo et al., "PLASTIC HEART," 8.

and the transformation of plants and communities alike, their practices foreground decay as part of cycles that make regrowth possible, "refus[ing] an illusion of perpetual productivity, without rest or repair."[157] The slow and responsive labour demanded of artists working with vegetal matter cultivates forms of empathy that make plants harder to treat as inert resources. Hope for the future resides in relationships that cannot promise profit. It lies instead in the modest and repeated acts of tending that we learn to recognize in these exhibitions when they are viewed through the lens of craft.

At the same time, these practices unsettle the conventional understanding of craft outlined at the beginning of this thesis. Craft scholarship has frequently described craft labour as grounded in slowness, care, placemaking, and attentiveness to land, and increasingly understands such practices as responses to ecological crisis. As Glenn Adamson has shown, craft has historically been structured through binaries opposing the "traditional" and the "progressive."[158] Canadian curator Ellyn Walker describes craft as a "gesture towards a reparative relation or future,"[159] highlighting its forward-looking potential. The works discussed in this thesis blur this opposition: while they rely on inherited knowledge, they are not oriented toward preserving a fixed past. Instead, they mobilize tradition as a living resource for imagining and enacting more just ecological futures, thus positioning craft as a mode of making that is future-oriented.

157. Olivia Laing, *The Garden Against Time*, 279.
158. Adamson, "Introduction," xiii.
159. Ellyn Walker, "The Sovereign Stitch: Rereading Embroidery as a Critical Feminist Decolonial Text," in *The New Politics of the Handmade: Craft, Art and Design*, ed. Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch (London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020), 280.

Figures

Figure 1. Anita Cazzola, *A Flag for the Plants I*, 2020. Naturally dyed silk, wool, linen, and cotton. https://anitacazzola.com/a-flag-for-the-plants-i.

Figure 2. Anita Cazzola, *A Ceremony in Defiance for the Plants*, 2021. Public intervention with naturally dyed fabric, rope, and clothes pins. https://anitacazzola.com/a-ceremony-in-defiance-for-the-plants.

Figure 3. Anahita Norouzi, *All our Relations*, 2022. Two-channel video installation (surveillance footages, carpet, 3 glass bottles, salt, pepper, golpar), variable dimensions. https://www.fondationgrantham.org/en/solo-anahita-norouzi.

Figure 4. Anahita Norouzi, *Constellational Diasporas*, 2021. Installation (350 glass balls, 350 Heracleum persicum seeds, resin), variable dimensions. Exhibited in Troubled Garden: Study for Migratory Roots, at The Grantham Foundation for the Arts and the Environment, Saint-Edmond-de-Grantham. https://www.anahitanorouzi.com/work/constellational-diasporas/.

Figure 5. Ginnifer Menominee, *Migrating Seeds*, 2023. https://menominee.ca/recent-expositions.

Figure 6. Anita Cazzola, Dye Results — Berry Skins, *Dye Plants in Curious Spaces*, 2021. Buckthorn berry skins on cotton, linen, silk, hemp, and wool fibers. https://dyeplantsincuriousspaces.com/buckthorn.

Figure 7. Ginnifer Menominee, *Migrating Seeds*, 2023. https://menominee.ca/recent-expositions.

Figure 8. Anahita Norouzi, *Remains*, 2021. Sculpture (11 panels of plaster reliefs, 12 x 12 in each), variable dimensions. https://www.fondationgrantham.org/en/solo-anahita-norouzi.

Figure 9. Anita Cazzola, *A Flag for the Plants I*, 2020. Naturally dyed silk, wool, linen, and cotton. https://anitacazzola.com/a-flag-for-the-plants-i.

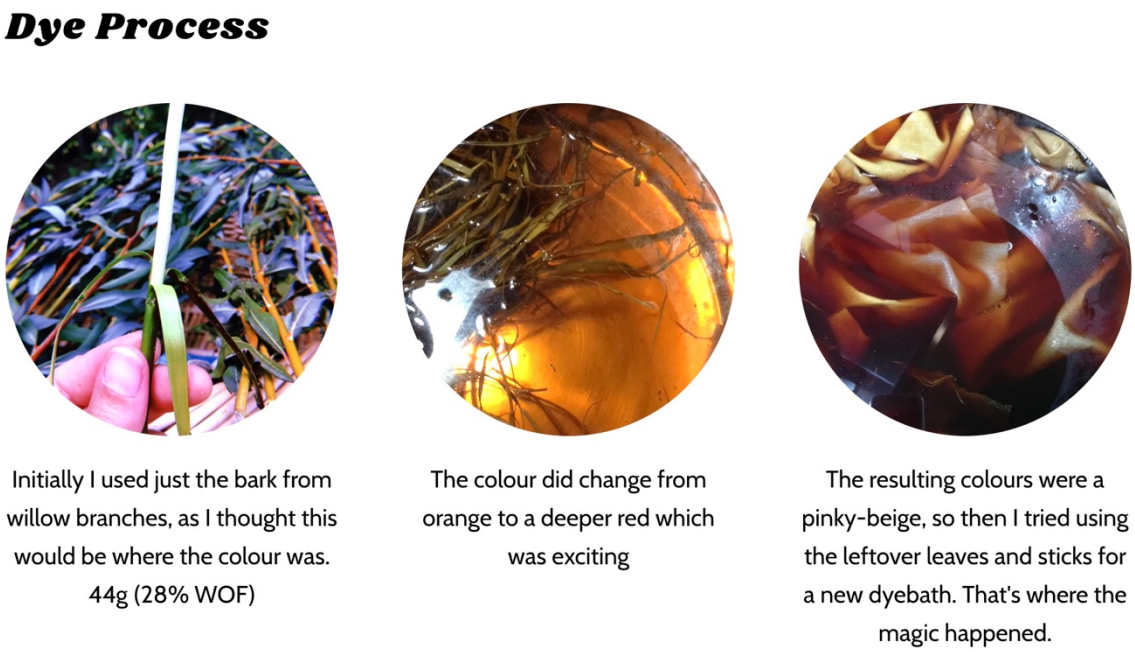

Figure 10. Anita Cazzola, Dye Process — Willow, *Dye Plants in Curious Spaces*, 2021. https://dyeplantsincuriousspaces.com/willow.

Figure 11. Anita Cazzola, *Infinite Balance*, 2021. Naturally dyed silk, wool, cotton, linen, and hemp, flag poles. https://anitacazzola.com/infinite-balance.

Figure 12. Ginnifer Menominee, *Migrating Seeds*, 2023. https://menominee.ca/recent-expositions.

Figure 13. Ginnifer Menominee, *Migrating Seeds*, 2023. https://menominee.ca/recent-expositions.

Figure 14. Ginnifer Menominee, *Migrating Seeds*, 2023. https://menominee.ca/recent-expositions.

Figure 15. Ginnifer Menominee, *Migrating Seeds*, 2023. https://menominee.ca/recent-expositions.

Figure 16. Ginnifer Menominee, *Migrating Seeds*, 2023. https://menominee.ca/recent-expositions.

Figure 17. Anahita Norouzi, *Constellational Diasporas*, 2021. Installation (350 glass balls, 350 Heracleum persicum seeds, resin, fishere hook), variable dimensions. Exhibited at the Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, Québec City. http://www.anahitanorouzi.com/work/constellational-diasporas/.

Figure 18. Anahita Norouzi, *Constellational Diasporas*, 2021. Installation (350 glass balls, 350 Heracleum persicum seeds, resin), variable dimensions. Exhibited in Troubled Garden: Study for Migratory Roots, at The Grantham Foundation for the Arts and the Environment, Saint-Edmond-de-Grantham. https://www.fondationgrantham.org/en/solo-anahita-norouzi.

SOLIDAGO CANADENSIS *(CANADA GOLDENROD)*

As you guessed from its name, Goldenrod is an indigenous plant in Canada. It blooms in late summer and remains until the fall. Goldenrod is a very important plant for pollinators, as it provides a source of food and shelter into the colder months of the year. It is a loving companion plant to the New England Aster which blooms around the same time. The two look lovely together, and also help each other (and pollinators) thrive. I think Goldenrod is such a beautiful plant, and although some see it as a weed, there is so much to celebrate about it! Of course, as a dye, Goldenrod is really lovely as well, producing some of the most vivid and bright yellows I've seen in my dyepots.

Figure 19. Anita Cazzola, Dye Process — Solidago canadensis (Canada Goldenrod), *Dye Plants in Curious Spaces*, 2021. https://dyeplantsincuriousspaces.com/goldenrod.

Figure 20. Anita Cazzola, *A Ceremony in Defiance for the Plants*, 2021. Public intervention with naturally dyed fabric, rope, and clothes pins. https://anitacazzola.com/a-ceremony-in-defiance-for-the-plants.

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