

**A Return to Villainous Roots?: The Revival of Witchcraft in Contemporary Art and Botanical Ecocriticism**

Culturally relevant on a global scale, an object of fear, and villainised for her wicked use of plants and herbs, the witch is a figure that is often defined through her connection to nature. Whilst across the globe between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and indeed still for some places in the world today, getting accused of witchcraft led to social isolation and more often than not, death, this figure appears to be experiencing a revival amongst female contemporary artists, utilised in discussions surrounding environmentalism. No longer simply a construct about certain ‘malicious’ or ‘dissenting’ women, the witch now appears as ‘part of a story about capitalism and colonialism,’<sup>1</sup> their strong connection to nature, and relatable, localised narratives standing as a counter position against the patriarchal societies that enforce the structures of capitalism and industrialisation that fuel the climate crisis of today.

Through the artworks explored in this essay, I will discover how the figure of the witch is utilised in contemporary modern art to open up discussion on environmental issues such as land commoditisation, the loss of common, botanical knowledge, decolonialising landscapes, and fostering new global human-land relationships that are rooted in understanding and care.

### **Witch Hunts and the Enclosure Movement: Rachel Rose’s ‘Wil-o-Wisp’ (2018)**

When considering the reasoning behind the witch hunts held across Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the phrase ‘mass hysteria’ typically comes to mind, with accusations prompted by societal and religious fears leading communities to turn against one another and name their neighbours ‘witch.’ Whilst such thinking is certainly valid, with the witch-hunts being informed by a variety of reasons, this period of female persecution is more linked to environmental factors than one might believe. When considering this phenomenon from a political-ecological point of view, the reasoning behind the mass naming of women as witches becomes less hysterical, and far more malicious, in nature. In this section, I explore the historic links between the commoditisation of land, women’s bodies, and the persecution of ‘witches’ through the work of Rachel Rose, investigating how land privatisation destroyed communities and informed the disconnect we feel with our natural spaces today.

Set in rural England across the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Rose’s ‘Wil-o-Wisp’ (Fig.1) follows the fictional figure of Elspeth Blake, a healer who, after ‘cursing’ a neighbouring farmer that said she took from his land, is accused of witchcraft and led away to face persecution. Whilst being a visually and auditorily entrancing filmic piece, what makes this work interesting from an ecological view is the way it frames the persecution of Elspeth against the backdrop of the enclosure movement, an act that saw the ‘privatisation of communal land and spurred violent upheavals in agrarian life.’<sup>2</sup> In acknowledging this link, Rose weaves together ‘class warfare, the appropriation of public resources for private benefit

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<sup>1</sup> Deepwell, Katy, ‘Feminist Interpretations of Witches and the Witch Craze in Contemporary Art by Women,’ *The Pomegranate*, 21.2, (2019)

<sup>2</sup> “Rachel Rose: Wil-o-Wisp/The Future Fields Commission,” Exhibitions, Philadelphia Museum of Art, <https://philamuseum.org/calendar/exhibition/rachel-rose-wil-o-wispthe-future-fields-commission>

and systemic violence against women<sup>3</sup> in a way that marks the commoditisation of land as a distinctly ecofeminist issue.

The enclosure movement was a process that was used to end traditional rights.<sup>4</sup> Gaining rapid momentum in the 1500 to 1600's, the movement saw the privatisation of traditionally 'common' or 'waste' lands, (where commoners could utilise the land as they needed,) seeing them 'enclosed' by hedgerows or fences to be used by wealthy landowners and farmers. This movement not only saw the appearance of the English landscape fundamentally change, but also intrinsically altered the societies of the rural communities that lived through them. Whilst this affected the entire country, women were the ones most negatively affected by the 'increasing commercialisation of life.'<sup>5</sup> As Federici explains in her pivotal text, '*Caliban and the Witch*,' the commons held greater value for women. Having less social power and less title to land, women found themselves more dependent on the commons for their 'subsistence, autonomy and sociality.'<sup>6</sup> Whether as a space to grow tradable goods, cultivate herbs for healing or contraceptive purposes, or simply a place to convene autonomous from men, the commons were one way in which nature functioned as a 'feminist space'<sup>7</sup> in this deeply misogynistic society.(Fig.2) As these communal areas disappeared so too did the societal power that women gained from them. With the enclosure of the land came the further trapping of women in domestic and reproductive roles, and in turn the commodification of women's bodies and labour as if to temper the loss of these natural resources. The persecution of the witch then, becomes not only a comment on the loss of female autonomy, but a reminder of the world of 'female practices, collective relations and systems of knowledge'<sup>8</sup> that were lost through the commodification of the land, and the necessity to try and reclaim them if we wish to understand how to live symbiotically with nature once again.

Rose looks back to this pivotal moment in time to investigate how much of the capitalism that drives the environmental issues of today began with the 'loss of common, public, shared space.'<sup>9</sup> In light of this, the figure of the 'witch' becomes not one of malice but pity, a figure shown sympathetically through the eyes of Rose as a victim of early capitalistic greed and a villainization of the autonomy that common land provided. Whilst mysticism is touched upon throughout the film, what seems to truly

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<sup>3</sup> Rose, Julian, Preview: "Rachel Rose: Wil-o-Wisp," *Art Forum*, (May, 2018), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201805/rachel-rose-wil-o-wisp-75176>

<sup>4</sup> "The Enclosure Movement," CELDF (Community Environmental Legal Defence Fund), <https://celdf.org/the-enclosure-movement/>

<sup>5</sup> Silvia Federici, '*Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation*,' (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 2004) pp. 74

<sup>6</sup> Federici, '*Caliban and The Witch*,' pp. 71

<sup>7</sup> Stacy Alaimo, 'Introduction: Feminist Theory's Flight from Nature,' *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as a Feminist Space*, (Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 13 – 'a remarkable range of women's texts inhabit nature in order to transform it, not only contending with the natures that have been waged against women but writing nature as feminist space.'

<sup>8</sup> Federici, '*Caliban and The Witch*,' pp.103

<sup>9</sup> Filipa Ramos, 'Interview with Rachel Rose on Wil-o-Wisp,' *Art Basel* <https://www.artbasel.com/stories/rachel-rose-wil-o-wisp-summer-digital-program>

mark Elspeth as a witch in the eyes of the men in her village is the capital she gained directly from her practice of understanding the land as a healer. Before she is led away, Elspeth works, mixing herbs and concocting medicine for a group of women within her house. Elspeth notably does not die at the end of the film, but rather both her and her executioners dissolve into thin-air. The final shot is of her empty house sitting quietly in the landscape – the place she once brought to life through her human ritual activity now an ‘empty container to be parcelled up into private property’<sup>10</sup> – a mirror image of the newly commodified land. (Fig.3)

**The Role of Plants in Decolonising and De-commodifying Land Relationships: Annalee Davis’  
*‘(Bush) Tea Services’ (2016)***

With the stripping of the commons from the masses in England came subsequent capitalistic ventures further abroad. This period of English land privatisation coincided with the English colonisation of the Caribbean (West Indies) in the 1600’s, setting the commoditisation of the land onto a global scale. Recognising this movement as a global phenomenon is crucial, both in regards to comprehending the negative impact on natural biodiversity this movement had, as well as understanding how such past injustice could form a ‘terrain of confrontation or solidarity between indigenous, African, and European men and women’ today.<sup>11</sup> The artist Annalee Davis explores how native understandings of plants and herbs can be utilised to form links, start global conversations on environmentalism and postcolonialism, and cultivate global environmental connections. In this section, I look at Davis’s installation pieces, *‘(Bush) Tea Services’* and *‘(Bush) Tea Plot – A Decolonial Patch for Mill Workers’*(2020) as case studies to understand how plants and the knowledge they inform can foster new global environmental ideals.

In Barbados, Davis’s country of origin, trauma is deeply rooted to the land. The collective memory of colonialism and slavery is kept physically present through the altered landscape, whose native botanical biodiversity suffered with the colonial introduction of plantation agriculture. Monocropping practices, in which native wild plants were removed for commodifiable plantations, still affects Barbados today, resulting in a loss of regional biodiversity and soil degradation.<sup>12</sup> In using the native Barbadian plant ‘Bush,’ a botanical typically considered a weed, in her *‘(Bush) Tea Services,’*(Fig.4) Davis challenges this legacy of monocropping, raising bush from a botanical nuisance, once stripped away from the land, to a precious resource now used in the colonial act of the ‘Tea Service.’(Fig.5)

Tea was one of the main exports from overseas British colonies; grown in plantations and

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<sup>10</sup> Guy Mackinnon-Little, ‘Wil-o-Wisp,’ *Tank Magazine*, <https://tankmagazine.com/tank/2019/03/rachel-rose>

<sup>11</sup> Federici, *‘Caliban and The Witch,’* pp. 68

<sup>12</sup> “Disadvantages and Benefits of Monocrop Agriculture,” GeoPard Agriculture, <https://geopard.tech/blog/disadvantages-and-benefits-of-monocropping-in-the-context-of-the-environment/>

harvested by enslaved, exploited workers, the industry functioned as another form of colonial monocropping, cultivated and commoditised for the British market. To use Bush, an ‘indigenous infusion of plants and herbs’<sup>13</sup> still widely recognised for their medicinal properties in Barbados, in this historically colonial practice, not only acknowledges the ‘botanical knowledge of the enslaved, indigenous and indentured’<sup>14</sup> but invites the viewer into a dialogue on the deep entanglements of land commodification and social inequality still seen globally today. Much like how these wild plants regenerate their native soil, Davis utilises Bush as a vessel to renew how we see nature that is not typically commodifiable, and remind us that there are ways beyond the colonial ideal to look at our landscapes and what we cultivate on it. ‘Wilderness and waste’ does not need to be ‘redeemed’ through labour<sup>15</sup> – the land can provide what we need if we know how to utilise it.

As Laroche states, what gives an ingredient its values is ‘not necessarily their healing or malignant properties, but the cultural context through which they come into use.’<sup>16</sup> Davis recognised how the botanical ability of Bush to regenerate and remove toxins from the soil can become a ‘conceptual springboard’ for conversations that may analyse traumas of the past, and ‘express solidarities’<sup>17</sup> that will shape our future for the better, an idea explored in *‘(Bush) Tea Plot – A Decolonial Patch for Mill Workers.’* (Fig.6) Situated in what was once a cotton mill, *‘(Bush) Tea Plot’* functions as a living apothecary for the mills past workers, the same ones that would have processed the cotton coming from British colonies like Barbados. In many ways, the mill emblemised how commercialising land, regardless of where in the world, will always have larger negative global implications. With cotton fluff filling the air and being inhaled by workers, respiratory illnesses were rife among workers – the cotton mill became a space in which land commoditisation made nature toxic.(Fig.7) The installation links shared colonial and industrial industries across the Atlantic through recognising the trauma that the commercialisation of the land caused across the globe. Through this sharing of healing herbs, *‘(Bush) Tea Plot’* explores ‘environmental resilience, regeneration,’ and shares the widely lost knowledge of ‘healing through the use of wild plants.’<sup>18</sup>

The materiality of botany and ecology allows for an investigation into the impact of empire, process of globalisation, and how plants and herbs can connect seemingly separate places and peoples and invite conversations on ‘the politics of the soil’ as a source of ‘subjection, inequality, disruption,’<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mendes-Franco, ‘The Healing Effects of Bush Tea’

<sup>14</sup> Janice Cheddie, ‘Annalee Davis’ (Bush) Tea Services: Botanical Inheritances (Archives 2020 ),’ *ARC Magazine*, 2016, <https://annaleedavis.com/archive/5ylon1ugei3ph8290tsi47atz40lyp>

<sup>15</sup> Jediah Purdy, ‘A Conservationist Empire,’ *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp.155

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Laroche, ‘The Flower of Ointments and Early Modern Transcorporeality,’ *Organic Supplements: Bodies and Things of the Natural World 1580-1790*, (University of Virginia Press, 2020) pp.71

<sup>17</sup> Mendes-Franco, ‘The Healing Effects of Bush Tea’

<sup>18</sup> “(Bush) Tea Plot – A Decolonial Patch for Mill Workers,” Archive, Annalee Davis, <https://annaleedavis.com/archive/bush-tea-plot-a-decolonial-patch-for-mill-workers>

<sup>19</sup> Cheddie, ‘Annalee Davis’ (Bush) Tea Services.’

and healing. This reclamation that we see today of the title ‘witch’ may seem odd in the context of Davis’ work, which does not explicitly site witchcraft as a key influence. Yet, the desire to reclaim these natural systems of knowledge, the same ones we saw erased in the work of Rose, is enacted upon effectively through the art of Davis. In sharing indigenous, botanical knowledge with a British audience, Davis both acknowledges the colonial history of such knowledge, whilst reintroducing viewers to a ‘perspective towards the forest and the field’ that they had long been cut off from.

### **How the Narrative of the Witch can Empower: Candice Lin’s ‘Sycorax’s Collection.’ (2012)**

Up to this point, I have mainly focused on how the figure of the witch has been utilised in regards to understanding the historic instances of land commoditisation that affect many of the environmental issues we face today. Yet, I have not explained how the figure of the witch can be used moving forward. In her work ‘Sycorax’s Collection,’ (Fig.8) multimedia artist Candice Lin explores the figure of the witch as a powerful entity, one that utilises the land not only as a way of exploring past influences on today’s ecological climate, but someone that instrumentalises her relationship to the land to work against the patriarchal structures that damage our planet.

In her etching, Lin gives form to the unseen and unheard figure of the witch Sycorax – the mother of Caliban from Shakespeare’s 17<sup>th</sup> century play ‘*The Tempest*.’ Aligned with the cultural fears of the time, within the original play Sycorax is a villainous figure, a witch ‘so strong/ that could control the moon,’<sup>20</sup> banished from her home in Algiers to the island on which the play takes place. As Vikram states, ‘the resolution of ‘*The Tempest*’ largely speaks to how the female body functions as a commodity within capitalism.’<sup>21</sup> Yet, Lin utilises this largely discredited<sup>22</sup> female figure to explore the ways in which plants can be used to ‘negotiate power in conditions of extreme powerlessness.’<sup>23</sup>

Lin presents Sycorax fully at one with the nature of her island. Standing amongst the flora and fauna, Sycorax herself resembles a tree, her feet rooted into the ground, cats climbing over her body, and from her back and calves leaves and branches sprouting out of her skin. Whilst somewhat grotesque in appearance, Sycorax here is a figure of abundance, at one and drawing power from the nature around her. The labelled plants on the ground around her speak to her cultivation of the landscape – the same ones that in turn cultivate and grow from her. She has become what Warren calls a ‘dweller *in* the land,’<sup>24</sup> a bioregional notion that, whilst quite extreme in this case, de-promotes human-nonhuman

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<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare, William, ‘Act V Scene 1,’ *The Tempest*, Open Source Shakespeare, (1611)  
[https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play\\_view.php?WorkID=tempest&Act=5&Scope=act&pleasewait=1&msg=pl](https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=tempest&Act=5&Scope=act&pleasewait=1&msg=pl)

<sup>21</sup> Vikram, Anuradha, ‘Candice Lin’s Garden of Earthly Delights,’ *KCET*, (August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015),  
<https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/candice-lins-garden-of-earthly-delights>

<sup>22</sup> Discredited due to her position in the play. She is dead before the play begins, and is only spoken of through the voices of others – often in very damning terms.

<sup>23</sup> Vikram, ‘Candice Lin’s Garden of Earthly Delights.’

<sup>24</sup> Warren, Karen J., *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), pp. 84

subordination and forwards ‘the collective collaboration of humans and nonhumans.’<sup>25</sup> Through this characterisation, Sycorax embodies the position that ‘selfhood, reason, and freedom emerge from nature, not in sharp opposition to it.’<sup>26</sup> Her understanding of herbs and use of witchcraft may have been what got her banished, but those elements of her knowledge are also what serve to be her main source of power, and ultimately allow her to live separately from the patriarchal structures that controlled and vilified her.

Whilst a fictional character is depicted, the story of Sycorax echoes real instances of plants leading to salvation, with Lin specifically referencing the use of herbs in the anti-colonial struggles of the Haitian Revolution, where, after being instigated by a Voudou ceremony, enslaved Haitians utilised herbs to poison the water and food of those who enslaved them.<sup>27</sup> In creating a narrative for Sycorax, an originally omitted woman, Lin similarly opens up real world discussion for women and people of colour whose voices have been discredited or co-opted by structures of power, particularly in regards to the climate crisis. Recognitions of individual stories are crucial for moving forward in our damaged world. As Warren states, ‘narrative is a modality that takes relationships seriously.’<sup>28</sup> Centralising the importance of voice, narrative ‘provides a way of conceiving of ethical meaning as emerging out of particular situations moral agents find themselves in,’<sup>29</sup> as opposed to the ethics that tend to be imposed on us currently through the presentation of overwhelmingly large abstract ideals that can feel unrelated to us, or fearmongering portrayals of global destruction that we feel we can have no possible control over. Narrative removes the abstraction from conversations on the climate crisis, relates it to us, and provides us with localised ways to consider how we can live and sustain our damaged world.

### Conclusion

The figure of the witch, a woman who throughout history was persecuted, despised and destroyed, makes for a great segway into environmental discussion, both mirroring the treatment of nature by the hands of the patriarchal structures that commoditise, as well as showing how such destruction affects the individual before it affects the masses. As a global phenomenon, this figure allows for explorations into post-colonial environmental discussion, giving voice to typically unheard groups and fostering global relations built on shared historic injustice, and a willingness to heal along with our planet. As Jeffreys states, ‘witches magic is embodied knowledge’<sup>30</sup> – she could be any individual who takes the time to understand. It puts the individual on a global scale, as single narratives are used to construct a

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<sup>25</sup> Roberts, Jennifer L., ‘Things: Material Turn, Transnational Turn,’ *American Art*, 31:1, (2017) pp. 65

<sup>26</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, pp. 85

<sup>27</sup> Vikram, ‘Candice Lin’s Garden of Earthly Delights.’

<sup>28</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 103

<sup>29</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 103

<sup>30</sup> Jeffreys, Tom, ‘The Return of the Witch in Contemporary Culture,’ *Frieze*, (2018)

web of tales that tell how the earth has reached this point of ruin, but also along these lines, share individual knowledge that allows us to take small steps to rectify this.

In the artworks discussed, we see how, through the utilising the figure of the witch and their individual narratives, a consideration of how plants and the understanding of how to utilise them leads to both personal power and a cultivated, caring relationship with the environment. As expressed earlier, commons were not only universally available natural places, but a space in which the sharing of knowledge forged communities constituted through cooperative, multispecies members. Whether physically, through the de-commodification of land, or metaphorically, through the building of a community through the sharing of environmental knowledge and information, fostering a mindset where both humans and nonhumans rely on and sustain one another could be a crucial step towards surviving together on our damaged planet.





Fig.1: Rachel Rose, Still from 'Wil-o-Wisp,' Video Installation with sound, double-lined mesh scrim, carpet, projection screen, and semi-transparent projection scrims, 2018, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. <https://www.pilarcorrias.com/exhibitions/18-rachel-rose-wil-o-wisp/works/artworks6317/> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> March 2023]

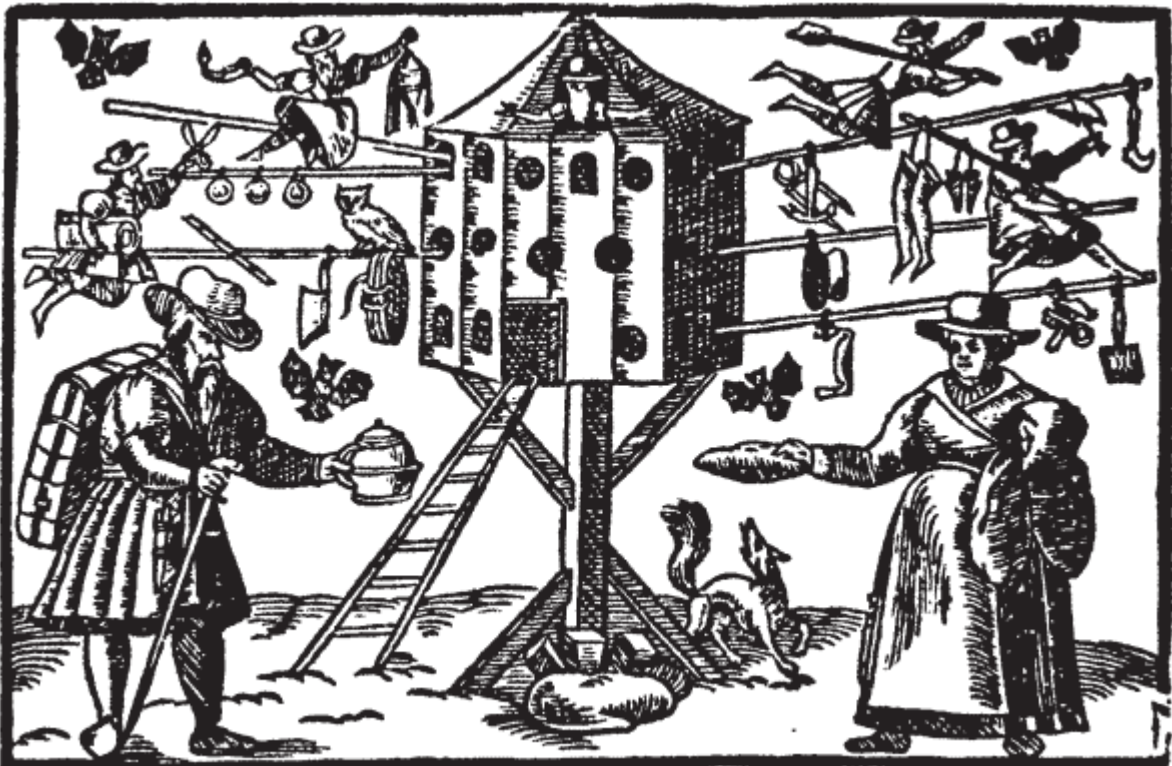


Fig.2: Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century German engraving reviling the Anabaptist belief in the communistic sharing of goods, in Silvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation,* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 2004) pp. 119



Fig.3: Rachel Rose, Still from *'Wil-o-Wisp,'* Video Installation with sound, double-lined mesh scrim, carpet, projection screen, and semi-transparent projection scrims, 2018, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. <https://www.pilarcorrias.com/exhibitions/18-rachel-rose-wil-o-wisp/works/artworks6317/> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> March 2023]



Fig.4: Annalee Davis, Cerasee Bush, Blue Vervain, Fever Grass and West India Bay Leaf utilised in (Bush) Tea Services, Installation, 2016, Empire Remains Shop Programme, <https://annaleedavis.com/archive/5ylon1ugei3ph8290tsi47atz40lyp>. [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023]





Fig.5: Annalee Davis, '*(Bush) Tea Services*', Installation, 2016, Empire Remains Shop Programme, Photo by Tim Bowditch, <https://annaleedavis.com/archive/5ylon1ugei3ph8290tsi47atz40lyp>, [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023]



Fig.6: Annalee Davis, '*(Bush) Tea Plot – A Decolonial Patch for Mill Workers*,' Installation, Glass Vitrine, Coral Stone base, Limestone 18<sup>th</sup> + 19<sup>th</sup> Century porcelain and Clay sherds, Soil and Wild Botanicals (Coltsfoot, Yarrow, Meadowsweet, Lemon Balm, Mint, Elderberries, Lady's Mantle, Feverfew, Common and Broadleaf Plantain, St. Johns Wort, Vervain), Wooden Bobbin, 2020, Collection of Artist, <https://annaleedavis.com/archive/bush-tea-plot-a->





Fig.7: Annalee Davis, '(Bush) Tea Plot – A Decolonial Patch for Mill Workers,' Installation, Glass Vitrine, Coral Stone base, Limestone 18<sup>th</sup> + 19<sup>th</sup> Century porcelain and Clay sherds, Soil and Wild Botanicals, Wooden Bobbin, 2020, Collection of Artist, <https://annaleedavis.com/archive/bush-tea-plot-a-decolonial-patch-for-mill-workers> [accessed 4th April 2023]



Fig.8: Candice Lin, 'Sycorax's Collections (Happiness)', 2012, Etching with Watercolour and Dried Plants, 18th Street Arts Centre

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