# Green Lines

S F Ho

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by

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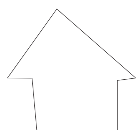

# Anti-Invasion Ecologies

## 1)

This past summer I was trying out this art experiment which was roughly focused on land-based and intersectional feminist art practices. It happened on Mayne Island, Coast Salish Territories.

We were camping on a site that had previously been an old mill and informal dumpsite, which was in the process of remediation by its current inhabitants. Responding to aspects of this environment that had been impacted by humans, Syr Reifsteck dyed paper using materials introduced to the site through human intervention: rusty bits of metal dumped on site with Scotch broom and Himalayan blackberry, two plants often considered invasive to the region. Megan Gerbrandt pulled metal, broken glass, and garbage out of the ground, marking objects with protective symbols to create an installation that led into the forest. Seeking to "unsettle" so-called invasive species, Anthony Meza-Wilson broke down specimens of Scotch broom, separating the plant into pods, leaves, and stems to mirror colonial practices of deconstruction and classification.

I often overheard participants express their distaste for "invasives," whereas I'd always felt a deep affinity for such hardy, weedy plants.

## 2)

Some of this feeling had been informed by *Invasive Exotics*, a 2015 Tromsø/Oslo exhibition at RAM Galleri for which I contributed a text on Ron Benner.

*Invasive Exotics* included Espen Sommer Eide and Kristin Tårnesvik's exploration of the archive of botanist and agronomist Emil Korsmo, known for his work on "combatting" weeds.

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz's *Farmacopea* interrogated how historic and colonial forces irrevocably transform a landscape through considering the deliberate eradication of the manchineel tree, an extremely toxic plant from the Caribbean.

Joar Nango and Håvard Arnhoff planted a small rooftop garden of the despised Japanese knotweed. At the opening, knotweed jam was served and instruments made from another largely reviled plant, the Tromsø palm, were played.

Curated by Margrethe Pettersen and Kristin Tårnes, *Invasive Exotics* sought to trouble minority world[1] understandings of plants as foreign invaders, linking ideas of the alien to issues around class, imperialism, and globalization. The exhibition also drew parallels between plants and people who are seen as undesirable or harmful. I remember some conversations took place around the time when many refugees were crossing into Norway and the news was full of incidents of European xenophobia.

Kristin wrote me just after the exhibition:

> I am now in the far north-east of Norway, close to the border to Russia. Very exciting place to be. Right now we have a lot of refugees coming over the border, mainly from Syria. Norway doesn't really seem prepared for how many are coming, but I hope that we will be able to take good care of them all. Hope all is well with you also![2]

***Sometimes the cultural categories that divide plants and humans dissolve to form a single class called foreign. This is a minority world anxiety evidenced in all forms of cultural production.***

## 3)

In the iconically American novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Betty Smith's romantic portrayal of poverty in early 20th-century Williamsburg, the eponymous tree in question, Ailanthus altissima, is commonly known as tree of heaven. Used extensively in Traditional Chinese Medicine but widely considered invasive on this continent, it possesses the ability to clone itself indefinitely and release chemicals into the soil that suppress the growth of other plants. Focusing on the tree of heaven, Smith explicitly harnesses the easy metaphor that conflates undesirable plants and people.

> You took a walk on a Sunday afternoon and came to a nice neighbourhood, very refined. You saw a small one of these trees through the iron gate leading to someone's yard and you knew that soon that section of Brooklyn would get to be a tenement district. The tree knew. It came there first. Afterwards, poor

> foreigners seeped in and the quiet old brownstone houses were hacked up into flats, feather beds were pushed out on the windows sills to air and the Tree of Heaven flourished. That was the kind of tree it was. It liked poor people.[3]

***Even the term invasion as it applies to biology has its roots in metaphor.***

## 4)

Published in 1958 during the height of the Cold War, Charles S. Elton's *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants* founded the study of invasion ecology. An animal ecologist, Elton had worked during World War II to protect England's precious food rations from rodents, including species introduced to Europe in the 11th century. Prescient in recognizing the accelerated migration of plants, animals, and viruses due to globally expanding human activity, Elton's book also uses war as a central metaphor, reflecting England's recent conflict and contemporary Cold War anxieties.

Elton compares "ecological explosions"[4] to nuclear bombs, describing himself as "a war correspondent… writ[ing] a series of dispatches recounting the quiet infiltration of commando forces, the surprise attacks, the successive waves of later reinforcements after the first spearhead fails to get a foothold, attack and counter attack, and the eventual expansion and occupation of territory from which they are unlikely to be ousted again."[5]

***I tend to see the proliferation of inconvenient, weedy plants as an expression of human disturbance, not a declaration of war from the plant kingdom.***

***Plantain, one of the best known and most common weeds used in herbal medicine, also earned the nickname white man's foot, as its spread in the Americas followed the path of European colonization.***

## 5)

In the exhibition catalogue for *Yellow Peril Reconsidered*, Laiwan flips this invasion metaphor around to describe the proliferation of the english [sic] language over a multitude of colonized minds and bodies.

> English, with its history of imperialism and colonization of minds, is a syntactical problem. Its writing reinforces its history because it was the only language accepted in its colonies. At this point, I know how to speak Cantonese at the simple level of a child. I get my writing translated into Chinese to decolonize the english and to throw in a spanner to make it work. I am dependent on english to deflate that which itself has created. I am dependent because it has become the native tongue that most of the reading world knows or wants to know. It is the audacious syntax that generates its own meanings and expectations within contexts it knows nothing about.[6]

## 6)

Plants that are deemed invasive often come with names that point to other places: Scotch broom, Japanese knotweed, Persian hogweed, Himalayan blackberry.

Their naming embroils them in nationalistic anxieties around borders and racialization that are really quite removed from the interests of plants.

Though such names paint them as encroaching foreigners, when it comes down to it, a plant's status as a weed has nothing to do with where it is from, but rather whether it enriches or disrupts the things that are of value in a white, capitalist culture that assumes itself to be natural and native.

***A plant becomes a weed when it threatens intensive farming and industrial agriculture practices.***

***Or, it becomes a weed when it disrupts notions of a pristine and unchanging wilderness, untouched and available for consumption/colonization.***

## 7)

Take for example the restoration of manoomin, also known as wild rice, in the Kawartha Lakes region.

For years, James Whetung of Curve Lake First Nation has been reseeding the lakes with this traditional Annishinaabeg staple food whose distribution has been decimated due to colonization, which includes the construction of the Trent-Severn Waterway. In addition to reseeding the lakes and distributing wild rice, Whetung's company, Black Duck Wild Rice, leads hands-on workshops and talks that teach traditional and modern ways of growing, harvesting, and processing manoomin across various communities.

However, although these practices harken back to older foodways and ecological systems, his work is seen as a nuisance and threat to the "natural" environment by local cottagers.[7]

Since 2007, residents of Pigeon Lake have been fighting Whetung, claiming that his efforts affect tourism, fishing, boating, and property values, and have even formed a group called Save Pigeon Lake that, alluding to how the spread of manoomin is affecting their own recreational "traditions," organizes protests, community meetings, petitions, and letter-writing campaigns.[8]

The displacement of manoomin directly relates to the harm caused to people who have cultivated relationships with it over generations. In describing how environmental damage has long-term, discriminatory, and impoverishing effects on communities, Rob Nixon hones in on how displacement refers not just to the movement of people from their places of belonging but also to "the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable."[9]

Disregarding the asymmetrical weight put upon select communities through environmental damage leads to what Nixon calls slow violence, a form of environmental discrimination in which the reverberations have deep, long-term effects upon the land and across generations.

In devaluing such generational relationships, value is placed instead upon economic potential.

***Thus the flipside of an invasive plant is an economic plant.***

## 8)

Through trade, agriculture, and imperialism, the far-reaching trajectories of plants that have been deemed economic is articulated in the work of Ron Benner, whose practice traces the "vectors" of corn, tomatoes, potatoes, and other plants first cultivated by people Indigenous to the Americas.[10]

***Again, language plays a crucial part in this, as the Latin classification system devised by Carl Linnaeus effectively standardized the naming of species from colonized countries so that they could be better utilized.***

## 9)

Describing this project, Jamaica Kincaid points to how the scientific naming of plants rendered them into ahistorical entities, comparing their plight to that of the people from these same places.

> This naming of things is so crucial to possession—a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away—that it is a murder, an erasing, and it is not surprising that when people have felt themselves prey to it (conquest), among their first acts of liberation is to change their names (Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka).[11]

***Plants, places, and people are more than simply invasive or economic. Changing the way that language describes these entities requires drastic reevaluations of the intentions that humans bring to the land.***

***For me, there is no more direct or bizarre expression of this relationship than the cultural practice of gardening.***

## 10)

Designed by André Le Nôtre, Versailles was the epitome of the French formal garden style, whereby order, harmony, and symmetry were expressions of man's dominion over nature. Such gardens were meant to be viewed from above, so that clipped hedges and planted flower beds formed rigid parterres and broderies.

With technological innovations in perspective such as the graphometer, designs could be laid out with geometric precision. The military invention of the cannon to build ramparts and and dig trenches allowed for the large scale construction of terraces, canals, and basins.

At one point Versailles' canals and fountains drew more water than the entire city of Paris. It is no coincidence, then, that this demonstration of power, wealth, and the state was contemporaneous to France's colonization of India, North America, and the Caribbean.[12]

## 11)

Kincaid began cultivating her garden parallel to her reading of William H. Prescott's *The History of the Conquest of Mexico*, through which she learned of the classification, renaming, and trade of plants now known as marigolds, zinnias, and dahlias.

Though she repeatedly describes her garden as a source of continuous frustration and anxiety, she also describes how this reading made gardening seem like more than what it was before. The garden became "something else," something bound up with words and history. In Jamaica Kincaid's garden, she digs irregular, oddly-shaped flower beds that confuse her more experienced gardener friends.

They question her motives.

Her style is so far from their understanding of what a garden should be, but she cannot explain herself. It dawns on her that her garden mirrors a map of the Caribbean and its surrounding seas, a knowledge that she chooses not to share with those who interrogate her. She marvels at "the way the garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (the Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings)."[13]

## 12)

Here in Vancouver, T'uy'tanat Cease Wyss and Anne Riley are just beginning three Indigenous remediation gardens that will ask what it means to make public art on unceded territory. Approaching the land with a spirit of ceremonial activism, they hope to develop gardens through respectful listening rather than invasion, using techniques such as clam gardening and mushroom logs that will be developed specifically for each site. They will also test each site for toxins in order to begin the process of "decolonizing dirt back into soil."

However, remediation also takes on social aspects that encourage communities to organize, caretake, open up, and listen to ancestors. To this end, a publication developed in collaboration with urban Indigenous youth will act as a toolkit to learn about herbal medicine, urban gardening, and land stewardship. With respect to the three nations on which the gardens are situated, Cease and Anne have invited three matriarchs from the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwxw̱ú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) nations as collaborators and advisors.

## 13)

In Ma Shi Po village in the northern New Territories of Hong Kong, three generations of farmers are facing eviction and separation from their way of life, in addition to continuous harassment from Henderson Land Development through noise, construction, the fencing off of farmland, and destruction of homes.

Since 2010, Mapopo Community Farm has hosted a bi-weekly farmers market, as well as tours of the village, workshops, and meals that emphasize sustainable land practices.

In May 2016, an injunction that gave permission for Henderson to clear seven-thousand square feet of farmland led to protests and a heated standoff, including a twelve-day squat in a wooden guard post built collectively by farmland protectors. As little more than one percent of the food consumed in Hong Kong is produced locally and with very little farmland left in the region, access to farming know-how and fresh, local produce is increasingly rare. The displacement of villagers for the sake of commercial interests has become emblematic of wider frustration and concern around food security, sustainability, and unchecked free-market development.

Artists have been instrumental in supporting activist actions. While walking through the village, creative production in support of Ma Shi Po is everywhere evident. I see colourfully painted protest signs and little installations hanging off of trees.

Zines, printed matter, and other small press publications use the village as a starting point to think through relationships to the land and development. The zine 守田/ *Protect Our Farmland* documents the 2016 squat from inside the homemade wooden "fortress."[14] Inside I see and read traces of cultural production—a papier maché agitprop "Spinach Man," identity-concealing masks with the faces of developers and government officials in hot pink and green, tenggu drum performances, reading groups, drawing, and poetry.

In an intergenerational workshop through YMCArts in Education, youth participants spend time with a village elder, interviewing them to write a story and also create a ceramic work using earth collected from the village. The earthenware and text are together gifted back to the elder.[15] In another workshop, participants are asked to consider the living spirits and local memories in Ma Shi Po's soil by painting rocks to resemble the fruits and vegetables grown at the village.

Although Ma Shi Po's villagers face displacement, the process of fighting the seemingly impossible has built a complex, multi-species social network whose life continues through other regional projects around local autonomy, cultural history, and environmental sustainability. Similarly, although Cease and Anne's Indigenous remediation gardens may only exist for one season, the social, cultural, and intangible relationships that they hope to cultivate through the practice of gardening moves toward a long-term, material project of decolonization.

## 14)

Although the English language frames certain plants and people as enemies while simultaneously erasing their true histories, this rhetorical war evades the underlying issues of capitalism and colonialism.

However, one might find that the process of taking on such insurmountable forces, which includes the work of shaping the culture and terms that help articulate the ecological and socio-political relationships around us, can be generative, nurturing, and full of rich possibility.

*Thanks to Michael Leung, Anne Riley, and Kristin Tårnes for additional information on and conversation around the works discussed in this article.*

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1. The term "minority world" is used to refer to those countries traditionally referred to as developed, where a minority of the world's population resides. The term "majority world" similarly highlights the fact that the majority of the world's population lives in the parts of the world traditionally referred to as developing. Thanks to Byron Peters for first introducing me to these terms. See 2007's Global Perspectives on *Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives* (eds. Ruth Panel, Samantha Punch, Elsbeth Robson).

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12. TBH, I got most of this from watching Monty Don's French Gardens on Netflix, specifically Episode I: "Gardens of Power and Passion."

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# HOW TO DRAW A LINE

Upon returning to Hong Kong after 15 years, the following text was written:

*The distance between one's experience and the experience of another.*
*The distance between experience and its representation, specifically through language.*
*The distance between a historical event and the historical statement through which this event is interpreted.*
*The distance between the memory of a friend and their tangible presence.*
*The distance between a song's point of transmission and point of reception.*
*The distance between the territory occupied at present and a territory of belonging.*

Linear time is often understood as a metaphor for progress. Things must always move forward, one success or failure building upon the other. From the civilization of ancient Iraq, Western knowledge systems derive the shape of a circle as a marker of time and space. This circle is counted by sixty, or the sexagesimal system, rather than the more commonly used decimal/ten. From this we inherit the sixty seconds to a minute, the sixty minutes to an hour, and the three hundred and sixty degrees on a ship's compass.[1] If ten represents the anthropocentric marking of quantity by fingers, sixty represents the measurement of the earth's body against the stars. Sixty was sacred as it was understood to be the lowest common denominator between the thirty days in a month and the twelve months in a year. The circle challenges linear time with a cyclical, seasonal temporality. However, a line is not always an image of infinite acceleration. As imagined by Cantor, it is also infinitely broken. No matter how small the line you can break it into a smaller one. These broken pieces stretch on into dust. This is again a metaphor for history.

In the *I Ching*, binary is signalled by a broken or unbroken line. What emerges from this simple duality is not a polarization between two opposite extremes but rather an exponentially complex spectrum of possibilities that speaks to intimate as well as sweeping binaries from expressions of gender to the global mining of data. A hexagram contains six lines or six bits of information, each line doubling the possible number of results. One bit of information yields two possible results. Six bits yields sixty-four. Considering the chance and complexity generated through the infinite lines of binary code in a digital era, I wonder what destinies may be read from the data footprint that is left behind. Denise points out that the yin-yang on the cover of the *I Ching* shows the blending and transfusion of black into white and vice-versa. In a culture that has reduced such symbols to Oriental kitsch, I had never before registered any meaning to this visual. Looking with fresh eyes, the image tells me that distance and connection are not separate entities, that the relationship between the two may form complex shapes, structures, and narratives that play out across space and time.

We take a walk in the New Territories through a military training zone.[2] I find myself at the border between Hong Kong and China. Gunshots pop in the distance. A lot of HK artists I spoke to were anxious about the dissolution of the border, that invisible line. Here but also at a distance, I saw Shenzhen, the Special Economic Zone, manufacturing centre of the world. I thought of worker suicides in the Foxconn complexes, Shenzhen's floating migrant population, a landscape radically transformed by rapid foreign investment and development. As I write on a laptop I wonder whose hands have touched this machine in its manufacture. Late-capitalism teaches us to abstract the labour imbued in the objects that support our daily life. It is a culture of disassociation. Yet as I disassociate my body still touches this machine, which leads me to obscure forms of engagement. Standing on an invisible border or touching this machine I am embodying a certain kind of distance; yet I feel in my body that no matter the distance, I am connected to other beings.

How to trace the line from Turtle Island to Hong Kong. How to measure the reach of British imperialism from the Opium War to the profound rupture that signals the founding of Canada. As I write this an estimated several hundred thousand to one million Uighur have been branded as terrorists by the Chinese government and forced into re-education camps. No one that I spoke to in Hong Kong seemed interested in British colonial history, they are thinking about the CPC.

*So also others, after they feign that a line is composed of points, know how to invent many arguments, by which they show that a line cannot be divided to infinity. And indeed it is no less absurd to assert that corporeal substance is composed of bodies, or parts, than that a body is composed of surfaces, the surfaces of lines, and the lines, finally of points. All those who know that clear reason is infallible must confess this—particularly those who deny that there is a vacuum.* ***For if corporeal substance could be so divided that its parts were really distinct, why, then, could one part not be annihilated, the rest remaining connected with one another as before?*** *And why must they all be so fitted together that there is no vacuum? Truly, of things which are really distinct from one another, one can be, and remain in its condition, without the other. Since, therefore, there is no vacuum in Nature (a subject I discuss elsewhere), but all its parts must so concur that there is no vacuum, it follows also that they cannot be really distinguished, that is, that corporeal substance, insofar as it is a substance, cannot be divided.*[3]

If, as Spinoza states, there is no division in corporeal substance, I am interested in the seemingly impossible process of what could be called annihilation, and what happens in this process to "the rest" that is not connected as before. One version of annihilation could be called colonization, another version of annihilation could be called decolonization. Cantor and Spinoza's broken and continuous lines are another apparently oppositional binary—while Cantor divides a line into infinity, Spinoza explicitly states the absurdity of this division. This break or division implies a difference

between specks of dust ultimately composed of the same substance. Difference necessitates a relationship. The pattern formed by the dust, the way the specks relate and lie together, defines the complexity of the corporeal substance.

Spinoza's *Ethics* is presented as a series of axioms, definitions, propositions, and corollaries in the style of Euclid's *Elements*. In creating this axiomatic system, Spinoza meant for his ideas to appear as inarguable as those that comprised the foundations of mathematics at the time. However, in our present time, Euclid's axioms do not hold. Geometry is practiced in a way that often ignores Euclid's fifth axiom, the parallel postulate. In fact, it is widely understood that no axiomatic system can be universal, consistent, and provable without reliance on assumptions that exist outside of that system. Not to say that there are no truths anymore, but that, as in the corporeal world, abstract reality proves to be much larger and more complex than what can be described by human intelligence. Rather than falling back on a singular axiomatic system, to my understanding, contemporary mathematics consolidates multiple systems into groups or categories that shift according to various fields of interest. The relationships between these systems and structures are occasionally interconnected, with strategies from one realm sometimes used to consider problems in another. It is the details of these relationships that are of greatest interest because they form complex rather than singular portraits of abstract reality, described in topological rather than linguistic terms. [4]

An eagle circled us as we arrived at our destination. She flies ahead or alongside us as we walk down Fielding Road. Our path is paved with an abundance of weeds as well as fissures that break through the pavement then into the earth, each of which must be navigated with careful steps or calculated leaps. Miner's lettuce, cleavers, vanilla leaf, ferns of all persuasion, forest around and above reach into this earth and hold and nourish the soil with their thin and thick bodies. That thick Pacific Northwest green and the smell of the garbage dump that borders this path are both profound and pervasive. The decay that we return to and come from. The birds scavenge from the dump and drop garbage everywhere, plastic bags make Christmas tinsel in the trees, bones scatter across the road, old dolls, hilarious scraps and things, fetid treasures. The sound of the ravens builds into a cacophony. That tired and illusory binary of Man versus Nature is here reclaimed and flung together in an unabashed and joyful triumph of uncivilization. Something runs through us, this path, a thread, an impulse that is constant but ever-changing.

Elisa once shared with me a personal correspondence between her and Pete describing "the green line" that is this feral place. As someone who is not at home in a multitude of ways, it's complicated to write about a place that in my mind is intimately tied to a person that I've never met, born out of a special friendship I've known only at a distance. When two people meet there is also the potential for complexity. Sharing Indo-European roots, the words "friend"and "freedom" trace their etymologies to

the same word, which means “to love.” David Graeber situates this union between friendship and freedom as developing in tandem with the notion of enslavement. Freedom isn’t the same as having no obligations. Instead a friend is able to choose their commitments and responsibilities to you, whereas those who are enslaved are not free to choose their relations.[5] Similarly, a feminist reading of Spinoza describes autonomy not in terms of self-determination but rather as the capacity to be affected by and care for an increasingly wider and more complex range of external forces.[6]

Friendship in this sense asks for a polyvalent self-awareness of one’s capacity for care. A place could never belong to a person, however one could choose in friendship to belong to a place, person, or thing. Pete navigated a kind of belonging when he wrote about Fielding Road and brought his friends here for walks.[7] In friendship, a fluctuating contract binds seemingly separate entities together through an articulation and negotiation of boundaries, desire, and responsibility. And how to measure responsibility that, as we recall, has an etymological root in love? In mathematics, there is a classic problem of measurement where the length of a coastline gets longer and longer as you focus on smaller and smaller details. Separability is impossible when the border is one continuous line.

*Thank you to Byron Peters, Elisa Ferrari, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Phanuel Antwi—for your friendship.*

## Notes

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