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Original Paper

**Title**

Materia medica, Elyse Portal



I was born on the prairies. My mother has Irish, Prussian, and Dutch heritage. My father's heritage is Ukrainian. All of my great grandparents fled poverty and/or persecution in Europe and became settlers in Saskatchewan. I spent a lot of time with my Ukrainian grandparents the year my parents divorced. I was five. By that time my baba (grandma) and gido (grandpa) had sold their large farming operation to live on an acreage. Despite their 'retirement', they were always working. My baba processed most of their annual food supply, and my gido ensured the crops and livestock were tended. On special occasions we gathered with my aunts and made pysanka: patterns on eggs. Here, complex line work would intertwine among geometric and representational forms. Deer, wheat, pine trees and stars referenced Christianity and unacknowledged indigenous cosmological kinships. I would later learn that pysanka was not initially Christian, but an old European Indigenous (pagan) practice that honoured the processes of life, marked by the ancient meander or unending line around the egg. To my European Indigenous ancestors, to create pysanka was to ensure the continuation of life. Looking back, I remember soaking the egg in coloured dyes, after mark making with wax. I loved the smell of beeswax as it melted in the cup at one end of the kistka (wax pen), over the candle flame.

When I was nine years old, my mother, sister, and I left the prairies when my mom got a teaching position on Seabird Island, which is part of the Stó:lō Nation. We lived in Chilliwack. I went to a school in a historic jail building with bars on its windows and a concrete playground. If I had any opportunity to skip school, my mom took me to Seabird. Hovering in the mists of the Fraser, the mountains watched over the inlet and its great soccer fields. I felt at home. I don't ever remember being told what I "should" be doing, I simply moved among the buildings and often found myself in a classroom with a piano and art supplies.

After six months, my mom's students became increasingly receptive as her pedagogical approach shifted from fixed indoor scheduling to greater nature-based learning activities. One day an elder from the community came to her classroom, which at the time was located in a temporary trailer. The elder and his students (him) told her that there was (him) going to be a ceremony to determine if the elders had chosen an appropriate site for the building of a new school. If the site was (him) approved, the Creator was going to send a messenger in the form of an eagle that would



Druids. Barry Cunliffe tells us, Caesar declared Druids were “a vicious sect that reveled in

Tom Goldtooth, executive director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, travelled to Europe to understand the source of settler/colonizer Western culture. By offering prayers to various forms, such as the Rhine River, he experienced the sentience of the land. The forgotten spirits conveyed that like Native American peoples, indigenous Europeans' were also colonized by empires and institutionalized religions. Indigenous Europeans, entranced in the Imperial dominant worldview, forgot who they were.

Goldtooth defines indigeneity as the capacity to build respectful relationships with the earth in ongoing, place-based exchanges. He believes that anyone can develop this way of being. For Goldtooth, "it's not a race issue; it's a human issue of understanding our relationship" to the universe as sacred.<sup>13</sup> What would our world look like if the boundaries between the individual, autonomous self, and the Other dissolved? With reverence toward the myriad forms of life, how would our waters taste, smell, feel? What abundance and diversity could manifest?

Like Goldtooth and Akomolafe, Joseph Beuys (1921-86) was deeply concerned about the damaging ecological and psychological consequences of the modern mechanistic worldview, and found resilience within spirituality. Beuys grew up in the Lower Rhine village of Kleve, and has been described as the "pioneer investigator of the role of art in forging radical ecological paradigms for the relationship between human beings and the natural environment."<sup>14</sup> For Beuys, the natural world and human psyche were interrelated in meaningful and mysterious ways, which he aimed to convey through his art. While he addressed larger forces, such as the economic growth paradigm, consumerism, patriarchy, and ecological destruction, much of his work focused on the inner human experience.

Actions such as *The Chief – Fluxus Song* (1964) recognized the agency of Others. Beuys, over an eight-hour duration, emulated the calls of a stag, while being rolled up in layers of felt. Akin to meditation, his intent was to "switch off the semantics of his own species in order to assist the kind of transformation of inner-self necessary for any outward social and environmental change."<sup>15</sup> Beuys, influenced by the work of Rudolf Steiner, was interested in the pre-Socratic worldview, where the artistic encompassed the scientific. Here, the production of



Embodied, experiential practices that expose alternate perceptions are what Jennifer Fisher calls *Technologies of Intuition*. Fisher, a Media and Culture faculty member at York University, discusses intuition as a relevant object of research and artistic methodology. Intuition is associated with real activities that encourage the production and acquisition of knowledge and human awareness. For Fisher, an intuitive practice is legitimate as an artistic practice if it employs communicative or perceptual rigor, which may include: “accessing interior perception, attuning oneself to one’s surroundings or to other individuals, communicating ancestral knowledge, collaborating with trance mediums, informing aesthetic choice, effecting a means of self-transformation, *haunting* art history or creating alternative networks.”<sup>18</sup>

Since 2005, I have practiced a form of intuitive technology or waking-dream journeying, taught by Eliot Cowan,<sup>19</sup> which has become central to my art praxis. I was introduced to dream journeying, while studying Plant Spirit Medicine, a healing modality that combines *household shamanism* with Classical Chinese Medicine. ‘HouC8alin-( C)-2((as b(an)1( awi(s)-1( )3(o9w)3.pan <<( )]TJ)-1



the plant. The plant may deliver image-narratives, colours, feelings, or sounds that mimic the wellness or ills of a future client. Plant communications are delivered in a manner that will resonate with the perceptive capacity of the healer, often through the senses.

With Plant Spirit Medicine, I have come to understand that the senses are not separate, measurable activities that report to the brain, but rather are interwoven in perception. The senses are collaborators. As my senses focus on things, they draw me into another centre. The more time I spend there, the more involved the relation becomes. Therefore, in my art praxis, I utilize dream journeying as a way to open a sensual dialogue with the elements imbued in the materials around me. Dream journeying is a kind of dialogue that participates with the agency of Others. The dialogue is an exchange, a methodology for co-creation. The more I practice, the more the barriers of separation between myself and Others dissolves. As I dialogue, I feel more at home in myself and in the world. Anxiety mysteriously vanishes, as I open to the ‘flow of events’.

I have been producing a series of textiles



An early example of this can be seen in *listening arms* (2010), a sculptural work in which the site of the source where the clay originated, next to the Pacific Ocean, directly informed the development of the work. Eighty-four arms, made from both local and waste clay, had the capacity to simultaneously reach and listen. This project was exhibited as part of an outdoor group exhibition, *Mary and Moses Sculpture Garden*, initiated by Christine Clark, a curator in Victoria, BC.

The sculpture garden was dedicated to the late Mary and Moses Martin, who had tended their gardens in Deep Cove for forty years. On a typically cool and damp west coast day, I walked around the four-acre property. I knew the arms wanted to be there. After spending some time next to the ocean, I happened upon a stand of trees in various states of decay, -1(rsfc(rsJ /3.1( de)

emulsifiers.”<sup>24</sup> Not only energy-intensive to produce, water-







floods, bursting through cellar walls of homeowners in the Annex, and destroying the retaining walls of the College and Bay Street Metro Police headquarters (1985).<sup>31</sup>

Along with Taddle, thousands of small streams and tributaries have been buried, which amplifies the toxicity of Lake Ontario. Environmentalists have since reevaluated the capacity for forgotten creeks to cleanse city water. Proposals within the last decade have been put forward to restore waterways and ravines, noting that with natural enzymes, they “possess an amazing ability to purify water and break down chemicals and contaminants typically found in storm water.”<sup>32</sup>

The National Film Board documentary *Crapshoot: The Gamble with Our Wastes* (2003) describes the hazardous waste intrinsic to sewersheds, and the associated systemic public safety concerns.<sup>33</sup> At Toronto’s Ashbridges Bay Wastewater Treatment Plant, samples taken from the solid waste sludge show high levels of flame retardant. Once collected within the plant, the sludge is dispersed onto farmlands in Ontario. Meanwhile, in Europe where samples show lower levels, researchers have linked flame retardant in sewage sludge with a rise in non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a type of cancer of the lymphatic system. In Sweden, a ban on dumping sewage sludge onto agricultural lands was driven by public outrage at the findings. The film reminds us that industrial technology has not been employed (and may never be able) to remove pathogens or chemicals from wastes that are being released back into life cycles. One contributor suggests that mixing human waste with industrial waste marks the “peak of non-life connected behavior.”<sup>34</sup>

### **vylyvaty visk: the pouring forth of fear**

In the winter of 2013, I was gifted the book, *Baba’s Kitchen Medicines*, where I learned about the wax ceremony, a form of Ukrainian spiritual healing. I asked my relatives if they had ever encountered this modality, and discovered that one of my cousins had been remedied of nightmares through ‘wax pouring.’ As I looked into this practice further, I encountered the M.A. thesis of Rena Hanchuk, *The Word and Wax*.









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13 Tom Goldtooth, "Everyone's Indigenous," by Sharon Brown, *Sacred Fire: The Heart of the Living World*, no. 14, (Marina Del Rey: Sacred Fire Foundation), p 34.

14 David Adams, "Joseph Beuys, Pioneer of a Radical Ecology," *Art Journal*, 51, no. 2 (1992): p 26.

15 Ibid., p 30.

16 Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 2-3.

17 Avshalom C. Elitzur, Silverman, Mark P. and Tuszynski, Jack,

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*microhabitat* (No Vacancy, Supernova, 2015; Black Cat ARTSPACE, 2015); *Journey into Fantasy* (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2015); *Materia medica* (University of Toronto Art Centre, 2014); *claybank* (Whippersnapper, 2014; University of Victoria, 2012); *Juglans manos* (Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario, 2013); *urbeing* (Xchanges Gallery, 2012); *Mark Laver: Shining Examples* (Legacy Art Gallery, 2012); *aline* (Upstairs Gallery, 2012); \* U H H Q ~~Open~~ Space Arts Society, 2011); *Species-at-Risk* (Ministry of Casual Living, 2011); *listening arms* (Mary & Moses Sculpture Garden, 2011); *advanced life support unit* (Upstairs Gallery, 2011); *Taché* (Audain Gallery, 2010); *Real Eyes* (Online, 2007-09); *Elements* (Northern Arts and Cultural Centre, 2008); *Lost & Found* (Javaroma, 2006); *Flower of Life* (Somba K'e Public Art Project, 2004); *Reclaimed* (Old Town Glassworks, 2004).

Portal's art practice has been awarded: *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Grant* (2013), *Master of Visual Studies Graduating Scholarship* (2014), *University of Toronto Fellowship* (2013), *Jamie Cassel's Research Award* (2012), *Fine Art Festival Bursary* (2011), *Pat Martin Bates Scholarship* (2011), *Royal Bank Scholarship for Innovation* (2009), *The Tenline Sales Material Award* (2009), and *NWT Arts Council Emerging Artist Grant* (2007).

On environmental issues, she has been given the University of Victoria's *Dr Lorene Kennedy Environmental Studies Bursary* (2011) and *Eco-system Bursary* (2011). Along with teaching studio art, she studied *Worldviews and Ecologies* and worked as a teaching assistant at the University of Toronto's School of the Environment.