

## Critical Perspectives on Plants, Race, and Colonialism: An introduction

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When I learn from plants, I imagine possibilities for rethinking and doing science and law otherwise. I begin to get a feeling for plants and how they offer alternative ways of sensing, relating to, and being responsible in co-becomings with human and more-than-human beings. This learning has been a process. When I began working with and alongside #Xhomi San peoples over a decade ago, I focused my learning on San struggles in South Africa over the patenting of *Hoodia gordonii* plants and their knowledge of them. I did not consider what Hoodia succulent plants could teach me.

I was initially curious how San peoples, through their own South African San Council, strategically deployed benefit sharing to interrupt regimes of patent ownership and pharmaceutical science in ways that offered both possibilities and limits for their efforts to establish belonging in a changing South Africa. Through the urging of members of the South African San Council, my learnings were directed at decolonizing regimes of US patent law by showing how patent ownership is inherently racialized, gendered, and Western, and by rethinking practices of science and law in support of Indigenous Peoples' efforts at self-determination (Foster 2016, 2017). Patent law rules in most countries, for example, grant exclusive patent ownership rights only for inventions that are markedly different from nature. In the case of Hoodia, South African scientists

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obtained a patent for extracting steroidal glycoside molecules from the plant that could suppress appetite as proven by their laboratory testing, which patent law considers different from merely discovering the plant or its molecules as found growing in the Kalahari Desert. Patent ownership is thus based upon understandings of nature as distinct from human-made culture, which is a binary style of thought that has been historically used to subordinate marginalized groups such as Indigenous Peoples, women, and people of color by characterizing them, in similar and different ways, as closer to nature and less than human.

As South African San peoples interrupted forces of patent ownership and their binary logics in powerful and limited ways through benefit sharing, so too did Hoodia plants through their own enactments or doings. Hoodia plants (e.g., chemicals, seeds, metabolites, spatial arrangements) refused, changed, or even aligned with practices of patent law and pharmaceutical science by evolving in patchy spatial distributions, growing too slowly when cultivated, and interacting with the human body in unpredictable ways that interrupted desires to make a Hoodia-based anti-obesity product. Their doings interrupted and exceeded their confinement as patented objects, thus acting back against the forces of law and science that sought to contain them.

Hoodia plants taught me that strategies of refusal and interrupting power can be found in practices of failure, moving slowly, tasting bitter, and causing nausea. They and San peoples, in different ways, demonstrated alternative ways of sensing and responding to the world in relation to beings such as rain, soil, insects, porcupines, the sun, and collectivities of peoples. Thus, they offer possibilities for rethinking what producing knowledge means and who gets to produce it, and for doing research with and in support of San peoples, lands, and Hoodia plants.

The authors in this Critical Perspectives section produce similar but also different insights through asking how plants and research with plants can inform feminist and Indigenous technoscience and, specifically, understandings of race, colonialism, and colonial settler legacies. They develop ways of learning with and from plants as witnesses to human suffering, producers of memory, preservers of flesh, guides for learning, healers of caring, wise knowers, and builders of more-than-human worlds. By addressing human–plant co-becomings with attention to colonial pasts and their legacies, they offer further directions for feminist and Indigenous technoscience that bring together a rich set of conversations.

Feminist and Indigenous scholars of science have produced different and valuable insights into how colonialism and colonial settler societies have involved the taking of peoples, plants, lands, and resources that informed the making of hierarchies of gender, indigeneity, race, sexuality, and nation (Harding, 1998, 2008; Philip, 2004; Shiva, 1997; Subramaniam, Foster, Harding, Roy, & TallBear, 2017; TallBear 2017; Tilley, 2011; Verran, 2001). They have shown how eighteenth-century assumptions of sex, gender, sexuality, and race informed botanical understandings of plants and nature more broadly (Schiebinger, 2004a), and how colonial empire depended upon the appropriation and transfer of certain Indigenous Peoples' botanical knowledges and relevant plant specimens to Europe (Brockway, 1979; Schiebinger, 2004b; Tilley, 2011; Verran, 2001). Still others have demonstrated how colonial pasts continue to inform contemporary debates over, for example, invasive plant species (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Subramaniam, 2014) and the appropriation of Indigenous Peoples' medicinal plant knowledge (Harry & Kanehe, 2007; Hayden, 2003; LaDuke, 2005; Shiva & Moser, 1995; Laveaga, 2009; Tauli-Corpuz, 2004). The authors in this Critical Perspectives section demonstrate how these rich insights inform emerging work in feminist and Indigenous technoscience that engages with human and more-than-human worlds (Haraway, 2016; Kimmerer, 2013; Myers, 2017a, 2017b; TallBear, 2017; Tsing, 2015).

Histories of colonial science involved practices, Sarah Ives here reminds us, of categorizing plants as subordinate to human animals, while simultaneously classifying certain peoples as "nonwhite" and closer to nature through racial taxonomies that constructed and reinforced whites as superior. Colonial Botanists with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, for instance, extracted plants from colonized lands and developed plant classification schemes, which reinforced Eurocentricism and norms of white, male expertise. These colonial histories continue to endure in new yet familiar ways through the Royal Botanic Garden's more recent Millennium Seed Bank Project, which Xan Sarah Chacko here argues, produces a depoliticized valence of "biodiversity conservation" to re-assert its epistemic authority while simultaneously flattening out its colonial pasts and legacies.

These histories, as William Ellis explains, also inform the colonial and apartheid pasts and legacies of South Africa, but it is through an exploration of the milkwood tree that connections between peoples and plants more fully emerge. An emphasis on connection and relation arises as a central theme across each of these entries, which simultaneously challenges histories of modern dualistic thinking and offers possibilities for thinking otherwise. In tracing the generative,

multifaceted and intertwined relations of *Kanna* plants and San and Khoi peoples, Diana Gibson invites alternative conceptions of temporality and history. Alternative ways of knowing are what Krisha J. Hernández articulates are needed for building settler futurities and “doing academic work that listens to and thinks with more-than-human beings as having bodies and lives worthy of living.” This means “something other than seeing plants or seeing like plants in addition to people” but rather, as Elaine Gan explains through her research on rice, considering “different modalities of plants as more-than-human entanglement, dynamic assemblages of biogeochemical and technoscientific ways of being.” Through their insights here, they offer exciting possibilities for more-than-human futures and for feminist and Indigenous technoscience.

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