



# Early Modern Studies Journal

English Department | University of Texas | Arlington

*Mary Somerset and Colonial Botany: Reading Between the Ecofeminist Lines*

Jennifer Munroe | University of North Carolina, Charlotte

In 1687, Sir Hans Sloane, then a young doctor and aspiring naturalist, left England for Jamaica to serve as personal physician to the Duke of Albermarle and to document and export plants from the area. Meanwhile, back in England, Sloane's patron, Mary Somerset (first Duchess of Beaufort), cultivated seeds and cuttings on the grounds and in the hothouses at her private estate in Gloucestershire. While Sloane sought to make a name for himself as doctor and colonial botanist abroad, Somerset was becoming increasingly known for her extensive collections of plants, mainly exotics, at her Badminton estate and for what would later be bound as substantial catalogues that documented them. These two figures, one well known to us today and the other rendered virtually invisible over the centuries, underscore how colonial botany was most certainly the domain of men, both in the seventeenth century and by scholars today, and how women have been thrust to its margins, even if they were doing similar work. I juxtapose these two figures of early modern horticulture to highlight how both were influential in the production and circulation of knowledge about colonial plants. Or, rather, I contend in this essay that they should both be understood as important figures, even if they engaged in two arguably different sorts of colonial botany.

In *Plants and Empire*, Londa Schiebinger contends that “the movement, mixing, triumph, and extinction of different knowledges” resulted from the exchange of plants between Europe and the Caribbean, due primarily to the efforts of “colonial botanists” who traveled great distances and “risked rough seas, torrid lands, fevers, serpents, and ‘savages’.”<sup>1</sup> The botanical adventurers Schiebinger features appear as key players in histories of colonial botany, while the “armchair botanists” who grew the plants travelers exported from dangerous locales occupy secondary roles and dwell in the background. Mary Somerset was one of the few female “armchair botanists” Schiebinger cites, and this essay aims to reposition Somerset as an active agent of colonial botany, not just a bystander or less significant practitioner. Rather than the work of an isolated few, colonial botany was inherently the result of networks of knowledge and practice.<sup>2</sup> While Schiebinger acknowledges that the Duchess “was no amateur gardener,” Somerset still figures in the history of colonial botany as a character in the shadows. Granted, Somerset was no rough adventurer, but neither was she a passive recipient of the plants adventuring men sent her. That few women embarked on such dangerous journeys is not surprising; it is simply fact.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps the real problem is that we need to rethink what constitutes “colonial botany” in the first place, such that the work women (and men) did at home with exotics counts as much as an active role in the importation of plants from abroad. I propose that we might see her as more integral to what Bruno Latour calls “centres of calculation,” where “the vast empire of empire bore fruit as science.”<sup>4</sup>

This essay thus punctuates the credit Schiebinger gives to Somerset’s work but argues that she was more integral and influential than even Schiebinger suggests; in so doing I contest the binary developed in the study of colonial botany, which separates the work of those who traveled to do colonial botany and those who practiced similar work at home.<sup>5</sup> Accomplished and recognized male scientists, including Hans Sloane (as his “Preface” attests), acknowledged much of the work some women like Somerset were doing at this time. But even as I reposition Somerset firmly within colonial botanical circles, I conclude this essay by asking what are the ecofeminist implications in doing so. On the one hand, then, I am engaging in an act of feminist recuperation—

revaluing the work of a woman who had been cast to the margins of science proper; on the other, I am arguing that her work potentially undermines the value of the countless others, both in England and in the countries England colonized, whose intimate relation to the land by way of their subsistence growing is so often figured as inferior to a distanced, objective approach to plant production and cultivation typical of “science.”<sup>6</sup> As such, this essay appears to have two competing purposes, a seeming contradiction that I will take up later in the essay.

## I.

The purpose of the first part of this essay, then, is to rethink what constitutes “colonial botany” such that we might include work by women such as Somerset in its history. In their Introduction to *Colonial Botany*, Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan call colonial botany “the study, naming, cultivation, and marketing of plants in colonial contexts,” that which was “born of and supported European voyages, conquests, global trade, and scientific exploration.”<sup>7</sup> This essay does not dispute that such work should be included in such a definition. Rather, in rethinking the importance of Mary Somerset’s work with imported colonial exotics, I aim to expand it to include the intellectual and practical labor that characterized women’s readily horticultural and botanical endeavor at home. Women like Somerset, and perhaps especially Somerset, studied, named, cultivated, and catalogued plants, often at the request of the same men (Sir Hans Sloane, John Ray, and Jacob Bobarts, for example) whom we widely recognize as key players in the colonial botanical scene.<sup>8</sup> Yet because she was a woman who did so at home rather than on foreign soil, the history of colonial botany includes her as at best only a marginal figure.

While the men who traveled and catalogued plants on site at exotic locales receive almost exclusive credit for the knowledge generated by colonial botanical endeavor, much of the later codified knowledge about plants, we know, came readily from work that happened back in England.<sup>9</sup> The bulk of what Somerset knew she ascertained by way of a) searching existing books about plants, and b) growing the plants herself at Badminton; while this makes her not quite a “colonial botanist” in the

proper sense recognized by historians, other highly regarded scientists of the day acquired much of their knowledge in that way. John Ray, for example, whose contributions to horticultural and botanical science are well known and whom Sloane cites elsewhere as the most notable source on plants, tells Sloane in 1696 that his own "Supplement" was "only a Collection of such names & Titles gathered out of Books."<sup>10</sup> In his tome on Jamaican natural history, Sloane acknowledges that much of his own credibility about Jamaican plants comes from a combination of his personal experience, consultation with authorities, and considered study of others', including Ray's, works.

I therefore look'd into most Books of this Nature, and the greatest part of what I found, is publish'd in the Catalogue of Jamaica Plants I printed about ten Years since, wherein I endeavour'd to do right to the first Authors and the Publick.

In the absence of reliable and comprehensive information in others' books, Sloane turns to his experiential knowledge of Jamaican plants, those he personally "met with" while traveling. Not only does Sloane claim that his experience with Jamaican plants grants him the authority to trump information one might find in books, but his first-hand knowledge constitutes an entire "History" of them:

It is a Catalogue of the Plants I met with at Jamaica, &c, Which I think, for Synonymous Names of the Plants therein mentioned, is somewhat more Copious and exact than any other before it: And which may be of some Use to inquisitive Persons, especially when they shall have this History of the things therein contain'd.<sup>11</sup>

If the evidence of a truly knowledgeable colonial botanist was a combination of the ability to cultivate plants and the ability to cross-reference one's plant cultivation against existing knowledge about plants in treatises from the day, then Mary Somerset was without question an accomplished colonial botanist. In fact, correspondence among the elite scientists of the day leaves little doubt that her work was recognized in the seventeenth century by those who mattered.<sup>12</sup>

Badminton was known for its success with exotics, as suggested in a letter from Jacob Bobarts to Somerset's gardener, Mr. Adams, in 1695/6.<sup>13</sup> But more than that, Somerset was personally recognized for her knowledge about the colonial plants at her estate, a knowledge resulting from her growing exotic imports from the East and West Indies, Barbados, and Jamaica (among other places). Sir Hans Sloane himself praises Somerset as well for her "command" of "the raising of Plants" where said plants "come to greater Perfection" under her care than they do elsewhere in Europe:

The Plants themselves have been likewise brought over, planted, and throve very well...especially at Badminton in Gloster-shire, where they are not only rais'd some few handfuls high, but come to Perfection, flower and produce their ripe Fruits, even to my Admiration; and that, by the Direction of her Grace the Duchess of Beaufort, who at her leisure Hours, from her more serious Affairs, has taken pleasure to command the raising of Plants in her Garden, where, by means of Stoves and Infirmaries, many of them have come to greater Perfection, than in any Part of Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Somerset's cataloguing and plant identification represented a substantial body of knowledge about her subject, as typified by the following entry (and many others) from her manuscript writings:<sup>15</sup>

"Bully bay or Mespila [?] forsam: I cannot find in any of my books the seed is most like a gourd seed it runs with twinning boughs like a french beane but much higher then any french beane being neer 8 foot high, the stalke is hard but not like a tree it hath three leaves upon a stalke of a deep green shaped most like a french beane but much smaller it is a yeare old; West Indies."<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, Somerset uses her experience cultivating plants to revise existing published books, as she does, for example, in the following:

Pluk[enet] 140:3 Spanish Ash, should have been w<sup>th</sup> the Trees"; "Pluk 185:1; Callameter, or Milkwood in Pluk is Galactoxylon, this should have been amongst the trees"; and "Pluk 185:1 Wild Callabash and Wild Cashe trees, "Should have been w<sup>th</sup> the trees."<sup>17</sup>

But Mary Somerset was not simply a passive recipient of plants from abroad. She was an agent in her own right in the importation of exotics, as suggested in a letter from Jacob Bobarts to Somerset's gardener, Mr. Adams, in 1695/6:

*"I have sent all those Plants w<sup>ch</sup> Her Grace was pleased to express Her desire of viz. / The Perfuming Chery of Arabia / White Barberry / Cornus Americana folio serrato / Ribes Grossularie folio / Sambucus racemosa fructu rubio / Laburnum majus / And an excellent plant of my jewell of a Primrose (and 12 sorts of all the best Roses). To w<sup>ch</sup> I have adventured to add one more, that is Mespilus Americana rutilo fructu, w<sup>ch</sup> I am sure is not com on [sic], neither doe I remember to have seen it w<sup>th</sup> you."*<sup>18</sup>

As Bobarts writes elsewhere, Somerset actively requests not just exotics in general, but often specific plants from locations where she knows them to grow abroad, as suggested in the following letter from Badminton requesting plants from Barbados:

*"That wch is desir'd by her Grace the Duchess of Beaufort from the Barbados & those other Islands is":*

*Stones of all the sorts of fruit. The fruit of all Shrubs that beare either berrys or Seeds, especially all sorts of Acacias (least they may not be known by that name) it is the plant call'd bryer amongst those seeds that I ^her Grace^ reciv'd of wch there are many sorts. The names of all plants both Indian &c from the Islands differ so much, the English giving them names according to their fancies that it is impossible to send names, only one plant wch her Grace values & desires seeds wch her Grace thinks is call'd by all the bean tree the seed is a scarlet bean, the flower a lovely scarlet, grows to a tree extream full of prick'ls.*

*All sorts of flowers and herb seeds no matter how common there, her Grace has a great desire to try whether it be possible to raise in England, the Caco tree, her Grace believes if she had one or more of ye great shells in wch ye nuts are confined could be raised hers.*<sup>19</sup>

And elsewhere, we find evidence of how Somerset herself records her success in cultivating exotics from such places as Jamaica and Barbados and her desire to acquire new specimens to add to her collection:

These are the names these plants go by in Jamaica it is to be hop'd the same plants by the same names may grow in Barbados, if so, what trees bear fruits, the stones & berrys are desired, those that do not if some small plants that have roots be taken up wth a considerable part of the root (and each root wrap't round wth some of the most clayy earth that country affords, & put into a chest or box, the empty part fill'd wth mosse or some such sort of thing, it is hope'd they may come into England from thence, wth as good suces as Orreng lemon &c does out of Italy, which many times, since the warr's, have laien 3 moneths in chests & yet growne very well.<sup>20</sup>

What is clear is that, even if she would not have been in a position to travel and collect them herself, Somerset actively sought to increase her plant collections with specimens from abroad.

Evidence of Somerset's desire to increase her collection of exotics appears also in a letter sent from Barbados in 1696, perhaps in response to the previous letter from Badminton,<sup>21</sup> in which Jacob Weir writes Somerset to update her on the status of botanical cargo that arrived by way of several different sailing vessels. These specimens include "over a hundred and seven sorts of seeds," palm trees, over one hundred bay trees (one "greate" and "fifty little"), twenty-two "grape" trees, lemon trees, cashew trees, gum trees, various ferns, and others. Weir suggests that this substantial cargo only partially represents the Somerset's requested stock of plants, as he writes,

I am sory I could send the seeds not sooner as I gathered them but I could not help it for the times is troublesom here but those seeds which are old gathered I will endeavour to gather them again but the seeds and plants to send over next fleet you write for severall things which are not in Barbados but in Jamaica. You desire to know the Authors of the plants but I can find none but names which the common people have. I have taken care to observe the nature of the

ground plants doe thrive best in, the time of encreasing them, when they blossom and bear their seeds, and likewise the vertues of them soe near as I can learn from the Doctors and people of Experience in this Country which I will show you when I come home.

Weir was particularly apologetic about not sending from Jamaica a specific variety of bay on Somerset's apparently lengthy list:

You writ for 2 sorts of bay trees, the bay tree with the round leafe and the bay tree with the long leafe but I can find noe such thing in this Island the difference is this a bay tree wch is old hath round leaves and the young ones have long leaves for I did observe that the young trees which were under the old ones had long leaves.<sup>22</sup>

Weir here acknowledges Somerset's active pursuit of exotic plant collecting; and it is clear that Somerset had particular plants in mind when she made her requests, which tells us that she had a familiarity with different species and their places of origin, even if, as is plain from Weir's comment about the bay trees at the end, she did not always get it right. Not only does Somerset seem to want the plants themselves, but Weir's letter also suggests that she had requested to know more about their medicinal uses, or "vertues," and growing properties.

But Somerset did more than eagerly import exotics; she sent English plants abroad, making her an agent of trade, not just receipt, as suggested in the same letter, for instance, when Weir writes to Somerset, "My master desires you would send him over some good kitchen garden seeds and some slips of artichokes."<sup>23</sup> Somerset sent her exotics, typically by request, to such Royal Society authorities as Sloane and William Sherard and to other members of the elite, such as Lord Clarendon.<sup>24</sup> To Clarendon, Somerset sent plants from the West and East Indies and the Carolinas, among others. Such exchange of plants was not by any means the exclusive domain of men, then, despite the suggestion of the preponderance of scholarship on colonial botany today; nor was it unusual that early modern Englishwomen participated in such efforts. We know from Somerset's manuscripts, in fact, that numerous women participated in plant exchanges, making the myth of the exclusively adventuring

colonial botanist, or even the male-driven networks, somewhat problematic. Such women included Mrs. London, for instance, who sent Somerset plants from Virginia, and Lady Cotton, who had delivered to Somerset many exotic trees, vines, and plants from her own garden, all of which were quite possibly imported from abroad, perhaps even at her own request, too.<sup>25</sup> In this way, women like Somerset were valued players in networks of exchange, where plants from abroad came to England, were successfully cultivated (and often manipulated to accommodate the non-native growing conditions), then exported again to other gardens in the country; and Somerset's case demonstrates how English women sent English plants abroad to exotic locations as well, so that English men and women in colonial locales might have a taste of home while far away.

If, as seems abundantly clear, Mary Somerset was integral to the colonial plant trade, then we might ask ourselves why she is such a marginal figure in the history of colonial botany today. As I have discussed elsewhere, this has at least in part to do with the way that the making of knowledge was inextricably tied not just (and arguably not primarily) to practice, but instead to writing—in particular, print—in the period.<sup>26</sup> In the *Introduction* to the first issue of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, the official publication of Society Fellows, Henry Oldenburg (then President) argues that print is not only useful, but also necessary to work being understood as scientific, as credible and useful knowledge:

Whereas there is nothing more necessary for promoting the improvement of Philosophical Matters, than the communicating to such, as apply their Studies and Endeavors that way, such things as are discovered or put in practice by others; it is therefore thought fit to employ the Press, as the most proper way to gratifie those, whose engagement in such Studies, and delight in the advancement of Learning and profitable Discoveries ... To the end, that such Productions being clearly and truly communicated, desires after solid and usefull knowledge may be further entertained, ingenious Endeavours and Undertakings cherished, and those, addicted to and conversant in such matters, may be invited and encouraged to search, try, and find out new things, impart their knowledge to one another, and contribute what they can to the Grand

design of improving Natural knowledge, and perfecting all Philosophical Arts, and Sciences, All for the Glory of God, the Honour and Advantage of these Kingdoms, and the Universal Good of Mankind.<sup>27</sup>

As Oldenberg characterizes it, print is the “most proper way” to convey and encourage further study that results in “usefull knowledge.” If this is so, and judging by the historical record it is, then women, who would have had less likelihood of putting their practice to print, would be inherently disqualified from creating “usefull knowledge,” botanical and otherwise.

Like Sloane, though, Somerset did write about her practice, even her practice just never made it to print. Instead, she left behind extensive manuscript collections that both catalogued and included specimens from her plant collections. These catalogues resembled Sloane’s own catalogues and printed writings, including Sloane’s Preface to his definitive book on Jamaican flora and fauna, *A Voyage to...Jamaica* describes how his book is compiled after having sent plant samples to other scientists to vouch for his work, then checked in books, then readied for print:

After I perused them [plant samples from Jamaica], they were, together with abundance of other rare Plants, by Dr. Sherard’s direction sent to Oxford, where Mr. Jacob Bobart has made very good use of them in the History of Plants he hath lately publish’d there; and lest there might from dry Samples, come any confusion in Natural History, Dr. Sherard afterward at my request, gave me the View of Such Plants as Mr. Bobart had describ’d, which has enabled me to put the Synonymous Names of the aforesaid History of Plants, published by Mr. Bobart, which the reader will likewise find taken notice of in their due places. These were not the only Favours I had of Dr. Sherard; for he furnished me of many Scarce Books he bought in his Travels beyond Sea.

Sloane explains how his printed book is the product of public (or at least relatively public) scrutiny by authorities on plants—here, Sir Arthur Rawdon and Dr. Sherrard, whose ideas and samples Sloane has “taken notice of” in his own publication. Sloane further details how he cross-references his own knowledge about plants against Sherrard’s, which has enabled Sloane to create a definitive history of plants based on

“Synonymous Names” from Sherrard and Bobart’s own “History of Plants.” This sort of collaboration challenges the notion that a colonial botanist in this period was exclusively someone whose work was valued based solely, even primarily, on adventurous travel abroad.

Such practical and learned cross-referencing is precisely what Mary Somerset does with her plant collections. And so, we might well wonder why Somerset remains a figure in the shadows rather than as one of the noted players. Somerset writes to her daughter, probably in 1692, to express frustration after she had sought validation for her plant catalogue from Mr. Sutherland, who managed the Edinburgh physic garden, and felt she was not taken seriously. She asks her daughter to take her catalogues to Sir Hans Sloane for his evaluation, so that if he “valeur’d it,” she will know she should pursue her work through more formal venues:

I desir’d you might show it to Dr Sloane & that if you found hee valeur’d it then I would send one to him, & that Mr Kin[nard] might have this to send as order’d that I now desire of you is, to tell Dr Sloane that I was doubtfull whether it was worth sending him but if I find by you hee continues his valew of it I will send him one by my page the work after Christmas (hee being then to go to the charter house).<sup>28</sup>

Some time later, a letter from Somerset to Sloane suggests that he encouraged her to continue not only her plant cultivation at Badminton but also her cataloguing, as she describes sending what she calls her “parcell” of plants (fixed in books) for him to review in a shipment that included books she borrowed from him to help in her cross-referencing:<sup>29</sup>

I hope you will receive safely books you have been so kind as to lend mee thus long, they are notwithstanding all my care of them very apt to mould, I have w<sup>th</sup> them sent you a small parcell of Badminton plants, (all except a very few) of my owne raising, I am sorry I did not make the booke bigger, haveing near as many more well dig’d, some flowers have added to embellish the booke, I doubt you will find many false names, but they are as my Lord’s Gardiner & I usually calls them, he has been in this the scribe, & neither hee nor I

understand latine so that I feare wee have committed many faults, at the end of the booke are some plants that have figures that came to me w<sup>th</sup>out names.<sup>30</sup> While we do not know for certain the year of the aforementioned letter, the “parcell” Somerset describes is, in all likelihood, the “Draughts of Plants” that she has delivered to Sloane in 1706, detailed in a letter to “Mr. Gosline” possibly from Somerset’s gardener, Mr. Adams:<sup>31</sup>

M<sup>r</sup> Gosline,

My Lady Dutchesse comands me to lett you know that her Grace desires you will goe to M<sup>r</sup> Beale and know the Booke-binders name that bound the last Philosophicall Transactions for her Grace and let him binde these, and if there be any wanting to add to them the last of her Graces is December 1704:

Her Grace desires you will deliver the inclos<sup>d</sup> Box with your owne hand to M<sup>r</sup> Robert Child Goldsmith at Temple Barr: and that you’l goe to Doctor Sloane and give her Graces service to him and let him know she requests him to assist her Grace in haveing her Draught of Plant’s bound and she desires you’l [sic] show him the inclos<sup>d</sup> paper which is the exact measures of the Parchments.

There is also some very good Prints that her Grace has which she desires to have bound in Bookes that they may be preserved, she desires you would also advise with the Doctor who may be trusted with them that they may not be chang’d<sup>32</sup>

It is, I would argue, not mere coincidence that Somerset’s request for the binding of her “Draughts of Plants” is dated 1706. If, as seems the case, the contents of her “inclosed” box to Sloane is a revised version of what she sent Sloane for review earlier, which included information about plants from the West Indies and likely other imported exotics from such locations as Barbados and Jamaica, then it is interesting that she endeavors to have her books bound only one year before Sloane’s own *A Voyage to...Jamaica* is published. Since Somerset was a close patron and regular correspondent of Sloane’s, it is entirely possible that Somerset was familiar with the

contents of his book long before he had it printed. Had she seen his manuscript? And if she did, was it her desire that her writings be bound and formalized in advance of the imminent publication of his? Did she, for example, want evidence of her own working knowledge made public in some way before his book appeared in print?

The example of Mary Somerset is instructive in that it forces us to rethink the definition of a colonial botanist, one that is at present heavily weighted toward elite men, and men who published their writing, from the period. To be a colonial botanist, it is clear, is not reducible to (even prioritized as) traveling abroad to collect, catalogue, and export exotics back to England or even from publishing one's educated ideas about it.<sup>33</sup> Seventeenth-century colonial botany resulted from a network of collaborative labor to be sure, but as I have shown, it was a network that most certainly included women not just on its periphery but at its center. Correspondence and prefatory material by the leading male naturalists of the day suggest as much; but the work of Mary Somerset necessitates that we as scholars include the women who negotiated these networks in our own scholarship today, not as they were already included then, but as we rethink the value of women's work in the period more broadly today. That is to say, the male elite had opportunities to venture abroad to conduct the work of conventional colonial science, while women were at best able to venture as their husbands' companions, with few notable exceptions.<sup>34</sup> But Mary Somerset, to take the example I have discussed here, accomplished the same sort of plant cataloguing and cultivation of exotics at home in England without ever setting foot on foreign soil or crossing the sea to do so.

## II.

But how might we read Mary Somerset's accomplishments in ecofeminist terms? If, as Schiebinger proposes, a study of colonial botany must focus on the "cultural politics of plants," what does it mean if a woman participates in colonial botanical efforts?<sup>35</sup>

How might thinking about such a “cultural politics” from the perspective of the relationship between women and plants in particular inform our reading of this enterprise? What if a woman’s colonial efforts are illustrative of what we might call feminist in so far as they demonstrate a sort of equality of knowledge and competence with men, but such work is inherently in tension with the premises of *ecofeminism* in particular—an awareness that humans are equal members of ecosystems, not masters (or mistresses) over the nonhuman natural world? How do we reconcile these two things, *if* we can at all?

A study of “the cultural politics of plants,” I would argue, should include a consideration of the gendered and classed implications of plant collection, distribution, and cultivation—the practices that become codified in the seventeenth century in England, for example, into formal modes of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge.<sup>36</sup> While Schiebinger’s work on the abortifacient peacock flower is an excellent example of how one might approach such a “cultural politics,” we need to rethink the use, importation, and cultivation of exotic plants more broadly in the context of ecofeminist goals such that we as scholars neither romanticize nor ignore the complex ways women interacted with the nonhuman natural world.<sup>37</sup> That is, it is not enough, and perhaps even at counter purposes with ecofeminist aims, if we simply look for women whose colonial botanical endeavors might have matched men’s in the period. We must instead allow for the possibility that, for instance, if a woman valued colonial science over domestic and local practice, for instance, she was inherently devaluing a domain that was associated with both women and native peoples. One key point of entry into such a reevaluation is to rethink these questions regarding the “indigenous,” which Schiebinger reminds us, means home-grown (in this case domestic, and English) as well as related to the home of the Other domesticated by the colonial subject.<sup>38</sup> To be a colonial botanist in the seventeenth century in England involved domesticating plants and practices related to their use in their home country. It meant subjecting plants (and, by extension, their native peoples and practices) to the ostensibly superior modes of knowledge and growing practices of the English.

It is not enough, then, to (re)position women within dominant paradigms, simply to move them from the margins to the center of dominant practices that reinforce such subjection. We must consider whether women themselves participated in knowledge-making practices that, as Val Plumwood writes, reproduced the conditions by which “The order which the colonised possesses is represented as disorder or unreason. The colonised and their ‘disorderly’ space is available for use, without limit, and the assimilating project of the coloniser[’s] own self-space, own culture or land, which is represented as the paradigm of reason, beauty, and order.”<sup>39</sup>

We might think about this question at least in part by way of a letter from Jacob Bobarts to Sir Hans Sloane. Upon Sloane’s return from his now-famous journey, Bobarts welcomes Sloane home in 1689 with a letter of praise for Sloane’s botanical achievements abroad:

I am w<sup>th</sup> many other to congratulate y<sup>r</sup> safe arrivall to England, and to be thankfull for soe eminent a Patron and Favourer of the study and practice of Botany, to w<sup>ch</sup> it hath pleased you to incline y<sup>r</sup> delight among the divers other curious parts of nature, and as I heare have enriched our Country and made more additions then ever S<sup>r</sup> W. Rawley or 100 more of the best have done and therfore the memory of y<sup>r</sup> soe great actions ought to be continued and beare proportion with y<sup>r</sup> industrious endeavours for the Hon<sup>e</sup> of y<sup>r</sup> Country especially among such as have any propensitie to the Reginum Vegetabile, to w<sup>ch</sup> great numbers of subjects (tho formerly savage) you have domesticated, and I doubt not but will continue y<sup>r</sup> endeavours to place them where they may be probably to learne English Moralls and it is great pittie but that the best care possible should be taken for the production of such curiosities as perhaps we may never againe have oppertunitie of haveing the least sense of.<sup>40</sup>

Here, Bobarts emphasizes the relationship between Sloane’s colonial botanical efforts and nationalism in much the same way other scholars today have made the connection between the two. Here, Bobarts applauds Sloane’s “industrious endeavours for the Hon<sup>e</sup> of y<sup>r</sup> Country especially among such as have any propensitie to the Reginum Vegetabile, to w<sup>ch</sup> great numbers of subjects (tho formerly savage) you have

domesticated, and I doubt not but will continue y<sup>r</sup> endeavours to place them where they may be probably to learne English Moralls.”<sup>41</sup> Who are the “formerly savage” subjects to which Bobarts refers? And what might it mean that Sloane allegedly not only “domesticated” them, but also continues to train them to “learne English Moralls,” suggesting that such domestication is an ongoing process of both people and plants? The way Bobarts references the “formerly savage,” now “domesticated,” related to the “Reginum Vegetabile” creates a slippage between person and plant that is more interesting still. On the one hand, the subjects he has seemingly domesticated, appear to be those who have a “propensitie” to the vegetable kingdom, those whose domestication would therefore result from becoming educated about the exotics that Sloane brings home with him. On the other, Bobarts seems to assert that Sloane has domesticated the “formerly savage” members of the “Reginum Vegetabile” itself, that the plants Sloane brings with him to England are not just subjected to acclimatization to the English gardens where they will be transplanted, but they will become English subjects. After all, Sloane’s botanical endeavor, according to Bobarts, “enriched our Country” at the same time it “domesticated” the vegetable subjects he imported. Plant domestication and nation-buidling, as scholars have shown, went hand in hand.<sup>42</sup>

Val Plumwood’s notion of how reason-based knowledge, that typified by the codification of colonial botanical practice, illustrates how indigenous and (from the perspective of the colonizer, at least) “irrational,” or unreasoned practice, stood at odds with the sort of formalized practice attributed to Sloane: “The order which the colonised possesses is represented as disorder or unreason. The colonised and their ‘disorderly’ space is available for use, without limit, and the assimilating project of the coloniser is to remake the colonised and their space in the image of the coloniser’s own self-space, own culture or land, which is represented as the paradigm of reason, beauty and order.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, the “English Moralls” taught to and domestication of Jamaican exotic plants enacts a process of assimilation that incorporates both plant and colonial Other into English “self-space.”

The “subjects” to which Sloane refers are seemingly the plants Sloane brings with him from Jamaica to England, but such a word is evocative of its association with

the human subjects of colonialism, those whom the English were actively engaged in “domesticating” at this time as well. In fact, it is evocative of how colonizing the land and colonizing its peoples were understood as twin activities throughout this period. Vandana Shiva characterizes these related forms of colonization, subjection of the Other and subjection of nature, as follows: “Throughout the world, the colonisation of diverse peoples was, at its root, a forced subjugation of ecological concepts of nature and of the Earth as the repository of all forms, latencies and powers of creation, the ground and cause of the world.”<sup>44</sup> The notion that Sloane’s endeavor abroad domesticated plants, and that plants, like the people of Jamaica, were subjects, makes colonial botanical work, both away and at home, a tricky proposition indeed, especially for ecofeminist scholars whose subject is a woman whose own subjects were domesticated others of the “*Reginum Vegetabile*.”

Early modern colonial science was inextricably mired in this sort of subjugation, as knowledge of the natural world meant studying flora and fauna at home and abroad for the purposes of, as Carolyn Merchant reminds us, bending the natural to the human will and design, with violence, if necessary.<sup>45</sup> The codification of knowledge-making practices, most notably in the developing scientific discourse of the seventeenth century in England, was particularly, as Vandana Shiva writes, integral to the process of colonization, which necessitated “The subjugation of other traditions of knowledge” and a “displacement of one set of culturally constituted facts of nature by another, not the substitution of ‘superstition’ by ‘fact’.”<sup>46</sup> In his own Preface to *A Voyage to...Jamaica*, Sloane details the sort of substitution Shiva describes, creating a history of Jamaican plants divided by pre- and post-English colonization:

Another Use of this History may be, to teach the Inhabitants of the Parts where these Plants grow, their Several Uses, which I have endeavour’d to do, by the best Informations I could get from Books, and the Inhabitants, either Europeans, Indians or Blacks. Jamaica had been, before it was taken by the English, in the possession of the Spaniards, almost from the time the West-Indies were discover’d: They had brought many Fruit-Trees from the Main-Continent, where they are Masters, and suffer no other Europeans to come;

which throve wonderfully, and now grow as it were Sponte: These they made use of for Food, Physic, &c. And were forc'd to leave with their Habitations, to the English, and the Skill of Using them remain'd with the Blacks and Indians.<sup>47</sup>

Both Plumwood and Shiva, however, make a special connection between the subjugation of colonized peoples, plants, and *women*. Shiva calls the “process of colonisation” a simultaneous “exclusion of women (of the west and non-west), on the exploitation and degradation of nature, and on the exploitation and erosion of other cultures.”<sup>48</sup> And Plumwood reminds us that the subjugation of indigenous practice—that of the colonized as well as the domestic, or home, space—happens in conjunction with the replacement of “women’s work” as representative of such practice:

“Women’s traditional tasks in house labour and childraising are treated as inessential, as the background services that make ‘real’ work and achievement possible, rather than as achievement and work themselves. Similarly, the colonised are denied as the unconsidered background to ‘civilisation,’ the Other whose prior ownership of the land and whose dispossession and murder is never spoken or admitted.”<sup>49</sup>

If this is so, then how are we to think about a woman who engages in colonial botanical trade and cultivation? Would not such engagement necessarily position her as colonial, subjecting agent of both the nonhuman natural world and women, thus negating whatever gains we might imagine she makes in feminist terms by demonstrating equal competence with men in a broader sense? After all, not long after Sloane’s return, Mary Somerset too receives high praise for her own cultivation of exotics—in particular, how her work with plants, even if only on English soil and not abroad as well, benefits the “Nation.” In fact, the author of such praise is the same person who spoke so highly of Sloane, Jacob Bobarts, who writes to Somerset in 1694, “I send now a packet of such seeds as to me seem hopefull, partly East Indians, partly West Indians, and perhaps some out of our Garden; perhaps where nothing is wanting some may be raised, and our Nation enriched therewith.”<sup>50</sup> Not only did Somerset’s cultivation of exotics, as I have argued, position her in colonial botanical circles in general, but her collections were understood to have made her, like Sloane, more

specifically an agent in the cultivation-for-nation-building enterprise. And it is clear that Mary Somerset actively pursued the very same practices of trade and scientific quantification that, as Plumwood and Shiva (among others) argue undermines the authority inherent to women as producers of household food and medicine, the foundation of subsistence agriculture. Her colonial botanical practice may have exemplified how a woman might engage with knowledge-making practices, proto-feminist as it challenged the dominant, male, discourse of science; yet it furthered an enterprise that was decidedly at odds with the sort of valuing of biodiversity and indigenous practices advocated by ecofeminists today.

And so, I find myself at the end of this essay conflicted. I have at once urged readers to recognize Mary Somerset for achieving in a domain that was for all purposes the exclusive purview of men; at the same time, if we are to reposition Somerset within the domain of colonial science, then must we not also acknowledge that her participation necessarily constituted subjection of plants and (at least implicitly the knowledge of) native people, of the indigenous in such a way that inherently also devalued women? We have no evidence that Somerset was critical of these subjugating practices; on the contrary, she seemed eager to be considered a legitimate if not also equal participant in them. And so I must acknowledge that Mary Somerset's practice seems for all practical purposes potentially to reify that which so many postcolonial, feminist, and ecofeminist scholars have sought to deconstruct. Can we have an ecofeminist history of colonial science that does not simply reify, though? If we can, then I argue, like Shiva, Plumwood, and others, that we must do more than simply find women whose work might qualify them as equal with men. Rather, we must dismantle the conventional notions of what constitutes colonial science in the first place, to revalue the domestic, indigenous practices that are at the heart of the work that (elite) men, and colonial science, appropriated for their own gains, both monetary and otherwise.

I may have argued that we redefine colonial botany to allow for the participation of women, whose practices took place in their yards and rarely afforded them the adventures abroad their male counterparts had, but I do not find in Somerset

an example of someone who valued the indigenous in the *twin* senses that Shiva describes. Rather, Somerset was as eager to domesticate the plants she acquired from exotic locales abroad, to fully incorporate them into their new English “home,” as Jacob Bobarts is for Sloane to do in the letter I discussed celebrating Sloane’s return from Jamaica. As such, I conclude this essay with a “divided duty” that provides me with a quandary like Desdemona’s in Shakespeare’s *Othello*:<sup>51</sup> not to recognize the achievements of Mary Somerset is to continue to marginalize her and to negate the significant role she played in colonial botanical knowledge-making practices; yet, to recognize her in this way creates a conflict of conscience for me, as I know that in so doing I inadvertently reaffirm what I aim to dismantle. Perhaps this essay ultimately offers no solution but rather only begins to address the problem with respect to seventeenth-century English colonial botany. What we as scholars need to do, then, is to seek evidence—more likely than not in manuscript sources and from non-elite men and women as such evidence exists—of indigenous practice in both senses of the term, the native and the domestic—such that we can reevaluate what counts as colonial botany, and all botany, that we value as “usefull knowledge” in the first place.

---

<sup>1</sup> Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard UP, 2004), 23.

<sup>2</sup> For a full-length study of the way that colonial botanical networks functioned, see Deborah Harkness, *The Jewel House: Elizabethan London and the Scientific Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. As a corrective to the notion that early modern “scientists” worked in isolation, Harkness demonstrates how such work was necessarily part of interconnected networks. This essay on Somerset aims to include Somerset, and women, as part of such networks in ways in which were previously unaccounted.

<sup>3</sup> Schiebinger discusses at length the work of the only woman to do so during the seventeenth century, Maria Sibylla Merian, a German naturalist who traveled to Surinam (only) with her daughter expressly for the purpose of exploration and documentation of plants, and there were a few others over the next century. See especially Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 30-35.

<sup>4</sup> Latour quoted in Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 57.

<sup>5</sup> This work might be compared with the sort of networks of knowledge and practice inherent to herbals in the period. See, for example, Rebecca Laroche, *Medical Authority and Englishwomen’s Herbal Texts, 1550-1650*. Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of how this has been the case historically and now, see in particular Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Brooklyn, NY and

Boston, MA: South End Press, 1988, rpt. 2010); and Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, ed. *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, PA: U of Penn Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance British Library MS (from here forward, BL) Sloane 4061, ff. 1-26r, where Somerset exchanges correspondence with Sloane.

<sup>9</sup> See in particular Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill, ed., *Visions of Empire: Voyages, botany, and representations of nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996); and Graham Huggan, "Green Postcolonialism," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 9.1 (2007): 1-11.

<sup>10</sup> Sloane, *A Voyage*, Preface; BL Sloane 4036, f. 289.

<sup>11</sup> Sloane, *A Voyage*, Preface.

<sup>12</sup> See Jennifer Munroe, "'My innocent diversion of gardening': Mary Somerset's Plants." *Renaissance Studies* 25 (2011): 111-23. Reprinted in *Locus Amoenus: Gardens and Horticulture in the Renaissance*. Ed. Alexander Samson. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012 (111-123). See also Douglas Chambers, "'Storys of Plants': The assembling of Mary Capel Somerset's botanical collection at Badminton" *Journal of the History of Collections*, 9 (1) 1997: 49-60.

<sup>13</sup> BL Sloane 3343, f.142.

<sup>14</sup> See Munroe, "'My innocent diversion of gardening'" for further explanation and examples of Somerset's specific experimental practices.

<sup>15</sup> Much of the cross-referencing Somerset does is from the popular and comprehensive "Hortus Malabaricus," a treatise on Sri Lankan and Indian plants (she notes as HM throughout her manuscripts).

<sup>16</sup> British Library Sloane 3343 f.174v. The question mark in this quote is mine, as I am not certain of the name of the plant.

<sup>17</sup> BL Sloane 3343 f. 265.

<sup>18</sup> BL Sloane 3343 f.142 (my emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> BL Sloane 4071, f. 110r, 111v (some of these papers are in Somerset's hand, others not).

<sup>20</sup> BL Sloane 4072, f. 193v.

<sup>21</sup> BL Sloane 3343 f.142.

<sup>22</sup> BL Sloane 3343, f. 270: copy of a letter in secretary hand, sent from Barbados July 26, 1696; probably sent by Colonel Russell, as we have another list of plants sent by Coll Russell from Barbados of the same date in the Duchess's hand f. 265r-266r).

<sup>23</sup> BL Sloane 3343, f. 270r, v.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, BL Sloane 4071, f. 236 and BL Sloane 4078, f. 385-386r. For evidence of her sending plants to Lord Clarendon, see BL Sloane 3343, f. 43r. In the letter in question, her recipient is identified only as Lord Clarendon, who was in all likelihood Henry Hyde. At the time she wrote him and sent him plants, he had experienced significant financial trouble and was in the process of resituating himself among the elite. As such, the plants Somerset sent quite possibly served as the foundation of and means for him to reestablish his gardens and, importantly, also as someone aware of the importance of having exotics on his estate.

<sup>25</sup> Sloane 3343: f. 58 and 83.

<sup>26</sup> See Munroe, "'My innocent diversion of gardening'."

<sup>27</sup> *Philosophical Transactions*, 1665-66: 1-2. <http://rstl.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/1/1-22/rstl.1665.0001.full.pdf+html>. Accessed January 18, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Badminton Estate MS FmT/B 1/2/1, Letter 16: to A. Coventry, De[cember] 25 [1692?].

- <sup>29</sup> While we do not know for certain that Sloane indeed “valewed” Somerset’s writings from the previous parcel, the fact that she sent a second parcel of her plants and catalogues suggests that either Sloane encouraged her earlier or she was simply undaunted and resolved to have her work taken seriously. Either way, Somerset clearly acted single-mindedly about having her work made more visible and more permanent.
- <sup>30</sup> BL Sloane 4061, f.19r,v: Somerset to Sloane (Badminton Dec 19).
- <sup>31</sup> Natural History Museum, London. Manuscript HS 235.
- <sup>32</sup> BL Sloane 3343, f.115r: “Badminton July 1706.”
- <sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Edward M. Test, “Making New World Publics: Botanical Studies in Sixteenth-Century Europe.” *Early Modern Culture*. <http://emc.eserver.org/1-8/test.html>. Test details the plant trade between Europe and the New World, demonstrating the interrelationship between European “scholars and humanists who made up a botanical public” and indigenous peoples, whose knowledge of plants was integral to botanical work that became attributed to European endeavor.
- <sup>34</sup> See Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 23-72.
- <sup>35</sup> Londa Schiebinger, “Feminist History of Colonial Science,” *Hypatia* 19.1 (2004): 235.
- <sup>36</sup> While the focus of this essay is the gendering of colonial botanical practice and history, a further examination of the role of race and class would constitute a necessary addition to the field in ready dialogue with an ecofeminist approach to the history of science in this period.
- <sup>37</sup> See Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire* and “Feminist History” in particular. For a good example of this kind of work, see Michelle Di Meo and Rebecca Laroche, “On Elizabeth Isham’s ‘Oil of Swallows’: Animal Slaughter and Early Modern Women’s Medical Recipes,” in *Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity*, ed. Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche, 87-104. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- <sup>38</sup> Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 15. See also Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive*.
- <sup>39</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 105.
- <sup>40</sup> BL Sloane 4036, f.55.
- <sup>41</sup> BL Sloane 4036, f.55
- <sup>42</sup> See, for example, Wendy Wall, “Renaissance National Husbandry: Gervase Markham and the Publication of England,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 (3) 1996: 767-85; and Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 2002).
- <sup>43</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 105.
- <sup>44</sup> Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 41.
- <sup>45</sup> See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976).
- <sup>46</sup> Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 28.
- <sup>47</sup> Sloane, *A Voyage*, Preface.
- <sup>48</sup> Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 2.
- <sup>49</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 104.
- <sup>50</sup> BL Sloane 3343, f. 37r.
- <sup>51</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*: 1.3.182-191, in *Four Tragedies*, ed. David Bevington, 214-394.