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## Home in the Dawnland: Sense of Place and Eco-Cultural Relations in the Penobscot River Valley

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HOME IN THE DAWNLAND: SENSE OF PLACE AND ECO-CULTURAL  
RELATIONS IN THE PENOBSCOT RIVER VALLEY

by

Katharine Anne Macleod Kemper

A Creative Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Human Dimensions of Climate Change)

The Honors College

University of Maine

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## ABSTRACT

In a world where a deep disconnect between humans and nature is commonplace, this thesis is motivated by a personal interest in reconnecting with the more-than-human world. The purpose of this project is to explore my own sense of place and lived experience on the land we've called Maine and the Dawnland, and to strengthen my relationship to this land through a co-creative artistic practice. It draws on the historic context of the land, as it has been stewarded by Penobscot people, to investigate existing human-land relationships in the area, and attempts to honor Indigenous perspectives.

The praxis for the research includes visiting seven sites in the Penobscot River valley, collecting plant materials, and printing their natural dyes and shapes onto silk panels, in a process called ecoprinting. This process emphasizes collaboration with the plants themselves to co-create the final works, where engagement with this process creates a stronger working relationship between human and plant. This, in turn, fosters a stronger connection to place through knowledge of plant behavior, both through on-site exploration of place, and through artistic practice. By resolving to create a stronger personal connection to place, this project hopes to inspire others to do the same, and to explore more ways to collectively strengthen our relationship to the more-than-human world.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the earth, the living, breathing, beating organism which we all come from, live with, and return to. I dedicate particular attention to the land we have called Maine and the Dawnland. It is my home.

This shall serve as proof of my dedication to the health and wellbeing of the human and more-than-human multispecies web of life we all share.

May we thrive.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Susan Smith, for her support, guidance, and knowledge-sharing throughout. She introduced me to the ecoprint process, without which this project would not have the same level of co-creative practice.

I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Darren Ranco and Dr. Lisa Neuman, for their guidance and contributions, especially the many email threads worth of resources. Many thanks as well to Dr. Bonnie Newsom, who invited me to sit by the river and provided me with a wealth of information on Penobscot archaeology and cultural practices. Thanks to Nancy Hall, and her creation of the Charlie Slavin research fund, which paid for the vast majority of my artistic materials.

Of course, I have my parents and family to thank for their support over the years, they loved me into the person I am today.

Finally, I'd like to thank my partner, Spencer, for their unwavering support and excitement through this process. I really should cite them as a reference for some of the theory and philosophies I incorporated into this project. The dia-logos we engaged in over the past few months have been crucial to the ideological development of the project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	1
DISCUSSION .....	2
PURPOSE .....	4
METHODOLOGY .....	7
Western Cultural Thinking .....	7
Penobscot Perspectives .....	8
Sites and Land Engagement.....	10
The Ecoprint Process .....	13
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	19
CRITICAL ANALYSIS .....	23
SUMMARY OF LEARNING .....	25
Artistic Research.....	25
Personal Ancestry .....	25
Relation to Place .....	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	28
APPENDIX A: ECOPRINTS.....	30
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY .....	45

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of sites	12
Figure 2. Placement of natural materials on silk panels	14
Figure 3. Ecoprint bundles	15
Figure 4. Completed ecoprint	16

## DISCUSSION

We live in a world in which time spent in nature is treated as a hobby. It places on the list right next to sports, music, and friends. We define being an “outdoorsy person” as a personality trait ascribed to certain people that like certain activities, rather than an inherent aspect of being human. However, this phenomenon is very recent in our species history. The industrial revolution marked the beginning of the mass extractive practices we see today, where our regard for the sacredness of nature really fell aside. It also began the trend towards industrialization, where more people began to work in factories as opposed to on farms. Because much of Western society was no longer interacting directly with nature or food sources, we began to lose our visceral connection to nature. It is not an argument to say that humans depend solely on our living world to survive and thrive, it is fact.

Unfortunately, many (I would argue most) of us feel like we live separately from nature. We are disconnected from our food systems, our waterways, and many of us our cultural traditions. Culture is our nature. Humans evolved to be social creatures, and our traditional practices are manifestations of our animal nature. All over the world, every culture has a relationship to place. Every human community that evolved on the land evolved with it, tailoring their cultural and spiritual practices to their local terra. Place can be vital to human community identity and is an important root for many communities. To begin to combat some of the major crises in our contemporary world, an increase in community engagement and identity is needed. This, therefore, implies place-based identity, as place and community are often so closely intertwined. Community identity is deeply strengthened from all being in the same place at the same time.



Time spent in place matters. As we engage with place, and with each other, we engage more deeply with our living world, our home. The dominant culture (globally, but particularly in the United States), prescribes individualism and self-sufficiency, which has unfortunately disconnected individuals from our communities. This has manifested in isolation, from each other, from nature, from life; we have become alienated from our *terrapolis*.

I see this as a trend in the society I live in, and I also feel it myself. I feel the pain and listlessness of an ignorant and untethered relationship to place. This project was born from a sense of longing to connect more deeply with the land I live on, and to get to know more personally the species I share a home with.

As a child, I used to spend countless hours in the woods playing and discovering, growing alongside the natural cycles of the coastal Maine forest. Through high school and early college, I lost that connection, because other phases of my life began to take the place of spending time outdoors. It has been a struggle to maintain a sense of connection with the local environment, given my frankly ridiculous level of busyness. Since beginning college, I've realized, gradually, that my whole-life engagement with my work is hurting me, not letting me rest, burning me out, and doing the same to almost everyone around me. This project was initially an attempt to connect back to the nature and sense of place that shaped me as a child, and to begin to slow down my life's pace.

## PURPOSE

I began with the notion that, though I try to spend time outside and engage with my local environment, I feel a sense of disconnection from the rhythms of nature around me. My sense of place is strong and runs deep in my lived experience, but it is not detailed. It is made up of disjointed segments of knowledge, experience, and emotion. The places I feel most connected to my environment are where I know the mechanics of natural cycles. I feel a connection to the geese flying overhead in part because I know that they may be on their yearly journey south, and will return in the spring. I've tasted the bitter mint flavor of wintergreen, and know whenever I see its little leaves that it won't hurt me if I eat it. I know that buds on trees in spring contain the makings of tiny leaves that will bloom outward and reach for the sun in summer. In this way, I personally connect knowledge of natural cycles with connection to nature.

Through my anthropological study, I came to the realization that Indigenous children of the pre-colonial past, and those raised in certain tribal settings today, had and have access to traditional ecological knowledge. This knowledge of the natural environment, along with the deep relationality characteristic to Indigenous sense of place, is passed down through generations of families, many of them living generationally on the same land and working consistently with the same natural cycles. This in turn strengthens and deepens their sense of place, includes detailed knowledge of interspecies relations, and implies a deep responsibility and stewardship, all of which I lack.

I do not wish to grow closer to nature in the same ways as local Indigenous groups, as many of these parts of their culture are sacred and not appropriate for me to insert myself into. I do, however, wish to emulate their attitude towards the natural world

and their deep connection to place. I wish to attempt to build my own ways of knowing following their example.

So, I begin my quest with, of course, my lived experience. My parents are both birders, and I attended a Waldorf school for my elementary education, so I was given some foundational knowledge as a child. I know the calls of the bald eagle, blue jay, broad-winged hawk, chickadee, catbird, phoebe, and other common birds. I can identify some common plants, oak, red maple, white pine, wintergreen, and some edible berries, blackberry, strawberry, huckleberry, and others. I know that foxes leave scat out in the open. Yet, there is so much about the local ecology that I do not know. Where do snakes like to make their nests? How do butterflies survive the winter, or do they? Is this plant native or invasive? Can I eat anything growing in my backyard?

I do not know so much about the cycles that affect my life so deeply; in turn, I do not know where I fit into the interspecies web around me, and I therefore feel separate from it. This project was motivated by a deep desire to teach myself about my local environment and the land I identify so closely with. It is primarily a study in personal growth, knowing that this self-teaching process is achievable for anyone.

The project is a creative body of work attempting to explore my own sense of place based on my own embodied experience. It is an auto-ethnography of sorts, written in the context of broader social structures that exist today. I am being-with land in the Penobscot river valley that has been human-integrated for more than twelve thousand years, and only in the past 500 has seen a major shift in stewardship practices.

The broader, guiding goal of my research is that this project plays its small role in informing a more harmonious future between groups of people and the land we now

share. A shared sense of place could act as a mechanism to realize similarities between settlers and Indigenous people, and help to support Indigenous rights and sovereignty. In the context of the colonial world, a stronger sense of place via relational responsibility is a key way to decrease human harm to our environment. However, for the scope of this project, I am beginning with my own life, my own practices, and my own sense of place.

## METHODOLOGY

### Western Cultural Thinking

Renee Descartes is credited with popularizing and systematizing dualism, and created significant ties between Western culture and dichotomous thinking. He is often cited with the creation of “man vs. nature,”

“The inventors of Nature were philosophers as well as conquerors and profiteers. In 1641, Descartes offered what would become the first two laws of capitalist ecology... Reality, in this view, is composed of discrete “thinking things” and “extended things.” Humans (but not all humans) were thinking things; Nature was full of extended things” (Patel and Moore 2017).

His work contributed significantly to an adversarial relationship between humans and nature becoming a dominant narrative in Western culture. These ideas are also related to the Western notion of individualism, that each person is a sovereign entity, independent of others and their non-human surroundings. This is a false definition. Not only do we not exist separately from our human communities, we are inextricably bound to the elements of nature. The very atoms our bodies are made of were sourced from the world around us, and the chemical makeup of the food we eat, water we drink, and air we breathe determines our health and actions, both personally, and as communities. Our lifeways flow in, around, and with our *terra*.

The crux of the difference between Indigenous ways of being and colonial ways is the community’s connection to the land. Whereas colonial peoples attempt to “tame” the land, to hold power over it, and to make it work for us, Indigenous peoples tend to work more in collaboration with the land for the health of both parties. However, it is not that simple. This “Ecological Indian” stereotype is just that; it is overly simplistic to say that

all Indigenous peoples have an uncomplicated, harmonious relationship to nature. I cannot claim to understand the nuances of these relationships, but Indigenous frameworks are about relationality, and they are far more complex than how Westerners often view them. However, it is not incorrect to say that Indigenous groups have been historically more effective at land stewardship. According to Ellis et al (2021), there has been a tight correlation between historical Indigenous stewardship and biodiversity,

“Human societies have been shaping and sustaining diverse cultural natures across most of the terrestrial biosphere for more than 12,000 y... landscapes under traditional low-intensity use are generally much more biodiverse than those governed by high-intensity agricultural and industrial economies” (Ellis et al 2021).

I argue that the root problem with our twenty-first century Western way of life, and our Anthropocene, is that we are so physically removed from the origin of our material needs that we do not see these connections. Our food comes off of a shelf in a heated building; it is easy to forget that it grew out of soil. Our water comes out of a metal fixture in our house, so it is likewise easy to forget that it came from the underground water table, or from a local lake or river. We do not have constant reminders that the materials that sustain our lives come from the earth.

The way to solve this is not by removing ourselves further from the environment, or to leave nature alone, but to take responsibility for it. Though this was not the intent I set out with for the project, it became one of the most crucial takeaways.

### Penobscot Perspectives

Sense of place, as I define it, has as much to do with the topography and life makeup of the locality as it does with the activities done on and with the land. On the

Penobscot river, Indigenous lives have changed since European contact, and while many practices have been abandoned, some of the most important ones have been maintained. I consulted with Dr. Bonnie Newsom, a Penobscot archaeologist and professor in UMaine's Anthropology department on this topic, and the first thing she told me the Penobscot people of history did on the river was play games. "They played with their dogs, I imagine kids skipped stones, people would gather, get married, bury their dead, and hold ceremony for different things." She explained that the Penobscot people's relationship to the land was secondary to their relationship with the river. "Our view of the world is from the river, and we have a very visceral relationship with the river... the land parcel in my mind is secondary to our engagement with the water."

They also had much closer relationships to their fellow species than contemporary Maine residents do. Professor Newsom noted that Penobscot people used birchbark to make baskets, homes, boats, food containers, and even maps. Cedar was used for the ribs of a canoe, for utensils, and for use in ceremony. They also used, and continue to use black or brown ash to weave baskets, which is both a functional tool and an important cultural practice. They used a variety of plants to make cordage, including spruce root, basswood, and milkweed fibers.

Each of these practices is a mechanism for relationship to land and place. Each requires a knowledge of natural materials, and each meant a regular need that necessitated an interaction with land. These practices were direct proof that nature was actively giving humans life. This viscosity is something I lack as someone who was raised in Maine, but not raised with the land. I feel disconnected from my local terra, in

part because these natural interactions are no longer necessary, and therefore happen far less often.

I decided before I even began this project that I wanted to focus my thesis research on something related to Native American culture or political issues. I have always felt a deep sense of conflict in my relationship with my home land because it is stolen land. Though my own family were not here at the time it was stolen, that does not matter today. As a white person, I am living on land that is not rightfully mine. And yet, it is the only home I know.

At times, my emphasis on native perspectives seems like a left arm of the project, not necessarily related to the core claim about my personal relationship with place. However, I thought it important to include because the place I am relating to has been irrefutably shaped by both pre-colonial native stewards and by the last five hundred years of settler colonialism. Where there used to be hills and forests, there are now towns and roads, and the salmon no longer swim up the river to spawn, due to the dams we have built. I would not be relating to this land at all if it were not for the genocide of native people. It is important to me to acknowledge the deep moral conflict of my mere existence on this land. I felt that the only just way to move forward with this project was to include Penobscot perspectives, and to hold and acknowledge them with honor.

### Sites and Land Engagement

Fueled by the motivation to strengthen my relationship with place, my process included making trips to sites along the Penobscot river, collecting plant materials from the sites, and doing background research on the particular species of each location. The



creative approach I took was exploratory, and broadly included gathering leaves and flowers from a chosen site and using the ecoprint process to print their natural coloring and shapes onto panels of silk.

Next came the engagement with place and collection of materials. Though I aligned the places I chose with the river, they are not exclusive to it, and the pre-existing significance of the location was not really something I took into account in my choices. My goal was to create a sense of place for myself, and therefore create a better relation to the land I live with.

I chose seven locations, as listed below, and detailed in Figure 1:

1. Orono, Railroad Tracks River Bank
2. Bucksport, North Tip of Verona Island
3. Winterport, Bald Hill Cove
4. Orrington, Public Park
5. Orono, Stillwater/Penobscot Joint
6. Frankfort, North Branch of the Marsh River
7. Orono, Stillwater Nature Trail

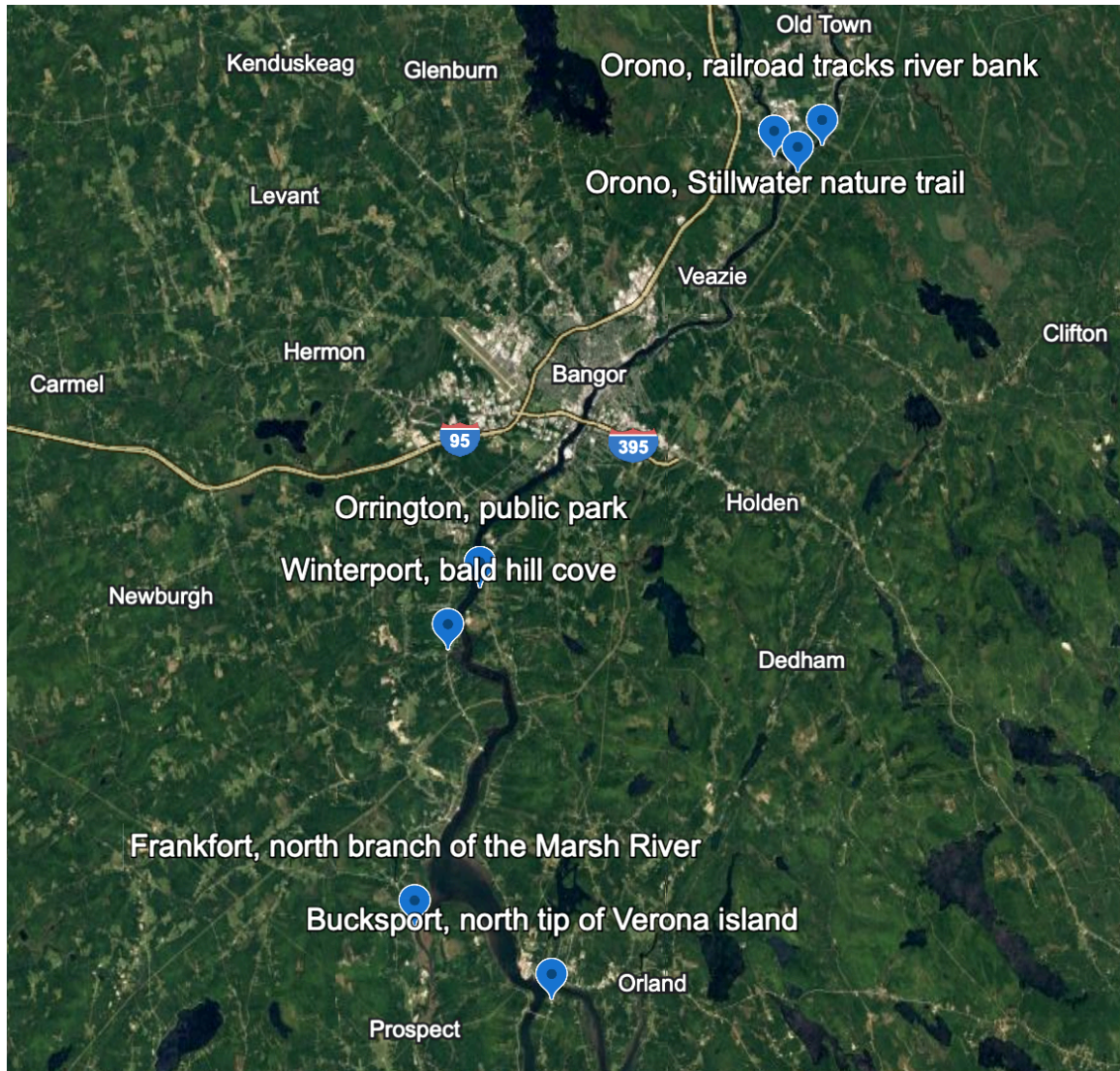


Figure 1. Map of sites, taken from Google Earth.

The Penobscot people have a strong connection to the river, and I found it an easy anchor point to get some continuity in the locations. They were also influenced by my own lived experiences, as sites 1, 3, 6, and 7 are places I had visited before. Sites 3 and 6 are both adjacent to route 1A, which is the road I drive on when I visit my home in Rockport. The others I chose because they represented increments of transition between fresh and saltwater, as the river flows into Penobscot Bay. This is an interesting ecological feature to me, as I have connections with fresh and saltwater in my own life,

and wanted to see how the makeup of flora changed as the salinity of the water increased further south. This transition did not end up being central to the project, but it helped me learn more about the particular makeup of the species I was engaging with.

At the site, I did what I could to be present in the place, noticing the shapes of rocks and earth, the plants living there, any animal activity, and how human activity may have affected the landscape. I also began thinking about what native peoples' sense of place might have been like at the location and what activities they may have done.

It usually took me between 15 and 30 minutes walking and paying attention before I felt satisfied with my engagement with the place. Next, I cut leaves and flowers off of trees or shrubs, being sure to not take more than I would use for the printmaking process, and always harvesting from healthy, large plants. Because I had not learned traditional land practices from family or my community, this was my way of being respectful towards the plants that provided me with materials for my project. I gave thanks by walking lightly, sometimes singing, and setting the intent to use the materials the plants gave to help better the relationship between my human community and our shared home.

### The Ecoprint Process

First, I prepared silk for the print process. Silk is the easiest fabric to use for the Ecoprint method, as it takes very well to the prints, but any natural fiber can be used. First, I cut it into panels, boiled it in water with a small amount of dissolved pickling alum, let it sit in the water overnight, then wrung it out and hung it to dry for about a day. This process is called “mordanting,” and it allows the organic material to not only bind to the silk, but it improves the color and quality of the print.

After collecting materials from the site, I returned home and laid out the leaves and flowers. I took them and placed them carefully on the treated silk, being sure to give each leaf enough room to make a clear print.



Figure 2. Placement of natural materials on silk panels. Bucksport, Verona Island site.

Next, I rolled the silk and leaf panels around dead sticks that I had found at the first site and reused for the rest of the sites. I rolled them as tightly as possible so the leaves would press firmly against the silk, then bind them with cotton twine to keep them tightly wrapped. I then placed them on a wire rack over a wide pan filled with water, and steamed the bundles, covered, for two and a half hours, refilling the pan with water every 15 minutes. This is the process that ultimately caused the leaves to release their pigmented chemicals onto the fabric.



Figure 3. Rolled bundles of plant material and silk, wrapped with cotton twine.  
Winterport, Bald Hill Cove.

For better results, I also placed in the steaming water a couple pieces of iron scrap I found on the railroad tracks in Orono near the first location. The iron, along with the pickling alum in the preparation process, are two chemical binders used to bind the plants' pigments onto the fabric.

The process is long and involves a considerable amount of wait time. From start to finish, it took three or four days per site to complete the pieces. Once complete, I unrolled the pieces from their bundles to reveal beautiful, colorful, and delicate ecoprints. Below is an image of a completed ecoprint, the rest of the images can be found in Appendix A, Ecoprints.



Figure 4. Completed ecoprint. Frankfort, North Branch of the Marsh River.

Ecoprinting was developed by Australian artist India Flint, whose work has been described as “the earth as the printing plate and time as the press.” She emphasizes the working relationship between her and the plant materials she uses, as well as the place she sources from. She describes the process as,

“... immersing myself in and paying deep attention to - wherever I happen to be :: gathering thought and experience, imagery and marks, as well as harvesting materials for making. I try to step lightly on the land while being nourished by it, and plant trees to compensate for the ecological impact of my wanderings. The work of each day, philosophically rooted in topophilia [the love of place] literally begins with a walk.” (Flint 2021)

Part of the reason I chose this particular process is because much of the end result of the pieces are dependent on the actions of the plants themselves. I do what I can to adjust the couple of chemical components required to get the clearest and most vibrant

print, but ultimately the leaves are the ones releasing the chemicals necessary to create the image. This meant that the final results were deeply unpredictable, it was like unwrapping a gift every time I opened up one of the bundles after steaming. Sometimes the colors from different plants would come through beautifully, and sometimes not at all. This theoretical approach fits well with the aim of the project, as it works in conversation and collaboration with the plants themselves. It ended up being the mechanism through which I developed a deeper relationship to place.

It also, relatedly, works against my need for perfection and control. The mordant and print process is contradictory to the synthetic dye process, which exercises much more control and strives for uniformity. It is often uncomfortable for me to let go of the creative process, and to just let things happen as they may, and this exercise in releasing control was an excellent practice towards the equanimous and co-creative patterns I would like to cultivate within myself.

My excursions incorporated material collection as well as presence in the space, attention to the natural environment, observation and notetaking, follow-up research, as well as the physical processes of making the artwork which required careful attention to plant behavior.

I learned the difference between red maple and silver maple, and that there are many other kinds of maple that grow on this land. The five-leafed vine I see everywhere is called Virginia Creeper, and it is invasive here. There are two main types of seaweed that grow in this area, bladderwrack and rockweed, and what each look like. Staghorn sumac, which I thought to be invasive, is actually native, and makes fabulous purple and yellow dyes. In learning these details, I strengthened my own land-based identity by

working directly with plants and creating avenues through which I taught myself ecological knowledge.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

The first thoughts I had of this project were a result of reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. It is a text that explores the role of Indigenous knowledge and ontologies in a Westernized world, and makes the case that Indigenous ways of knowing are not only viable alternatives to Western thought, but are actually essential to mending our broken relationship to our world. Kimmerer emphasizes the importance of personal relationships with *terra*, especially plants. “We have always known that the plants and animals have their own councils, and a common language. The trees, especially, we recognize as our teachers” (Kimmerer 2013:18). She covers many facets of human-nature relationships in this text, but particularly emphasizes how plants can teach humans how to live well. I used this in my co-creative practice, learning, in a sense, from the plants I used.

It is worth noting here that there are some serious critiques of Kimmerer’s work, especially in regards to how accessible it makes traditional Indigenous knowledge to non-Indigenous people. Every year at UMaine’s Wabanaki Winter Market, a sign encourages non-Indigenous people not to pick sweetgrass, in reaction to a recent increase in non-Indigenous interest in the plant. Though these reactions to the text present real problems of encroachment upon sacred aspects of Indigenous cultures, this text was essential to my exploration of place. It helped me actualize the notion that I am not separate from place. It is not a matter of whether my relationship to place exists, it is a matter of the health and strength of that relationship.

This was deepened and developed in my classes in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023, as I was able to learn basic anthropological concepts while acknowledging the importance

of the more-than-human world, and came to learn the ultimate falseness of the notion of individuality.

One further seed of the project was James Eric Francis Sr.'s talk, "Penobscot Sense of Place," that I first viewed at the Mitchell Center this spring, and rewatched an expanded version from his YouTube channel. His talk was deeply inspiring for me because of some of the place-based history presented in it about how the Penobscot people lived pre-colonization. He discusses place-names as informers of activity, and consequently human-land relationships. I first drew a parallel between the supposed migratory patterns of Penobscot people that mimicked my own commute from home to college, and used that as the genesis of the project. However, I later discovered through my conversation with Dr. Newsom that that model is contested. There is archaeological evidence to suggest that seasonal migration only began after European contact. Whether or not that narrative is false, it did still help me make a connection between my own life and those of people native to the region I grew up in, which was the initial spark for this project.

I have also just begun to read *Staying with the Trouble* by Donna Haraway, which explores how we can "make kin" in the interspecies web of the modern age. I gleaned many relevant terms and ideas from this text, including ones related to co-creation, like "sympoesis," "terrapolis," and "becoming-with." Her ideas in chapter one (on Playing String Figures with Companion Species) introduced me to the formal idea of "multi-species art" (Haraway 2016:21), combining the actions of a human and another, or multiple other, species to create art. The text gave the language I needed to describe the core of the methodology behind my practice.

I have done some research on Maine colonial history to ensure I am aware of the timeline and basic impacts of colonialism on the Penobscot people. While it is a complex topic, and I cannot learn all the facets of it, I think I have come out with a basic understanding of some of the ways the landscape changed due to settler colonialism.

The Wabanaki special collection at Fogler library has been particularly helpful to me, and some texts I have utilized include *The Visual Language of Wabanaki Art* by Jeanne Morningstar Ken, and *Giants of the Dawnland: Ancient Wabanaki Tales*, collected by Alice Mead and Arnold Neptune. Through this exploration I have felt the need to be judicious about my source material, as I want to be as aware as possible of colonial perspectives influencing historical accounts. *Wabanaki Homeland and the New State of Maine: The 1820 Journal and Plans of Survey* by Joseph Treat was recommended to me by Micah Pawling (the author), whom I reached out to in search of sources. The text helped inform my very basic understanding of early settler colonial and native relationships. It did not particularly comment on cultural or other conflicts.

I have also been attending the Terrell House's permaculture discussion groups, as well as endeavoring on "polycrisis" discussions with my partner. Both of these have drawn on podcasts and short Youtube videos for discussion material, but have strayed far and wide. From those I've covered lots about human-nature integration and actual agricultural and political systems that make it feasible.

I've also listened to a myriad of podcasts that have influenced my thinking. *The Great Simplification* by Nate Hagel, and *The Future of Governance* by John Vervaeke and Jordan Hall both deal with current political and governance systems and their flaws, and explore mass systemic transformation futures, including de-growth and post-growth

among others. *All My Relations* by Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip) and Dr. Adrienne Keene (Cherokee Nation) is an excellent podcast on Native American cultural and political issues in today's United States, and helped inform me on some of the biggest systemic issues native people are currently facing.

My delve into place-based art has been more recent, as I ended up spending a significant chunk of time doing research into Indigenous narratives and histories. However, upon recommendation of my advisor, I delved into the Wild Pigment Project, a site that distributes pigments that are sourced by artists and donated.

“When I say the pigments are “contributed,” that’s exactly what I mean. They’re given, as gifts, to Wild Pigment Project, by other artists like me — artists who have intimate relationships with land and reciprocal practices of learning, giving and growing through materials they work with to make art” (Elkins 2022).

Their website provides an excellent catalog of all the artists that have donated pigment and their artistic projects. The artists I drew most heavily on included Elaine Suhui, Caitlin French, and Kari Cahill. Cahill’s work was particularly relevant to me because of her co-creative and site-responsive emphasis. She works directly with land as a part of her work, particularly with her project *The Earth Spun Light*, in which she uses the cyanotype process and cites the sun as a medium for the work.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The use of site-based research and working in a process of multi-species collaboration allows for an immediacy to my work, and a result that is based on time and place. This research allows me to get to know the land, and that knowing process has been powerful to me in dissolving some of the alienation I feel from my locale.

My search for other artists who share a place-based practice has been challenging, and mostly sourced through the Wild Pigment Project. However, common throughout the artists I have found is attention to place, to time, and to people. This category of art is largely autobiographical, but is also about the actions of groups of people and their effects on the environment. Many of these artists work with waste-stream materials, and many with rocks and plants. The emphasis is using materials from the environment itself to serve as a direct representation of the place they came from, not simply an image of it.

A smaller subsection of artists I have found work with the theme of co-creation that ended up being so essential to my practice. This is where artists work collaboratively with natural processes, plants, sunlight, and other non-human events to create art. Kari Cahill, for example, describes her process as site-responsive. In her project *Australis*, she used cyanotype ink, which is UV-reactive, to “capture the presence of the Australian sun.” Cahill effectively sets up the necessary conditions for creation, but the actual creating is done by the sun and the ink. My process is similar in style, and while I did not begin intending for this to be essential, the co-creative aspect to the process is perhaps the most important one.

Though this project is place-based, it is also time-based. I took into consideration the experiences of people that came before me on this land, and those that will come after. I am trying to interrelate with every entity I can here, human, plant, animal, past, present, future. Though I cannot know every complexity of the land I live-with, I now know more about the lifeways of local plants and animals.

## SUMMARY OF LEARNING

### Artistic Research

The decision to do a creative thesis was initially daunting, as it felt like a step outside the norm. It has indeed been challenging, but not in the ways I expected. I did struggle with the free-form nature of the project, and the self-motivated timeline. However, I learned so much about the nature of artistic research, beginning with the notion that it is a completely legitimate and widespread way of knowing. This was my first real in-depth experience with a way of knowing alternate to the academic and scientific way I am used to. It opened me up to the reality that there are many ways of knowing, and that I myself may come to know things in various ways. Learning through creation is not new to me, but learning through artistic expression is.

### Personal Ancestry

The question of my own ancestry was present as I began this project. What is the connection between sense of place and ancestry? How do I relate to the land differently than the Penobscot people, because I am so new? The beginning of this project conveniently intersected with a trip I took to my “ancestral homeland,” the Isle of Skye in Scotland. I hoped to feel at home, like some deeply rooted sense of place would be uncovered and I would finally feel like a part of the land I was experiencing. This did not happen.

What I discovered through this experience is that, for me, lived experience is much more powerful than ancestral ties. I do not know very much about my ancestry, or about the cultural values or practices of my ancestors. What I do know is that I am from

Maine, from the Dawnland. I have formed my lived experience here, and though my knowledge of natural cycles is limited, every moment of my life here has been just that, a life here. My sense of self is inseparable from my sense of place. I have lived on and with this land all my life, and my lived experience is far more important than my ancestral ties.

### Relation to Place

I created this project to deepen my relationship with the local environment and create circumstances for immediate and close interaction with land. I accomplished this through the co-creative aspect to that process was the praxis or the mechanics of how I created stronger relationships to place and to the more-than-human world. Though I set out to grow closer to the land, this goal was nebulous, and through this thesis I've gained a much more significant awareness of my responsibility here.

I began somewhat timidly, not wishing to encroach upon traditional Indigenous human-land relations. However, through encouragement by my committee, I've shed my hesitation. These relationships mean not only practical knowledge about plant behavior, but a much deeper sense of responsibility towards the land around me.

Here, I was creating an auto-ethnography, deepening my own relationship with the local land, and teaching myself how to live more rightly in relation to other beings. I've now consciously entered into relation with the trees, rocks, grasses, animals, and waterways I've engaged with, and feel myself willingly pulled into the implications of these new relationships. The reality here is that these relationships are sacred, and it is not cultural appropriation to have my own sacred relationship to the land. I've learned that this means a newfound sense of responsibility to actively protect our land, and to be



responsible for it. Through this project I have grown closer to the person I want to be, the Anthropocenic steward. Not simply one who doesn't do harm, or lives alongside the land, but one who is in deep relation with it, one who bears and carries out the responsibility of maintaining it.

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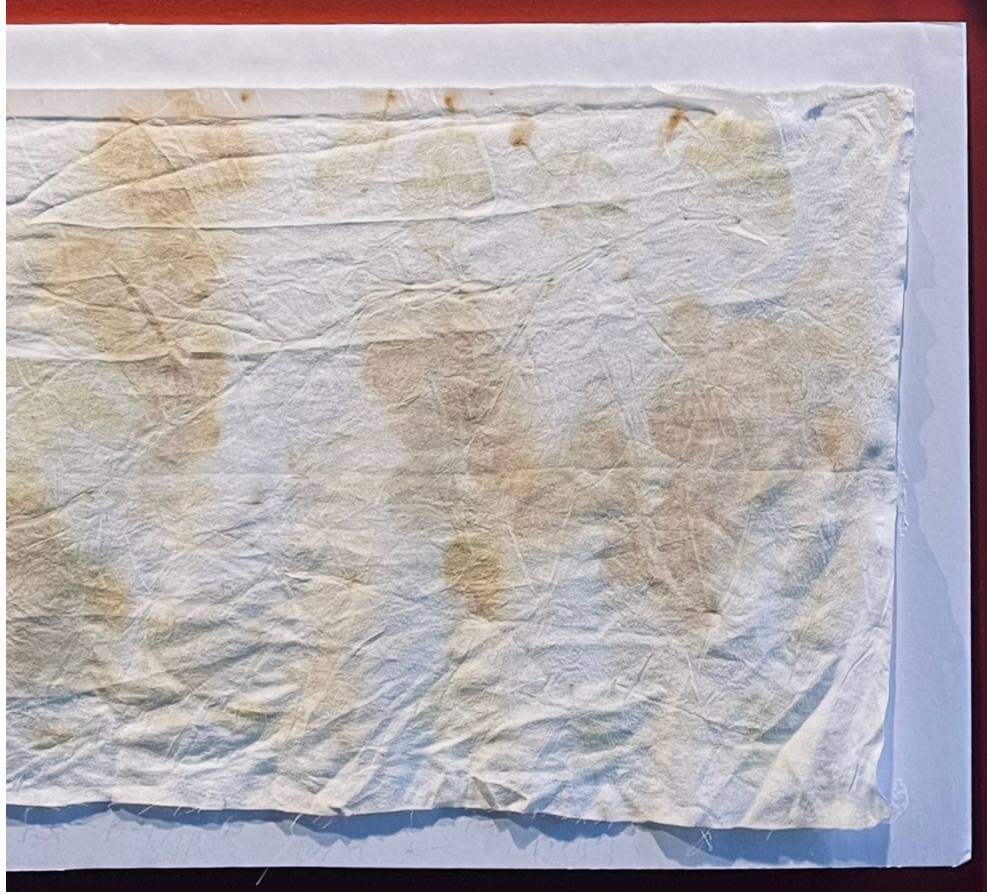
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## APPENDIX A: ECOPRINTS

Photos courtesy of James Winters.



Full ecoprint exhibition on display. Wilson Center, Orono.



Orono, railroad tracks river bank (#1)  
ecoprint on silk  
silver maple / *acer saccharinum* L.  
sensitive fern / máhsosi / *onoclea sensibilis* L.  
buckthorn / sahsahk<sup>wimínosi</sup> / *rhamnus cathartica*  
virginia creeper / *parthenocissus quinquefolia*  
tall meadow rue / *thalictrum pubescens*



Orono, Stillwater/Penobscot river joint (#1)  
ecoprint on silk  
silver maple / *acer saccharinum* L.  
sensitive fern / máhsosi / *onoclea sensibilis* L.  
meadow willow / ánsakənahk<sup>w</sup> / *Salix gracilis*  
brown ash / sk<sup>w</sup>ətəwəmək<sup>w</sup> / *fraxinus nigra*



Orono, Stillwater/Penobscot river joint (#2)  
ecoprint on silk  
silver maple / *acer saccharinum* L.  
sensitive fern / máhsosi / *onoclea sensibilis* L.  
buckthorn / sahsahk<sup>wimínosi</sup> / *rhamnus cathartica*



Orono, Stillwater nature trail (#1)  
ecoprint on silk  
sensitive fern / máhsosi / onoclea sensibilis L.  
red maple / ak<sup>w</sup>ilémisi / acer rubrum L.  
silver maple / acer saccharinum L.  
northern lady fern / máhsosi / athyrium filix-femina



Orono, Stillwater nature trail (#2)  
ecoprint on silk  
buckthorn / sahsahk<sup>w</sup>imínosi / rhamnus cathartica  
silver maple / acer saccharinum L.





Bucksport, north tip of Verona island (#1)  
ecoprint on silk  
rockweed / áskaləsi / *ascophyllum nodosum*  
bladderwrack / áskaləsi / *fucus vesiculosus*



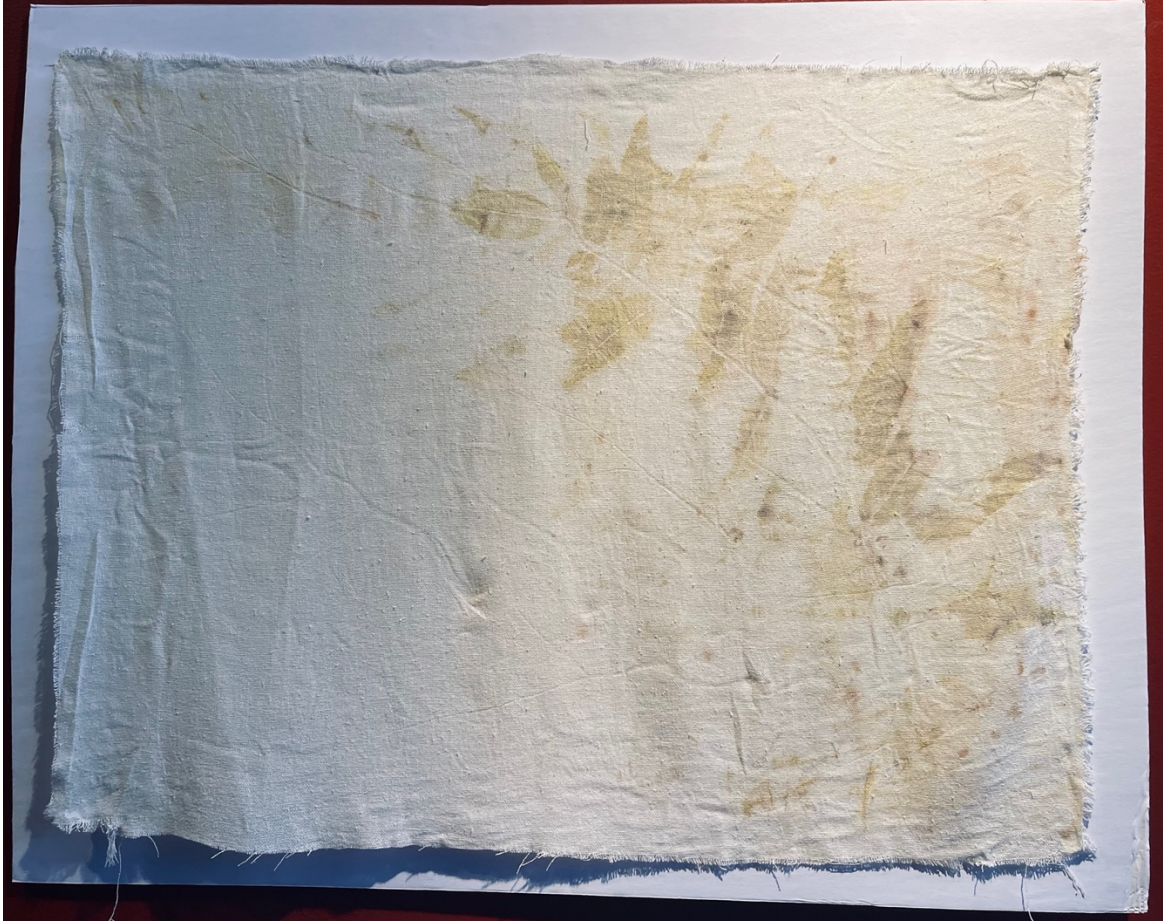
Bucksport, north tip of Verona island (#2)  
ecoprint on silk  
rockweed / áskaləsi / ascophyllum nodosum



Bucksport, north tip of Verona island (#3)  
ecoprint on silk  
staghorn sumac / *rhus typhina*  
virginia creeper / *parthenocissus quinquefolia*



Bucksport, north tip of Verona island (#4)  
ecoprint on silk  
staghorn sumac / *rhus typhina*  
green ash / *sk<sup>w</sup>ətéwəmək<sup>v</sup>* / *fraxinus pennsylvanica*



Bucksport, north tip of Verona island (#5)  
ecoprint on silk  
staghorn sumac / *rhus typhina*



Winterport, Bald Hill cove (#3)  
ecoprint on silk  
goldenrod / *solidago canadensis*  
purple loosestrife / *lythrum salicaria*  
norway maple / *acer platanoides*

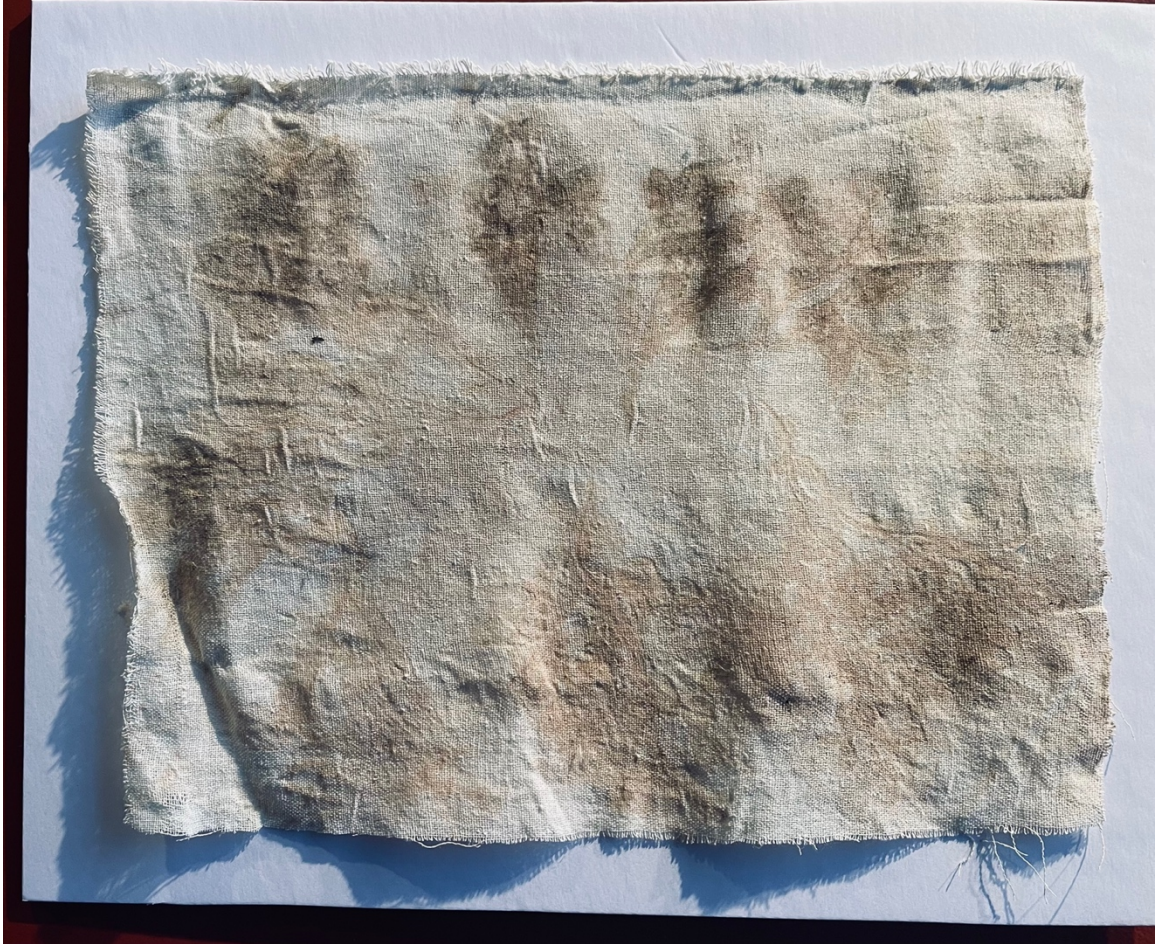


Orrington, public park (#1)  
ecoprint on silk  
paper birch / mask<sup>w</sup>émosi / *betula papyrifera*  
green ash / sk<sup>w</sup>ətéwəmək<sup>w</sup> / *fraxinus pennsylvanica*  
common blackberry / psáhk<sup>w</sup>ətemin / *rubus allegheniensis*



Frankfort, north branch of the Marsh river (#1)  
ecoprint on silk  
bladderwrack / áskaləsi / fucus vesiculosus  
paper birch / mask<sup>w</sup>émosi / betula papyrifera  
green ash / sk<sup>w</sup>ətéwámək<sup>w</sup> / fraxinus pennsylvanica  
northern red oak / anáskəməsi / quercus rubra





Frankfort, north branch of the Marsh river (#2)  
ecoprint on silk  
bladderwrack / áskaləsi / fucus vesiculosus



Frankfort, north branch of the Marsh river (#3)  
ecoprint on silk  
paper birch / mask<sup>w</sup>émosi / *betula papyrifera*  
green ash / sk<sup>w</sup>ətéwəmæk<sup>w</sup> / *fraxinus pennsylvanica*  
northern red oak / anáskəməsi / *quercus rubra*  
river birch / *betula nigra*

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Kate Kemper was born in Belfast, Maine. She was raised in Unity, Belfast, and Rockport, Maine, graduated from Ashwood Waldorf School in 2016, and from Camden Hills Regional High School in 2020. Majoring in Human Dimensions of Climate Change, Kate spent her first two years at UMaine as a physics major, and as such has earned a minor in physics. She is the Community Service Chair for All Maine Women's class of 2024, a Senator and the Faculty Senate Representative for University of Maine Student Government, a Program Coordinator and Board Member at the Wilson Center for Spiritual Exploration and Multifaith Dialogue, and a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

Upon defense of this thesis, Kate plans to spend her senior spring taking only fun classes, reading, and being-with the land as much as she can. Upon graduation, Kate plans to stay in Orono, and take a gap year before moving on to graduate school.

*... but who knows what comes next!*