

Do roses dream of freedom?

- Amanda White

All the plants, animals and ecosystems in the world want recovery, they want freedom, they want health - and with them as allies, we are never alone.

- Nicole Rose, *The Prisoner's Herbal*

Here in North America, there is a direct relationship between dominant cultural aesthetic preferences, the visible landscape and control. European-style gardens tame and thereby claim the land as territory for colonial expression and expansion, spaces in which “human territorial projects take the form of neatly classified taxonomized plants.”¹ Gardens and their resident species can be a reminder that colonialism is a multispecies project, involving people as well as animals and plants.² However, gardens are also sites in which plants themselves take up and claim space. Ornamental plants, no matter how fragrant and colourful, should they embark on the long journey to freedom, become a problem for this project of control because “gardens are both ruled and always at risk of becoming unruly.”³ Plants who push up from beneath a manicured space to grow; use their ancient tools to be pollinated in the wild and entice birds to disperse their seeds; spread by their roots with many microscopic co-conspirators in the soil - these plants always risk being tamed, pruned, or eradicated.

Roses are one of the worlds most traded and thus controlled ornamental flowers in the floriculture industry. Most are grown for a global supply chain and come predominantly from farms and farm labour in Ecuador as well as other countries in the global south (Colombia, India and Kenya to name a few) and yet the majority of roses are consumed at a distance in wealthier nations, (the USA, the UK and Europe, in that order).⁴ When flowers are cut and packed for distribution over these distances, they begin to wilt and it is a race against time in the ‘cold chain’, moving in refrigerated trucks and storage until they reach their destinations. Roses have to be kept at temperature just above zero, around 1 degree for 4-5 days in a kind of suspended animation, but even still it is estimated that 45% of cut flowers simply don’t make it and wilt before they arrive.⁵

Rootstocks are yet another form of invisible labour in this particular commodity chain. There are tens of thousands of rose cultivars available to consumers. Roses selected for the shape, colour, fragrance and frequency of their

blooms are not always also healthy or strong at their roots, especially in the context of global travel, or an industry spanning a myriad of growing zones and soil differences requiring especially robust characteristics. Many rose growers and breeders rely on a much smaller pool of rootstock varieties for growing, using these dependable plant bodies as a base upon which more desirable varieties are grafted.

Without generative conditions and a gardener's care and attention (or sometimes even with it), over time, delicate blooms are eventually outlived by the stronger invisible plants instrumentalized to support them. Left to their own devices, a sudden wealth of healthy stems and unfamiliar flowers may one day emerge from a rose plant.

Dr. Huey, a climbing rose with dark red blooms who requires little maintenance and care, is one such plant. Huey, by virtue of being overlooked-may have inadvertently become the most common and abundant rose in North America, especially favouring abandoned gardens.

Notes:

1. Besky, Sarah, and Jonathan Padwe. 2016. "Placing Plants in Territory". *Environment and Society*. 7 (1): 9-28.
2. Mastnak, Tomaž, Julia Elyachar Mastnak, and Tom Boellstorff. 2014. "Botanical decolonization: rethinking native plants". *Environment and Planning. D. Society & Space*. 32: 363-380.
3. Besky.. p. 17
4. "Cut Flower Trade: How the Global Industry Is Transforming." BBC News, BBC, www.bbc.com/future/ bespoke/made-on-earth/the-new-roots-of-the-flower-trade/.
5. Larson, Paul D. "Valentine's Day: COVID-19 Wilted the Flower Industry, but Sustainability Still a Thorny Issue." *The Conversation*, 25 May 2021, www.theconversation.com/ valentines-day-covid-19-wilted-the-flower-industry-but-sustainability-still-a-thorny-issue-154889.

Do roses dream of freedom?

I dream of an open field.

I am carried there on the wind and with the help of birds or other animals.

Once, I escaped a garden. I crossed a threshold and became my own. A rose among the grasses, left to its own devices.

I will love freely, I will grow wiry, bushy, long and un-uniform stalks, I will stretch out to meet the sun. My petals may become uneven, unsymmetrical, and over time, my colours will change to meet my surroundings, I will thus become invisible. My shields -my beloved thorns- expand, exploding from my sides, taller and sharper.

No one shall touch me or smell me, the rose determines.

Well, except for the birds, I will shield them, and the insects too -my little loves- as long as the sun is shining on me, with all my energy, I will burst forth so many blooms, they will never want for pollen.