

Hi, everybody. My name is Alexis Boylan. I am the director of Academic Affairs at the University of Connecticut's Humanities Institute and also a professor of Art History and Africana Studies. And it is my pleasure today to welcome you to a conversation we're going to have with Romita Ray.

I did, before we start, want to just thank the Luce Foundation. It's their generous funding and their support that has inspired and encouraged this exhibition and all of the projects that have fallen from it, the *Seeing Truth* exhibition. I hope everyone, after they watch this interview, will take some time and watch the other interviews in this series, but also take a look at our amazing and constantly expanding web pages that have all of the information about the upcoming exhibitions, instigator items, and all kinds of other treats when thinking about art, truth, and science, and art and museum space.

So with that, Romita I would like you to introduce yourself. I'm asking everyone in the interview series to introduce themselves, so that we can get a sense of how you see yourself, and your work, and yeah, that sort of thing. Welcome.

Thank you, Alexis. So my name is Romita Ray. I teach art and architectural history at Syracuse University. And my own work focuses on the visual cultures of tea, in both colonial as well as modern day India. And I've been steeped, no pun intended here--

[LAUGHS]

--in all things tea, beginning with the tea plant itself, to the plantation, to thinking about all the global mobilities of tea, the histories of maritime trade, and also transnational trade, of course, between China, India, and Britain, and to a certain extent North America, whose story has to be told in the 18th century story of tea. So my work really lies at the intersection of natural history, specifically plant studies, plant humanities. I look very closely at animals as well and their role in tea plantations and wildlife. And hopefully, our conversation will broaden to them today. And also, of course, looking at the human beings whose lives are entangled with tea, both on plantations as well as in urban areas and urban spaces, be it in the tea industry or, for that matter, in museums, in which, of course, you have a vested interest, and so do I, as an art historian. So I'm really looking forward to this conversation with you.

So I am going to back up, because you said two phrases that I wanted you to unpack a little bit for our listeners. The first was I wanted you to talk and this is, of course, because one of my jobs is as a director of academic affairs for a humanities institute, when you say plant humanities, what do you mean by that?

What does that phrase mean? What is that? Is that a field? Is that a discipline? Is that an attitude? Is it a style? Tell me what plant humanities are, and then I'll just give you a hint.

The next thing I want to talk about is, what do you mean when you say the mobilities of tea? So let that steep, to use your word. But first tell us all about the plant humanities.

Sure, I think the plant humanities is really a very broad, humanistic lens through which we are looking at plants, which have traditionally been studied by biologists, right, by botanists, in particular. So we look at plants through the lens of literature, history, history of science, philosophy. You can look at it through multiple lenses. So it's really broadening the lens of how we study plants with our feet anchored firmly in the humanities.

And this can also be, by the way, applied to also the arts. It's not just humanities, sitting with the humanities squarely in that discipline, but also with the interconnected discipline of the arts, right? How do artists also approach plants through a humanistic lens? So much of their work and research is humanities-based as well.

I guess I'm left wondering, how does this-- I mean, you said, that typically we think about plants, and we think about botanists. So what gets added to that conversation when we add the humanities to it? I can imagine somebody saying, a plant's a plant. And if somebody writes a poem about a rose, that doesn't really tell us anything about the rose. It tells us about the person. So how do you really see, in terms of what I'm secretly leading us to is--

[LAUGHS]

--talking to about truth and knowledge. What knowledge about plants do we really get from the plant humanities?

OK, this is a wonderful question. Let me also backpedal for a second when you asked me about is it a new field. And I think of it as a burgeoning field. It's a very exciting one. And it's one that cannot just happen through conversations between humanists and artists. It's actually one that takes place with scientists.

So instead of the science approaching the humanities, it's the humanities approaching the sciences, right? And it's this two-way street that the plant humanities acknowledges at every given stage. And I should also flag the fact that in North America Dumbarton Oaks, which is Harvard University's research arm in Washington, DC, is really pioneering the effort to make plant humanities blossom in every way possible with these really well-thought-out, I think, interdisciplinary conversations, because we also toss the word interdisciplinary around quite a bit, right?

But it's always very hard to do it meaningfully and thoughtfully. It requires people to come into the same room and really turn the lens around constantly. And if you're willing to do that, I think very exciting things can happen.

So that being said, let's now get to your question. So I'm going to bring up an example here of an expedition that took place in the 19th century in India. It was a tea expedition. And you're going to find me doing this a lot, by the way, I'm going to keep returning to the story of tea to answer some of your questions. So this was a definitive tea expedition to what we know today as Assam, the Northeast of India, when indigenous tea species was found growing in India that would later be cultivated or industrialized by the British to create tea plantations in that area. And the same plant would get transplanted in Sri Lanka as well as in Africa to create tea plantations there.

When this expedition takes place, one of the leading botanists, who is British, who keeps a detailed field journal, gives us a ton of information, right, about the plants he's encountering while he is going in search of this species of tea that's a forest species. And as you read his field memoir, you realize it is not just a scientific perspective, in terms of measurement, calibrating the plant size or depth, or for that matter, mapping the geography of the place, the kind of typical markers that we ascribe to scientific inquiry, right? It is a humanistic journal as well.

It tells a story about this individual, what he's feeling, his intuition, when he thinks the expedition will fail, what kinds of cheese he likes to eat, who he's having an argument with, what kinds of animals he encounters, how they make him also feel. In that particular area, what is it like to explore, how frightening it can be, how challenging it can be. All these questions of you, who are as a human being pour into his memoir.

So every single, I think, inscription of this sort, these sorts of field notes that we think of as scientific inscription are also deeply humanistic. So one cannot exist without the other, because the scientist, himself or herself, is ultimately a bundle of emotions. We are talking, also, about a physical body in the environment, which means people are going to experience climate. They're going to experience senses. All of this makes up the world of science, in both tangible and intangible ways. And I think that's where the humanity steps in and allows for us to pry open the scientific experience to a much wider one that is deeply human at the end of the day.

Do you think-- So I'm asking-- this is a loaded question now. Just based on that, such an interesting perspective, and I'm asking this, because I think I can imagine and have had conversations with scientists, contemporary scientists-- obviously, I haven't had a lot of conversation with 19th century, except through the archives. But a sense that sometimes that line of questioning, the suggestion that scientists are influenced by their environment, or by what they ate that day, or what they didn't eat that day, or what frightens them, or what they're looking at night when they are relaxing--

And I'm thinking right now about the fantastic book about the Mars Rover. That at night, all the scientists would sometimes get together. When they were creating the Mars Rover, they would get together and watch sci-fi movies at night. And I love this idea of trying to figure out how to see Mars, but through the spectrum of this way of them then seeing how humans have created, in cinematic view, how we look or how we think we're going to see outer space.

But I haven't noticed that some scientists feel very prickly about this, because it can be interpreted that we're suggesting that their observations or that their data is somehow tainted. Or, it isn't as truthful, it isn't as rational as science might need, or some scientists might feel they need to carry authority. What do you say about that-- That this can be the moment when interdisciplinarity breaks up a bit.

That we have this sort of way in which we want all of these ways of knowledge to work, and yet some of the suggestions that we're making fray the authorities of knowledge. So how would you confront that? What is your feeling about the concern that somehow making it more human also deteriorates the potential of the science?

OK, so this is interesting. First of all, you're talking about data, right, which, once it's gathered, it's published, has a certain space of its own. But I think, as humanists, we are looking at how we arrive at that data, how the scientist moves through different experiences to, in fact, make the conclusions that are made.

And the experience factor is what I am interested in, in particular, because that is bound to be messy. It's life, right? It's cluttered. No matter how much you plan, things may go a certain way, especially for those, I think, who work in the outdoors.

And I'm thinking of someone like Meg Lowman, whose memoir, *The Argonaut*, I just finished reading. And it's so powerful, because she talks about her experiences as a scientist, it's not so much about the data she's gathered, because that is in the publications, right? It's in the peer-reviewed journals, which has this wonderful space of its own. It's making the big contributions that it needs to make, but what about the backstory, the one of arrival? How do you work through these ideas.

How do you also function, as a scientist, with self-reflexive? I'm thinking also of Robin Kimmerer, right, who really-- it makes us reimagine what scientific truth is, in many ways. I mean, how many different truths actually can intermesh and sometimes collide?

So I think we need to see the bigger picture here. That it's not just the data, but the journeys that ultimately yield that data that are also equally important. And I think sometimes that is shaved off from scientific publications, because they're only interested in the findings, publishing that. And I think, because within that discipline as well, that is what matters, right?

Whereas they all have fabulous adventures to tell us about. And that's where that shared sense of humanity comes out. And the few scientists that I have worked with, in fact, quite a few of them now that I think about it-- every single time I tell them that, yes, you are scientists, but you're also historymakers and you don't realize that, but you are.

And I think, in part, because in the 19th century, and we know this is historians who work on the past, these boundaries between literature, writing, science were much more blurry. And when these scientists are writing their field notes, they're writing as diarists, right? So they're marvelously eloquent.

They're deeply aware that they're leaving behind a record of some sort, which has to be readable. And I think the scientists today may be keeping field notes of a slightly different ilk, but the ones who are great storytellers, as we can see around us, who've all written beautiful books for us to read, understand the value of that, understand the value of holding onto those stories and the wonder of science, right? The wonder of science, I think, is what can be conveyed humanistically.

Right, well, it's interesting I mean, I often think that what if we thought about data as a language, and that scientists then should be encouraged, in some ways, to be bilingual? That they can speak in data, but that they can also speak in poetry, in painting, in-- that but in a way, these are all attempts to articulate some kind of knowledge, but just the way one language--

Language itself always limits us. No matter what language you pick, it has its limitations. It has its grammatical fixities. And so you need, in many ways, other languages to bring other ideas to the fore.

I want to move back now, because you've already sort of suggested it, and I want to get into both things tea. So let's transition to this phrase that you used as a way to get into your project, which is-- because I actually love thinking about this concept, which is the mobilities of tea. Talk to us a little bit about the mobilities of tea, and then maybe back it up and talk about why tea? Why is tea a good vector for you to talk about some of the ideas you wanted to? So maybe think about the mobilities of tea, as what it does for you intellectually then as well.

Well, two fabulous questions. I hope I don't lose track of them as I'm speaking. And if I do, please forgive me and bring me back on track--

I'll bring you back. Don't worry about it. Yeah, that's my job.

[LAUGHTER]

Let's talk first about the mobility of tea. I feel with my project, especially, and I should say that I'm writing a book about the visual cultures of tea in colonial and modern India, I feel very strongly that one cannot write about the art and science of tea without looking at the plant. You have to start with a tea plant itself. That is the beginning and the end of the story in many ways, right?

The rest of us are peripheral, the humans, the non-human world of animals. We are peripheral, but connected to the tea plants. So I'm literally chasing the tea plant down, in some ways. And I followed it in many directions across India, in Sri Lanka.

My goal is to find it in the tea plantation that's growing I believe outside of Charleston and South Carolina, or is it North Carolina? I'm forgetting. Somewhere in the Carolinas. I can't believe I'm forgetting this, but it's in the Deep South right now.

And what's fascinating for me when looking at the mobilities of tea is that tea, in India especially, is comprised of two different varieties. One is the China variety, which was transplanted thanks to the East India Company in India. And the second story revolves around the indigenous Assam variety of tea, which is what we call a jungle variety, or jungle, or forest variety of tea growing in Northeastern India in Assam and the surrounding states.

And Chinese tea is a product that, of course, the British have been very familiar with, that Europe has been very familiar with thanks to the high culture of tea drinking of the Chinese imperial court. It's a very prized commodity, and scientists are excited about having it transplanted. In Europe, Carl Linnaeus is always on the quest for gathering tea specimens, living ones, in this case. East India Company captains are involved with bringing these living specimens home back to Europe.

Sometimes these plants, turn out to be, by the way, fraudulent when they flower. That's another very interesting part about this story. And I think it could apply to other plants that are prized commodities that are brought back alive, but turned out to be fraudulent. So the hoaxes, the failures of these projects...

I was going to say, is this like a forgery tea? Is that what we're talking about? I kind of-- [LAUGHS]

I don't it's a forgery tea. I think, basically, whoever the tea collectors are basically bombing off other Camellia species, and it's when they flower that, of course, you are able to identify, right?

Right. Fascinating.

Yeah, so all of these other tales are woven through this story. And tea is also, of course, arriving as dried leaf product, the edible product as well. And one of the fascinating things about the China variety of tea is that it is also now linked with the location of the city of Calcutta, which is founded as the capital of British India. It's actually the youngest among all the cities, which are considered colonial settlements built by the British, or overtaken, I should say, by the British, not built. All of them are not built by them.

And it's strategically located closer to the China trade routes than other cities, such as Madras and Bombay, the two other big port cities. So strategically, Calcutta emerges from the China trade connections, aside from the fact that it also connects to the inland area. And not surprisingly, it also is a city with one of the oldest botanical gardens in the world, built in the 1780s precisely to foster the cultivation of plants like tea, indigo, cinchona, other plant commodities, basically. Basically following what Sir Joseph Banks had set out as economic botany, right?

And this particular story, therefore, that I'm telling, where I'm chasing down the tea plant, is about tea being cultivated in the botanical garden in Calcutta as kind of a test, as an experiment. And it flourishes.

The tea bush will flourish wherever you plant it, the tea plant. It's just a question of altitude, water, soil. That is what will influence the flavor of tea. So you can grow it in your backyard in Connecticut. Whether or not it's going to yield the great flavor that you want, that's a whole other question altogether, right?

So the tea plant, therefore, moves from China to the botanical gardens of Calcutta. And then is also dispersed to other areas of India for cultivation. The Assam tea plant is a slightly later story. The China variety is brought over from the late 18th century onwards. There's a botanical garden already to receive them, right?

The Assam variety has to be found in the forest, which means you have to depend on Indigenous tribes, middlemen to go to this particular area. So it's one of expedition, it's one of exploration. I'm not going to use the term discovery, because it was already discovered by the Indigenous tribes of India, who are living there, who still, by the way, lived there and prepared tea in a very specific manner.

And because it's a jungley, a forest variety, it's deemed inferior, from the beginning. The British are very suspicious as to whether it's even an authentic Camellia species, tea growing species, right? But if you look at the geography of where Assam is located or Northeastern India is located and where the tea growing areas of China are located, it's the same geographical continuum.

So it makes perfect sense, but it doesn't come with high imperial Chinese culture. It's been consumed by tribals, right? So it comes with a different kind of cachet.

But the moment it is authenticated when it is established as a tea variety, immediately the East India Company swings into action. And we have government plantations that are set up. And again, when I'm looking at the mobilities of tea I'm thinking about, all right, how does it go from forest to plantation?

All plantations, therefore, if one looks at it very strictly are about transplanted plants, even in Assam, because those plants have been taken out of the forest and been transplanted in a plantation, right? Also, the tea plant itself grows up to at least 15 feet high, like a regular tree. So if I were to show you a tea tree, you would not think of it as a tea growing plant at all. You wouldn't be able to recognize it.

So the tea bushes that we see are actually grown at chest height. They are forced to grow at that height. It's almost like a quasi-bonsai procedure, essentially, to structure the tea in such a way, the plant in such a way that it first of all throws out fresh leaves continuously. So it is forced into a certain state of fertility.

And then, of course, the freshest, the tenderest of tea leaves are plucked from the tops of these bushes. So then the mobility of the tea is transferred from bush to hand, to the pluckers' hands. And then are transported to the factories, where they are then processed by other hands to become the tea that you and I drink. In the meanwhile, that is being transported, is being mobilized through the railway systems in colonial India, also by river. And then of course the export is through the sea.

So we've got all these different tracks, or trajectories, of mobilities through different hands, through different environments, right? If you think about the auction house through which these leaves will circulate, we have a whole other audience, a whole other set of brokers who are determining the fate of tea. And what's curious to me, as someone who grew up in the city of Calcutta, is that Calcutta remained the center of the tea industry from its roots in the 18th century.

Till this day, it remains the center of the tea hub. So the Tea Board of India is located there. The Indian Tea Association is located there. One of the earliest herbarium collections, also located in Calcutta. And the history of tea collecting, or rather tea specimen collecting in Calcutta is connected with the oldest museum in India.

So tea has basically gone through several shifts and changes. And Calcutta has grown with those shifts and changes and those mobilities. And really, remained the center of the tea industry.

Tea research, however, is conducted very much in Assam, which has an outdoor, I would say, a botanical garden, which is obviously outdoors. But it's also like an outdoor laboratory that also functions as a plantation. It has its own herbarium, and it's an absolute national treasure in India. It's run by the Tea Research Association and was set up in the early part of the 20th century.

And that's where also the mobilities of tea are looked at very, very closely. And tea has also been cloned. It's been cloned. Different varieties of tea have been mixed. So China variety with Assam variety.

So it's a fascinating plant when you think about not only the journeys it's undertaken, but also the different environments it's shaped. It has shaped an entire industry of tea production in Sri Lanka, again, coming out of Assam tea, right? And Sri Lanka was known actually for its coffee plantations prior to the tea industry. It has shaped entire plantations in Africa.

So it has really been very instrumental in changing not only the layer of foliage, of plant ecologies, of animal ecologies that we see above the soil, but also underneath, right? Entire our soil pH balance has changed because of tea. So these are all things to consider when we think about the power of the plant, in both reviving certain environments, shifting and changing certain environments, certainly and also, sometimes in destroying certain environments as well, right?

So why tea is the question you asked me, right? For me, it's both an intellectual journey, it's also a very personal journey. So let me start with the personal one first, because that may set the stage for the intellectual one.

So my interest in tea evolves from my own family history in tea. My paternal great-grandfather was the founder chairman of the Indian Tea Planters Association in British India. So I come from a tea planting family.

So a lot of my interest in tea and telling the story of tea has really been driven by the need and the desire to tell the story of the Indian planter as well, because the story has really focused on the British planter. It's about the Indian planter, along with the British planter, along with other planters who are Australian, French, also looking at the Indian scientists' contributions here, because you cannot look at tea as a product in a plantation without thinking about the science of tea, because that's connected with agriculture, right? So that's the personal impetus.

The intellectual journey of why tea is because it is so definitive to the history of India. It is the most important, I think, plant commodity that India has that it's consumed on a large scale, not just in India, but across the world. So this has always been a fascinating, I think, avenue for me to look at, because the nationalism of India, or the national history of India, the overthrow of British rule, shall we say, also has a very powerful place in the tea industry. And this is another end of the story that I am looking at very closely in my book. That it's not just about colonial India under the British, but very much a post-colonial story as well that has become now a deeply Indian story. So this is where the intellectual journey has been very exciting for me.

And as somebody who's lived in North America now for 30 years, 30-plus years, for me, this is particularly exciting, because it connects the story of India with China, with Britain, and of course, with North America, right? It's a transnational story, for me, very much like a story of my own life in some ways. I mean, I think sometimes it's difficult to separate the intellectual from the personal, because both are very closely connected.

I'm interested then in pivoting you a little bit to talking about the visualities of tea and how this mobility has been represented visually. You didn't go so far as to say that tea has agency. But that we need to think about tea as an actor that may have its own sort of volition perhaps. But so what then is the story of the images that may, in moments, connect with tea and in moments might differ from tea, in terms of that idea of the visual objects and visual ideas start to take on their own autonomy, they become their own agents, they do their own work, they have their own abilities?

Let me think now. Let me take you back to the plant for a second, because I think that's the best place to start, because in my own research what I have found is the two obvious avenues are looking at botanical illustrations and material specimens, right? And the two are very different.

On the one hand, the botanical illustration especially, I would say, 18th century, as well as continuing into the 19th century, more often than not are colored. So you actually have very detailed, beautiful color added. So you have a sense of what the blossoms, the tea blossom actually looks like, what the tea flower looks like, the green of the leaf itself, et cetera.

With of course, tea specimens all that color gets lost. It drains away over time. They basically become brown bits of leaves, right? They're very fragile. And the tea flower, typically has white petals, *Camellia sinensis*, that is, with a yellow center. And those also fade, shall we say.

So very different colorations, very different types of fragments. And I'm using the word fragment in the broadest sense possible. But I think these cuttings the fact that we have fragments that are separated from the tree themselves speak to mobility, right? From the tree, they have traveled, perhaps, to a greenhouse somewhere in Europe where they have been cultivated or to a herbarium where they've been preserved. If they were cultivated in a greenhouse where they successfully lived, shall we say. Then those cuttings are taken from the mother plant, held up by a botanical artist to be drawn, and then color is added to that image.

So there are many different temporalities and spaces embedded in those kinds of, I would say, drawings. We tend to think of them as pressed specimens, but more often than not, they were actually rotated to study the different configuration of leaves and flowers in relation to the leaves, right? And with the material specimens, with the herbarium specimens, they are, of course, flattened out, but there's a completely different sense of materiality to them.

There's something also quite magical, because you realize that they come from these remote places at a completely different moment in time. And they now live in these tomb-like spaces almost. I mean, museums, archives, storage are very much like tombs. And I hate to use that analogy, but to a certain extent, these are objects that are preserved in their deaths, right? So it's very, very interesting to see how the tea plant has therefore shifted from the plant into institutional spaces, as well as into these intimate pages of books that we read and admire as well, right? So this is also quite fascinating, I think, in terms of mobilities.

Now with the visuality aspect of a plantation, to my eyes, when I look at images of plantations, and there are so many, so many across time from the 19th century onwards, you will oftentimes see very classic images of tea bushes dotted with a sprinkling of tea pluckers who are busy plucking these. And most times, these pluckers are women, their pickers are women, right? And to me, they are almost like extensions of the plant. They are connected to the plant.

So as the leaf is being plucked it is traveling in that moment into this person's hands, right? And there's something very intimate about that. And this is something I'm also exploring in my work is this question of plant intimacies. How do you transform the plant into a commodity? It is not just what happens in the machinery in the factory or in the canister that you and I are buying off the shelves. It is happening as soon as it is plucked. It's actually happening as soon as it is grown, but I think when it's transformed into a human hand, there is something very powerful about that particular gesture.

Now I can't go in necessarily and look-- zoom into the images to see exactly how they are being plucked, although one could do that. But certainly, I have contemporary images of pluckers' hands. And if I were to connect back to the broader theme of your project, Alexis, to me, these pluckers have been incredibly underestimated in the making of science, because the majority of research that has been done on them by historians, and rightfully so, has focused-- the bulk of scholarship has focused on the question of labor, which is very problematic, especially in the colonial era as well. And of course, the ongoing battle with labor issues, with labor questions, et cetera.

But in that story, however valuable that is, we have forgotten to question or retrieve foreground, their role in the making of science as well, because they are the ones encountering the tea bush on a daily basis. They get to report to their supervisor and also to the tea planter as to how the bush the tea bushes behaving on any given day, what the soil conditions are like. Is there, for instance, an area where you see wildlife encounters more than others?

And this is something else to think about, is that tea cannot be separated from its environment. It is an actor in conversation, in partnership with other actors. So tea growing is a multispecies activity. All the wild animals that live on tea plantations or even come through tea plantations are actually contributing to the life of tea.

And this is something we have to recognize, because if you look especially at a place like Assam, where the tea variety was, after all, a forest species. First of all, plants originally come from the forests, right? [LAUGHS] We can't deny that. Assam was a very exciting place to plant tea, because the forest had left soil that was incredibly rich. So when we have masses of forest trees being cut down, when deforestation is happening, it's opening up this incredibly fertile land for creating plantations, right?

And of course, the DNA of the plant itself relies on that kind of forest soil. It is deeply rooted in forest conditions. And for those conditions to survive, you need-- [AUDIO OUT] as well. It's not just the plants.

So till this day, although in much diminishing numbers for especially big cats, for big mammals, we have wildlife corridors still running through forests. We have regular sightings of leopards, and I have a wonderful picture actually in the Dooars area very close to Assam on the other side of the east of India where a leopard cub was found. And these are very regular sightings on plantations, where leopards will find cover. Not only, I mean they can climb trees and shade trees, they will also hide in tea bushes. At one point tigers did the same. Elephants come through regularly, even now. Cobras, for instance will find refuge from the heat under tree bushes.

The tea bush itself is a habitat for insects. There's incredible biodiversity on plantations. All of these creatures are constantly contributing to the health of your tea plant, right? The very tea that we drink. So the mobility and the visual images of tea can't be separated from that. So I'm very interested in looking also very closely at the animals that are part and parcel of tea country.

And we also have to keep in mind that in India plantations still intersect with forest. There is no boundary wall as such. So the forest and the plantation have forest borders. And those leaky borders are actually represented by the animal mobilities, where you see the animals on a regular basis, right?

So the laborers are the frontline workers who actually come in contact with these animals oftentimes, so they are incredibly aware of the environment, so are the tea planters. And yet the story of the planter and the plucker, and the making of science, and the broader understanding of science has not really been explored as much. I think that needs to be explored.

So when we are looking at images of plantations, the visuals of plantations, for me, all of these questions come up immediately. When a plucker is at a tea bush in a photograph, whether it's for the 19th century or the 20th century, to me, immediately it raises questions about how is the plant encouraging animal behavior, number one. Has this been depicted in art? And yes, it has. Do we see the tea planter as well as the plucker as agents of science? Absolutely, they are right there with the tea bushes, right?

So these are the kinds of hidden stories that I'm trying to pull out of these images, not just looking at plantations as organized landscapes of monoculture, which they are. They're also gardens. They are very specifically actually a tapestry of gardens. In fact, in India we don't even call them plantations. We call them tea gardens. And it's the garden that is comprised of these tea bushes, which is very close to a hedge, if you think about ornamental hedges, very similar to that. So there are all these crossovers with horticulture and gardening.

Also, within a plantation planters bungalows are oftentimes made out of vernacular materials from the forest. And they are typically surrounded by flower gardens with other transplants, with flowers like dahlias, roses, et cetera, which are brought from nurseries, perhaps in a city like Calcutta, to be transplanted in these gardens, within the tea garden, the ornamental floral garden within the tea garden, which is also about drawing political boundaries, cultural boundaries, social boundaries, right, within the hierarchy of tea plantations.

So these are very complex spaces, and these are all the different kinds of stories I'm trying to unpack. Also, of course, looking at the visual images of architectural history. When you are thinking about tea and you're looking at, let's say, a harbor, a port city-- and again, I'm going to bring in the example of Calcutta. And I'm going to bring up the example of Guangzhou, which was Canton. And if you look at the houses, the architecture lining the river in Canton, you will see all the European factories lined up where the tea trade is happening, right?

And in Calcutta, because of the tea trade, tea warehouses crop up along the banks of the River Hoogly, the main river that flows through Calcutta. So it begins to define the city's interface with the river, which is also very important. In London, very similarly, the East India docks are receiving these plant commodities, and not just tea, but other commodities that are being shipped out as well. So the way in which we begin to perceive space, urban spaces, is, in fact, being guided, being directed, being shaped constantly by these plant commodities that are being grown rurally in completely different areas, right? There are entire heritage hotels which are acknowledged as the places where tea planters stay en route to their plantations.

So also thinking about taxidermy for which, of course, the American Museum of Natural History is so well known, right? I'm thinking about the urban practice of taxidermy here, because a lot of the big taxidermy farms in India are set up in major cities, one of them is Cuthbertson and Harper. They are located, among others, in the city of Calcutta. And they were actually preserving skins, tiger skins, leopard skins for those planters who would have hunted big cats, not only on their plantations, but also in nearby forest.

They also, by the way, receive scientists not just from Britain, but also from North America into plantations as rest houses for moving on to their expeditions. Or, they helped them with their science and data gathering. And I'm thinking especially of the hoolock gibbons diorama in the American Museum of Natural History.

And I remember visiting, some years ago, and being so wonderfully surprised that here was this particular primate species in this diorama from Assam. And because of plantations, of course, the hoolock gibbons shrunk dramatically, has shrunk dramatically to the point where we literally have islands where once it was all forest for them to live in. They're now restricted to these poor forest patches, right? But occasionally, they do show up on plantations, and historically, they have.

Now they are arboreal creatures. So they're canopy animals. And the diorama, very beautifully, pictures that, visualizes that for us in New York City. But for me, it's not just about the forest in that diorama. I see the forest connected to the plantation in that diorama.

Right, right. Well, that so nicely edges us into the next question I have wanted to ask you, which is focused a little more on the *Seeing Truth* exhibition, but also tying into some of these questions that you are asking. And remind me, I want to come back to this idea of plant intimacy, because I think that's fascinating.

But so in the *Seeing Truth* exhibition and project, we are seeking to problematize, of course, the links between art, science, museums, and the whole culture of knowledge making. You were saying that it gave you all this joy to see these animals in the Natural History Museum, but the Natural History Museum, of course, has a very long and deeply problematic relationship to, I was going to say, mobilities, but specifically to capitalism, to colonialism, to plant and animal life, and caretaking of those. The conservation element has been sort of complicated. And all of this, of course done, under the auspices of the importance of science and the importance of producing knowledge.

So what I was leading you to is if you could maybe help us understand what your relationship is conceptually to the ideas of art, and science, and truth. And how are those ideas connected for you? How do they deviate? And then how has the study of tea helped you, perhaps, put those terms in constellation with each other?

Oh, gosh. Lots of different questions. I'll try and tackled at least one of them, let me put it this way.

[LAUGHS]

So I'll start with your last one. And hopefully, I'm going in the direction you want me to go in. So this question of truth, as a historian, we're always looking at texts, right, we're looking at the archives, we're looking at images, when we're also art historians, or material culture.

And one of the challenges of doing research as you know is that the objects, especially those of us who work on the history of science, the objects that we seek are in very different types of archives, in the natural history archives. For me, it's also at the British Library or the archives in India, which are government-based archives, originally imperial archives.

The whole term archive itself, the whole concept of an archive is deeply colonial. It has colonial roots. And the American Museum of Natural History is not the only one with the problematic histories. Even the tea industry itself is steeped in all of what you mentioned, capitalism, colonialism, plant extraction, deforestation. Also of course, with deforestation comes the loss of animal lives as well as other plant lives, right? So all of these institutions that we are talking about are entangled in these histories.

For me, personally, looking at the material that I've been looking at now, as almost like a detective, finding the objects connected back to the tea growing landscapes that I study, which are actually distributed between the Natural History Museum in London, and Tring, and now, presently, also the American Museum of Natural History. These are nodes, right, that I am looking at.

But I'm deeply aware of the fact that, at one point, these were all living histories. That in the archive they tend to get siloed. They tend to get categorized, and they live in these bubbles, right, because we're looking at them within the framework of a particular context, a particular scientist's expedition, a particular moment of collecting. It has an acquisition number. It has a catalog entry. All of that is fine as distilled information, but having now lived in, and visited, and traveled in the spaces from where many of these objects came from, or where these archives pertain to, it's a whole other landscape, right? And you realize the immensity of these landscapes and how these objects, in the end, are very tiny glimpses of a much larger, broader, complex environment with so many networks of information, so many different actors.

And so the challenge is, whose truths are we telling and who is speaking to that truth, right? So the museum, I think, is one constituent. But the moment we take the objects-- almost and reimagine them in the spaces from which they come, whether it's a herbarium specimen, the botanical illustration, the plantation image, the animal taxidermy specimen, the animal image itself, all of these can be traced back. Imagine them tumbling back into Assam, Darjeeling, Munnar, down in Kerala, or the Kangra Valley. These are all the tea growing areas of India, right? You will see a completely different truth then. You will see one that is not completely separated. They are all connected back. And to me, that is very vital.

Also, listening to the voices on the ground have been incredibly enriching in my project, because what I found is when I read so much about tea written by so many different authors there's a huge amount of literature on this subject, and I'm talking about the history of tea, in particular, and then when you were talking to the planter you will glean a whole other set of histories, a whole other understanding. And I have to say, that my deepest knowledge of tea has not come from any book, it has come from knowledge that I have received from the planters and from the scientists who work directly with the tea plant, as well as from tea pluckers. There is no substitute for that knowledge. It is not something that is written necessarily by historians. Occasionally, we do have references to it.

So I feel very strongly that we need to figure out ways to create the dialogue between the museum as well as these spaces. How do we break down these boundaries, right? I mean, we talk about boundaries between scientists and humanists, but there are also these institutional boundaries, right? That these voices need to be in the same room, because there's so much to learn from each other.

And to me, it's always interesting whenever I go back to India, and this happened in 2016, actually. I'll give you an example when I was invited to give a talk at a museum in Calcutta called the Victoria Memorial Hall. And a huge audience showed up, a lot from the tea industry itself. And I was quite nervous about giving this talk about tea, because I felt I was preaching to the choir here, right? I mean, they come with deep knowledge. But it was really invigorating, because I chose to speak about the 18th century chapter of tea, which really surprised them in many ways.

There were also people in the audience who had no idea what a herbarium was. And that's something else that we need to keep in mind, is that those of us who are plant nuts and animal nuts may find all of this very familiar, but to the larger audience, a museum, a fine arts museum is really what they have in their heads. They don't necessarily think of natural history collections also as art collections or visual collections that have meaning for those of us who are visual historians, right? So these multiple truths have to be brought in conversation with each other as well.

And something like, let's say, how does the tea plant foster an experience that is perhaps deeply spiritual for people who live on a plantation? Does it in fact engender a certain kind of reverence for the plant as well as for the animals, right? Oftentimes, these are Adivasi, the tribal workers, who by and large are also themselves colonial transplants were brought from other areas to work on plantations. They have their own rituals of honoring animals on plantations.

These are the stories that we also need to tell, right? And this requires us to be in constant conversation with the actors on the ground who have, for generations, lived with this plant and lived with the environment, the multispecies environment of the plant, right? Then only, I think, can become to a much more holistic and a much more layered concept of the truth, because truth is not just one thing, right? It's a prismatic-- it's a prism where you can look through different lenses to arrive at certain conclusions. At least, that's how I look at it. And I think we have an opportunity to really think about the interactiveness of different actors, and the messy overlaps, and the divergences, where the story comes together, where it diverges, because people have different truths, even on a plantation, let alone in a museum, where it is so much further removed from that. So we have to start ground upwards, I think, and think about how do we bring all these stories together.

Can we also think about the plant through the lens of an animal? You asked, can the tea plant, in effect, be also an independent actor? How do we think about the story of tea, from the version from, let's say, the vantage point of the tea plant itself? Can we then turn it around, and say, OK, so today I'm thinking like a tiger moving through the bushes, right?

And from all the memoirs that I have read of all these different encounters with animals as well as plants one can try and reimagine this. It's a bold move to make, but I think to think more creatively is a more responsible way of arriving at whatever truth we arrive at. But I think, the truth is it exists right now in a museum collection or an archive is a very static one. It needs to be more dynamic. It needs to be far more holistic. I'm not going to use the word inclusive, because it has become such a buzzword. I want to use the word holistic, because I think that allows for different shades, because for an Adivasi--

for a tribal person-- it may have a totally different, shall we say, arc of meaning that is deeply rooted in experience, actual lived experience.

For someone like me or you, who's a scholar sitting so far away, the arc of meaning will be deeply rooted in the intellectual experience. So there are all these different experiences that feed into this truth. So I think opening up those voices are super important for us to really revisit what we mean by truth in these connections.

Right, I mean, I love this idea. I mean, I think this is a through of your project and through of an idea that we have had actually very narrow. And I'm thinking, and I say we. I think, in terms of museums, in terms of academic disciplinary modes of study, very narrow and actually then, I think, surprisingly fragile ways of thinking about knowledge, and I do--

You had mentioned her earlier, but I hear a great deal of similarities with the work of people like Robin Kimmerer, who are suggesting that we need to think about science and knowledge as not limited to these particular sites and these particular modes of learning. And that's why I love this idea of plant intimacies. And again, I think that it is also complicated then, of course, by how so many of those bodies across time did not choose to pick plants-- I'm thinking right now about the sort of plant intimacies of enslaved peoples with products like cotton or rice. That these are not chosen intimacies.

I mean I think that so often we think of intimacies in a very modern and contemporary sense as chosen ones, things that we have chosen to have intimate relationships with. And that so often this knowledge comes at this very toxic is a mild way of putting it, the genocide of one kind of life to produce this other product. That these intimacies have costs, but at the same time that there acknowledges that are pulled from them that cannot then be silenced, because, in fact, they have their own journeys, and stories, and that they also suggest to us such rich ways of imagining ourselves, of not limiting our knowledge, of imagining possibilities and potential.

I think that it's so interesting, because it's, in some ways, you mentioned so much, your work as a historian, but it seems to me there's so much almost future looking in what you're saying. The idea if we could hear something different, if we could reframe our story we might have different potentials. Things might have different outcomes, which seems impossibly hopeful, at the same time a very-- for what I think can often be-- I mean, again, I think that amongst the words of mobility and intimacies our contemporary version of those has such of excitement attached to them, but they can be so tragic, and devastating, and all these other sort of aspects to it. There's a wholeness of those things that is more complex than I think we have given voice to.

Absolutely, and if I may speak to that, when we think about tea, which like any other product is marketed as a very sensual product, right, it's a very sensory product. It's sensual. It gives you great pleasure. It's supposed to be very soothing. Compared to coffee which is considered this drink which is, yes, very soothing, too, but it's a lifter upper, it wakes you up, it jolts you awake. Tea is much gentler as a product, right? And that's a marketing strategy. And of course, it is all of that, but it is also being marketed to us that way.

And if you were to think about the moment, again, when the tea is being plucked, right, going back to that first point of intimacy between a human being and the plant as a commodity-- also, when it's being pruned, that's another first point of intimacy, right? And there are specific instruments that are being used to prune the tree as well. So here is a bush that is being forced into a very fertile stage. You also have these women who are also fertile bodies themselves, who are producing generations of pluckers, by the way, who are being, as you said, forced into a situation-- well, forced by the system of capitalism, right, into a situation where they are the ones who have to be the intimate agents of tea plucking.

Now that act of plucking is not just plucking a rose petal, let's say, off a rose. It's actually twist and pluck. So when you are plucking tea, it's much more difficult to do than it appears. And the first time I actually plucked tea, I realized that. That it took enormous dexterity and strength of your wrist. I mean, the first time I plucked it frankly speaking, I butchered the leaves. It was terrible. My first attempt was absolutely disastrous.

[LAUGHS]

And partly because I was so self-conscious while I was doing it. And I kept thinking, how can I be the great-granddaughter of this person who set up this really important set of plantations, not know how to pluck tea? And at the same time, being deeply conscious and quite delighted that I was learning something new for the first time that would connect me in a very visceral way with the kinds of images I was looking at for my own research. So there was both of that. And then when I finally was able to do that, too, it took a while to figure out, the particular deftness, the weight of your hand, how much pressure you had to put. And all of this was so humbling, because I learned that this intimacy with the plant was really a certain kind of corporeal memory almost, right, for those who pluck on a daily basis.

And you're talking about a physical activity where your hands are being bruised, you are plucking for lengthy hours, you cannot predict if there's a little bit of a branch poking into your fingers, right? You could be bitten by a snake. You could be bitten by mosquitoes. There could be a leopard cub.

[LAUGHS]

All kinds of things can happen. So this question of intimacy is deeply fraught with all the different possibilities of interacting with your environment, right?

I mean, you mentioned this idea of death, of the way in which life, and death, and reproduction are very tenaciously woven through our archives. And this is an issue that's come up a number of times in some of the earlier interviews we've done. But I do think it's fascinating, I think, because it connects with something we were talking about earlier, which is about how scientists collect data. That it ultimately demands so much physicality, like that we forget--

And I mean, I think even we forget what it means to actually even sit in front of our little computers. That you and I will get up from here and our shoulders will feel a little tight. And we'll have to walk off the sort of hour that we sat here. But it is so often that we forget the physical part of all of the stories that we are telling and we disappear the body. And I think that's what's so interesting about the line of research that you're doing is that you are insistently pulling us back to the act of twisting and pulling. And that this has meaning and that it--

I mean, I have to say, and this is just an aside, but I was very old, in terms of my sort of scholarship and thinking about race and visuality before-- and this is when I was teaching in the South, somebody brought in a cotton plant for me. And I had never-- I had, I mean, I'd seen, as you said, noticed there's tons of images of plantations, basically starting as soon as there is a plantation. There's somebody who's trying to capture it visually and tell a story. But all of those images of plucking cotton had no meaning as soon as I actually felt the plant, and felt the way the plant was sharp, and resists you. Plants don't like to be pulled, and plucked, and moved around, and bent.

And it does push you back into this fantastic way in which science, and art, and our physicality are constantly at war with each other. That there are these ways in which producing anything is a physical act. If we forget that, if we erase that we miss this really crucial story about the plant, about the person, about the animals. I mean, that we just would lose this part that has to do, in fact with death and corporeality. That's so interesting, yeah.

Absolutely, and it also, I think, has to do with the afterlives as well, as one would have moved beyond death. And I'm thinking of taxidermy specimens, in particular, and also the hauntings that was afterlives represent, right? So much of this is about the hauntings of memories, the tug of memory, the tug of certain spaces that are now lost to us, certain bodies that are lost to us, right?

And this is actually very powerful on tea estates, on tea plantations as well, because you're deeply aware of the disappearing forest. You are deeply aware of all the deaths that have made it possible for this deep land to live and thrive and the need to also be mindful of the future. And I think that is something that the tea industry is very well aware of today. So what we see as, let's say, a hoolock gibbon stuffed specimen in the American Natural History Museum, very, very powerful sign, a very conspicuous sign of deforestation. When you speak to a planter on the ground in Assam, they will be equally concerned about conservation efforts for the hoolock gibbon.

So again, going back to your point, that how do we build these bridges between the makers of knowledge and the people who are exhibiting that knowledge or storing that knowledge, which would be the museum or the archive. And then the people who are creating this knowledge on the ground, being all the scientists, and planters, and pluckers, et cetera, et cetera. I think we have to also think about spectrality, hauntings, memory, the afterlives as well of these spaces and their actors, because why else would these people leave memoirs behind? Why would they feel compelled to write about what it was like for them when they lived in India as planters? Why would they feel compelled to write their field diaries? Do you see what I mean? At some level, there is a certain desire to hold on to these spaces already. So those deaths perhaps occur as soon as-- and I'm talking about psychic deaths, perhaps occur as soon as they leave the area, and they're remembering it, and we need to hold onto that.

Right, well, that's beautiful. I mean, it's just beautiful to think about all of these, again, this way in which your project does this really important work of capturing multiple temporalities, multiple corporealities, and forcing us to restructure what we think we know and what we think we even can know. I mean, I think that's the other part that I think is so sort of fascinating.

So I'm going to toss you a little bit, as we end, as we get to close to the end of our time here together. Part of the *Seeing Truth* project is having instigator objects, so objects that have been pulled from the Museum of Natural Histories collection, their archived collection, which as you know is already a very complicated-- how objects move out of the museum or a scientific realm and into an archival realm. Again, changing identities, changing knowledge categories. What instigator object strikes you as something that you wanted to engage with and what provoked you about the instigator item that you chose?

So it was a difficult choice, I will say this. But I decided to follow my instincts and go with the one that I felt spoke to me right off the bat, more as a mysterious object than any other. And when I clicked on it I realized what it was, and that's the Tiffany letter opener that was, I guess, gifted to Henry Osborn, right, by his wife. And I found that fascinating, because the making of science really has depended on this vast ecology of letters, right, this empire of letters, and letter writing.

And so much of what we chase down as researchers revolves around the art of writing. It's about finding the correspondence between different actors. And certainly, that's been integral to my research as well. And actually finding letters has been far more exciting than finding the published articles in some ways, because--

[LAUGHS]

--you always have this hope that a secret will be revealed in a letter, or there'll be some really interesting nugget of information that will open up a whole new world for you. And sometimes that does happen.

Absolutely.

Right? That does happen. And for me--

It keeps us coming back to archives, right?

Yeah, exactly.

Like that sort of, like it can happen. I can find something. This is going to blow my mind.

Yeah, exactly, exactly. And there's also something to be said, again, about intimacy where you're touching the letter that this person who you have read about has actually written physically. And here is a letter opener that literally opens this treasure trove for you, right, where you are receiving this gift, I'm stealing from Marcel Mauss over here, of a letter. And you're opening it, and someday that letter becomes part of an archive, right?

And there's something quite delightful about that. There's a joy of receiving. I'm sure there's also the pain of receiving a letter as well. That not everything is about happy news. News can take different kinds of shades and forms. And certainly, looking at the 19th century and the 20th century, I think letters are absolutely essential to the exchange of scientific ideas, to the exchange of visual ideas, to figuring out things from, OK, what color do I put on this drawing to Joseph Banks asking for drawings supposedly made by Chinese artists in India off the Chinese plants that were transplanted. I'm still trying to find them, for instance. So when you start tracing, letters when you start literally tracking them, they lead you to these other nodes, right? So for me, that letter opener really felt like a lock and key, where you unlock an entire new realm, perhaps, of ideas.

The other thing that was quite exciting about that object is that it holds the imprints of the hands of this person who has used it, right? It's weathered over time, perhaps. It literally contains the imprints of Henry Osborn and his wife, and that's also what letters are. They're imprints of other lives. So speaking of death and life, they're really caught up in this wonderful cycle, so to speak.

So I think that's what really attracted me to the object. And also, this question of mobilities. Letters have traveled across great distances along with all the specimens that I studied, for instance. Usually, there are letters accompanying them, both during their journey as well as afterwards when they've been deposited somewhere. They have oftentimes gotten lost. So the loss of scientific knowledge, the gaps, the ostensible gaps that people never know about. So these are all important questions to ask.

I have to say that my present project has also led me to asking all the tea planters I interact with to please reserve all their records, which means letters and correspondence [LAUGHS] for the future generations of historians like myself. So important, crucial--

I think it's crucial. I mean, I certainly think that part of the project the larger project is to think about archives as radical political spaces, and to think about what our own contributions could be to those--

Exactly.

--radical political spaces and that sort of thing.

Absolutely, they're not just about the past, they're very much about the present and building towards the future.

Right, right, absolutely.

And sometimes I don't think scientists, or for that matter, planters or pluckers are thinking of themselves as historymakers at all, yet they are.

Well, I mean I do think that is what is so political about archives is that we are always historically, and culturally, and socially trained to think about who contributes to history and who doesn't. And so I do love the idea of you empowering people, but also us, as scholars, I mean, because this is what you're doing also is trying to listen to people who were told that they were, their stories and knowledge wasn't important, and trying to find evidence of what they were thinking and feeling. That so it connects your project in the 18th century to the contemporary moment. That where are these voices, and we should be listening to more knowledge, more memories, more intimacies, not less.

But all right, and now, of course, I'm going to give you the super easy wrap up question. And this gets us back to our very first sort of conversation about truth. So tell me one thing, one thing, because everybody tries to do-- I'm going to warn you. Everybody tries to say, like can I have two things. It's like wishes from a genie. Everybody wants more than just their allotted amount.

Tell me one thing that you know is the truth, and then tell me how that is true, what evidence do you have of its truth, and when did you know it was true, and why?

OK, so does it have to be an object?

No, no. Anything you want it to be.

OK, so this, I mean, it's a fabulous question. I think my one thing would be the experience of plucking tea. That would be the one thing that I would think of immediately as really surprising me about what I understood about tea as being like any other plant, easy to pluck the leaves. In that moment of plucking I realized that the images that I have been looking at, as I said earlier, convey plucking as just an activity, whereas, as I was plucking, I realized that the truth of plucking tea was a lot more complex than that. It was physical. It was certainly a very disciplined activity, which I knew, hypothetically, in my head, but I finally figured out that, yes, this is true.

And this is also very close to the making of science in some ways, right? That science is also a very disciplined activity, the gathering of data. So the pluckers' activity is also incredibly disciplined. It has also been disciplined at the same time. So it's highly problematic as well. So that's where these learnings come in.

It also made me realize that what we see as a botanical specimen in a herbarium like Kew is ultimately about plucking leaves off a tea tree somewhere in Assam or in the northeast, all right? And so the story behind those leaves sitting in these herbaria are coming out of these, again, plant intimacies of someone knowing what to pluck and how to pluck them. I think this is very key to the shaping of the truths that we see, and that we wish to convey that in our own writings, if that makes sense?

It does. That was beautiful. That is that is a great truth.

And that... and that truth, to me, when I was plucking the leaf, it wasn't just about the leaf, you're really connected with the plant. You can feel its strength. That it's rooted to the ground, and I am tugging at the leaf. And here is this creature who is so deeply anchored below the soil, right? And I'm the alien coming into its environment and trying to remove something from it. So as you said, it resists. But at the same time it yields. It allows you, ultimately, to pluck.

Now I'm also very conscious that this plant is connected to a whole other network of actors. And so it made me a lot more conscious, finally, that when I drink tea today, when you drink tea today, or anybody else, we are not just drinking tea. You are drinking the imprint of that soil. You are drinking the imprint of the hands that are plucked the leaves. You are drinking the imprints of the animals that have brushed against those tea bushes, right? You are drinking an entire ecosystem. Ultimately, that, to me, is a much bigger truth than anything else that I'm pursuing.

Well, and it has such responsibility and potential then, too, right? I mean, it gives me chills to think about that, and then I am also oppressed by that knowledge in equal, beautiful ways. That is a tremendous responsibility to think about the things which we take in, and that we make part of us. I mean, because I think that's the other part of this whole story that's very intimate, which is that you drink it.

Absolutely.

And we were talking earlier about the luxury, or the feeling of calm, or-- but no matter what, you're trying to adjust something on your physical level. And I just, again, I think that's what's so exciting about your project is the connecting of all of these modes of thinking, but also this privileging of a kind of knowledge and a kind of experience that I think we haven't always been attentive to.

Yeah, and I think, also, going back to what you just said, Alexis, it's about imbibing this product, right?

Yeah, mm-hmm.

It's the most powerful way to engage with the plant, and in fact, is the ultimate of plant intimacies is when it becomes part of your body.

Yeah, right.

And this actually led to a lot of anxiety in the 18th century about whether we're going to turn Chinese by drinking Chinese tea, for instance. And there are actual visual depictions of this, right? And to me, it's fascinating that this particular plant has been marketed in different ways. Chinese when it was suitable to do marketed as Chinese. Marketing it as Indian now, which, of course, it is now also an Indian product. Marketing it as British, whereas the plant doesn't really grow in Britain. Although, there are attempts to grow it in Scotland and other places now.

So the way in which this also works with national identity is quite interesting. And of course, the history of porcelain, which I didn't even go into. But that fine bone China, right, that was so prized and shifted an entire history of innovation--

Absolutely.

--in Europe, as a result, because the tea tastes different in the kind of container you're using, right?

Right.

And it smells different, and also, it's a very sensitive plant. So once it's dried, if it's in contact with another very aromatic substance, let's say, with jasmine flowers, it will absorb the aroma of jasmine, for instance. So tea is a remarkably malleable product in many ways, plant product.

And also, plantations are very sensory environments. That's the other thing is the moment you're near a tea plantation you will smell the fresh tea leaves, no matter where you go. So all of this we have to keep in mind when looking at images. That we have to touch with our eyes. We have to sense with our eyes in bigger ways than just thinking about sight.

Right, right. Well, thank you so much. This was absolutely delightful, and I'm so excited to have had this chance to talk with you and talk about truth, and art, and science, and museums, knowledge, and intimacies. So thank you, Romita.

Thanks so much. And I hope you enjoy a cup of tea this afternoon.

[LAUGHTER]

Absolutely.