We are dying wool with dyestuff from invasive and non-native organisms living on Santa Cruz Island in the Channel Islands archipelago in California, investigating the complex and intertwined influence humans have on our ecosystems, and the aesthetic, emotional, magical, and medicinal interrelationships between humans, plants and color. "The wool is open to yarn, the yarn woven into shawls. In addition, we are constructing a database of natural dye colors and various methods for visualizing and organizing that data, using a wide range of systems, from scientific to esoteric.

The organisms (many plants and one insect, cochineal) we are working with, were brought to the island over an extended period of time, starting when it was first colonized by Europeans. New organisms were still occasionally introduced in the late 20th century. For example, cochineal (controversially a very important source of red dye) was brought to the island in the late 19th century to help kill off the various which were considered a hazard to the over grazing on the island.

The human immigrants had a relationship to these organisms in their home lands for millennia, many of these plants have been used for food, medicine, magic and dye. Just as with humans, some behave better than others when arriving in a new land. Robin Wolf Kummerow, botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes about Bredal's plantain with affection in "Breathing Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Flora." "It's plantain is a racial classic, a foreigner who is not colonizing. It is a generous and healing newcomer, who is truly listening to the new environment. Other plants are invasive for wreaking havoc in the ecosystems they "invasive" On Santa Cruz Island, fennel, a sweet smelling, delicious plant, which is highly medicinal, traditionally used for protection, magic and yields a magical yellow color, has taken over large swaths of land to the detriment of the native flora. It is now one of the many plants targeted for eradication from the island in a major conservation effort aimed to restore it to a more "real or perceived" natural state.

The sheep breeds producing the wool and yarns we are working with have an historical connection to Santa Cruz Island. It's believed that the Santa Cruz Island sheep breed stems from sheep of several breeds, potentially including Martin, Rambouillet & a French variant of Merino, and English Leicester, brought to Santa Cruz Island in the mid 19th century for wool and meat production. Over the years, the sheep increased in numbers and became feral, causing massive erosion to the landscapes. In the nineteen, consistent with restoration efforts on the island, the sheep, then in the tens of thousands, were eradicated. Due to the methods used to keep the sheep off the land, most were shot on the island. The endemic Santa Cruz Island breed has biologically become one of the five most critically endangered breeds on the List conservation, priority list.

The wool from these sheep speaks about the landscape where the individual sheep lead their lives and the breed emerged. Its staple length and crimp, the soil and vegetable matter trapped in it, reveals something about the sheep, the breed and their environments (the people now speak of the "terreir" of wool.)

Interlopings is a process-based collaborative art project combining traditional techniques such as dyeing, spinning and weaving, with data visualization and "performative science" and "relational aesthetics" strategies. The public is invited to participate in the process through workshops and exhibitions and to have a direct visual, olfactory and tactile experience with animals and plants that have been introduced to the island. By catching and touching the wool, inspecting the insects and vegetable matter stuck to it, getting dazed by rich and subtle colors given to by the plants and seeing the warmth from weavings, the audience-participants inadvertently explore a wide array of topics. They might gain insights into issues ranging from aspects of the natural and cultural history of the Channel Islands and conservation, to topics related to the Anthropocene and chemistry. Some of the questions this project seeks are: How do we define a "native" species? When was wild? How do we double where species belong? What organism preserves our protection? What is the goal with conservation? What ends justify what means? Growing up in Sweden; in the seventies, we marched to the catchy chant "slate sprays" - stop spraying, while the children today learn that one of the most significant dangers to our natural environment are alien species! While these issues will be discussed in workshops and exhibitions, the most important questions are asked, and maybe answered, in the direct experiences of hands, nose, and eye and in the relationships created between people, processes and materials.

Interlopings The Warp and Weft of Ecological Entanglements
Helén Svensson and Lisa Jevbratt

1/12/2022 – 3/12/2023
Interlopings: Colors in the Warp and Weft of Ecological Entanglements
Pettiford Conservation Center Gallery, Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, California

2023 Interlopings: Experiencing the Warp and Weft of Ecological Entanglements
Chromal California Words Center, Camarillo, California

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