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Strange Science

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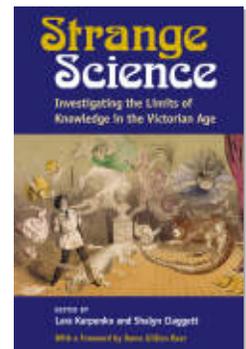
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CHAPTER 3

“A Perfect World of Wonders”

*Marianne North and the
Pleasures and Pursuits of Botany*

Narin Hassan

In the preface to Marianne North’s travel narrative, *Recollections of a Happy Life* (1894), Catherine Symonds writes: “My sister was no botanist in the technical sense of the term; her feeling for plants in their beautiful living personality was more like that which we all have for our human friends. She could never bear to see flowers uselessly gathered—their harmless lives destroyed.”¹ Symonds highlights how North straddled cultures of science and art, and of collection and environmentalism; though not “technically” a botanist, North clearly loved, studied, and depicted plants on a massive scale. She traveled the world to explore and to paint specimens from tropical landscapes but, as her sister notes, preferred to see flowers blooming in their native habitats. She had relationships with some of the renowned nineteenth-century men of science—her narrative describes her encounters with Charles Darwin, Alfred Russell Wallace, Joseph Hooker, and many others—and, although she was not professionally trained as a scientist or artist, she was recognized for her discovery and depiction of rare plant species. North lived a privileged life quite unusual for Victorian women and formed friendships with travelers and writers including Amelia Edwards, Lucie Duff Gordon, and

Isabella Bird, and artists Julia Margaret Cameron and William Holman Hunt. She was one of the most active and intrepid female explorers and had the means to travel the entire globe while narrating her experiences and recording her visions in a robust collection of paintings and illustrations. She produced hundreds of visual images and donated 832 of her paintings to the Royal Botanic gardens at Kew, where she funded the development of the North Gallery and supervised the display of her works. “She had the lower walls lined with boards made of the 246 different types of wood from which she had collected on her travels.” She also “paid for 2,000 copies of a catalog compiled at her request by . . . Kew botanist W. Botting Hemsley.”² These images, like her travel narrative, record an active life of exploration and reveal North’s unique vision of the globe and natural life within it.

Although, as Symonds notes, North could not bear seeing plants “uselessly gathered,” her representations contributed to expanding archives of botanical knowledge and she hovered on the cultural edges of both scientific and imperial expansion. She defined a unique relationship between the woman traveler and landscape: in her narrative and paintings she highlights the power of plants and their potential relationship with humans as “friends.” North’s “feeling” for plants and emphasis upon her intimate immersion within natural habitats challenges assumptions about nineteenth-century botanical exploration, including notions of the prototypical Victorian woman traveler as a distanced observer of landscape and more interested in native peoples, domestic lifestyles, and customs. While the tropics were a space where North could feel emancipated from the confines of Victorian society and participate in discourses of both science and colonialism in ways she could not have at home, her unique representations of the environment provided alternative, and sometimes subversive, visions of tropical spaces. Although her depictions unveil the wonders and specimens of the natural world, they also emphasize human interaction with nature as an intimate and phenomenological experience. In an age when botanical culture was increasingly linked with classificatory systems and objective notions of scientific knowledge, North promotes a subjective and fluid vision of nature focused upon immersive feeling and sensory expansiveness.

Marianne North became a naturalist, painter, writer, traveler, and amateur botanist during a time when the “nature” of botany as a field was becoming professionalized. As Ann Shteir has shown, botany shifted from being a domestic form of amusement to becoming a more scientific and professional venture in the nineteenth century.³ But it was also

increasingly associated with expanding conceptualizations of scientific knowledge and imperial conquest that often disregarded the activities of women. While, on the one hand, botanical interactions were linked to domestic amusement for ladies, on the other, as Mary Louise Pratt has famously argued, botanical knowledge was tied to masculine scientific and imperial pursuits:

Natural history called upon human intervention (intellectual, mainly) to compose an order. . . . One by one the planet's life forms were to be drawn out of the tangled threads of their life surroundings and rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and order. The (lettered, male, European) eye that held the system could familiarize ("naturalize") new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system of nature.⁴

David Arnold, in his reading of the tropics, ties the desire for order in European representations of nature to colonial histories: "Ideas of landscape, far from being peripheral to the exercise of power or merely reflective of a material reality, formed a central and integrating element in the wider constitution of colonial knowledge and a critical ingredient in the larger colonizing process."⁵ Further, Janet Browne reminds us that "the study of animal and plant geography in the nineteenth century was one of the most obvious imperial sciences in an age of expanding imperialism."⁶

North challenges binary notions of botany as either a ladylike domestic pursuit or an expanding science associated with masculinity and imperial expansion during this age. Instead, she articulates the ways that women can engage with botany at a global scale and reconstitute notions of the exotic within the natural world. Instead of imposing a preconceived vision onto the landscapes she encounters, North engages with the process of viewing and perceiving foreign spaces as a subjective and evolving experience. She presents an archive of botanical description and illustration that contributes to scientific knowledge and colonial discourses while also emphasizing the sensational pleasures, the wonder, and the intimate enjoyment of landscapes as powerful and elusive sites of transformation. She represents nature as containing rich and complex processes that cannot be easily categorized or captured by human interests. Instead, for North, plants function as independent and interdependent systems that sometimes challenge scientific objectification and categorization. As an intrepid traveler, North provides us with

a complex image of the Englishwoman abroad as an active, immersed, and embodied agent of scientific inquiry who participates within, and reframes, our sense of imperial science through her sustained commitment to representing nature; she is simultaneously engaged with, and ambivalent toward, the project of imperialism. North’s focus upon the intimate qualities of her experience with the natural world and the sensations they produce open readers and viewers of her work to the expansiveness of global knowledge and the complex qualities of nature. In her travel writing, paintings produced overseas, and the North gallery she curated at Kew upon return to England, plants are given a majestic and powerful status, depicted not as victims or specimens of imperial expansion, but instead as powerful and appealing agents that can build human consciousness and create a sense of global connectivity.

*“Vegetables Suited Me Better”:
Placing North within a Critical Context*

North is a perplexing figure, and criticism of her work emphasizes that she, like the plants she describes, often defies categorization. In her introduction to *Recollections of a Happy Life*, and her book, *Place Matters: Gendered Geography in Victorian Women’s Travel Books about Southeast Asia*, Susan Morgan describes the difficulty of defining North as artist, writer, and traveler. Reminding us that botany was itself an emerging science within this period, Morgan interrogates North’s complex role as amateur scientist, and ponders her complicity within imperial science, examining “how scientific imperialism is being represented when the leading imperialist role is being filled by a female subject.”⁷ Like Morgan, Antonia Losano considers North’s gendered position, arguing that her work “exhibits a rhetoric of emancipation.”⁸ These critics show that North moves beyond the ladylike pursuit of botany toward a more authoritative role as a gendered subject participating on the fringes of imperial science. Barbara Gates also describes the dilemma of the female explorer and the different expectations for women engaging in scientific discovery, reminding us that even though North led an active life of botanical discovery, she “still did not win the acclaim the scientific community routinely awarded to men who had accomplished far less than she.”⁹ More recently, building upon the work of Morgan and others, Eadaoin Agnew has suggested that North bolsters colonial projects in the development of her own professional and authoritative

voice, claiming that “North actively endorses the scientific projects of nineteenth-century imperialism.”¹⁰

North’s visual imagery has also garnered attention, and a number of recent studies, such as Michelle Payne’s *Marianne North: A Very Intrepid Painter* and Laura Ponsonby’s *Abundant Beauty: The Adventurous Travels of Marianne North, Botanical Artist*, provide a stunning overview of her visual images.¹¹ Yet even in the area of artistic production North is hard to define. Whereas Ponsonby, as the subtitle to her volume suggests, claims North as a “botanical artist,” Suzanne LeMay Sheffield describes North as one who did not quite fit into the traditions of either artistic or scientific illustration and claims the kind of work she produced was elusive and hard to define.¹² Michelle Payne describes her representations as “nature study,” whereas Lynn Merrill designates her as a “scientific artist.”¹³ Karen Morin also notes that “it is difficult to place North as a botanist or a more scientific type of naturalist; it is also difficult to place her as an artist.”¹⁴ North is an elusive figure, shifting between nineteenth-century cultures of science, imperialism, art, and travel, but ultimately challenging the boundaries of these areas.

It is clear that North sought the acknowledgment of scientific men and claimed some authority through her discoveries and expansive journeys into tropical lands. Accordingly, she may be considered a conduit to imperial expansion and certainly may be assumed to align herself with Western science. She does, as Morgan and others have suggested, produce the “naturalist’s gaze” by objectifying the beauty of plants and revealing the human desire to know and consume landscape.¹⁵ I also agree that she does engage with and benefit from expanding systems of imperialism and scientific exploration. In the early pages of her narrative, she describes her visits to Chiswick gardens to paint “specimen flowers” and to Kew, where, she writes, William Hooker “gave me a hanging bunch of *Amherstia nobilis*, one of the grandest flowers in existence. It was the first that had bloomed in England and made me long more and more to see the tropics.”¹⁶ The very nature of nineteenth-century travel—particularly botanical exploration—was already deeply embedded within structures of imperial science during this time, and to “survey” the globe assumed a desire to define and consume it within cultures of imperial knowledge and expansion. North’s competitive and ambitious desire to discover rare species, and the fact that five species of plants were named after her, reveals her implication within scientific imperialism.

North also, however, challenges traditional nineteenth-century prac-

tices of collection and questions the pursuits of plant hunters who tend to ignore the interconnected qualities of natural life, suggesting that plants sometimes “gaze back” and challenge our efforts to collect and contain them. Her textual narrative highlights the overwhelming powers of nature, and her visual images provide equally potent representations of plants as unique and perplexing figures that both interact with and challenge human intrusion. Indeed, at numerous moments within her text, North alludes to her own connection to plants as far more enticing than human interaction. In the second volume of her *Recollections*, she follows a short description of native women in Borneo exotically “clad in all the colours of the rainbow” with the claim, “Vegetables suited me better.”¹⁷ While North asserts her identity as a painter, traveler, and writer through her tropical pursuits, she also creates a holistic vision of landscape that emphasizes the power of plants and their ability to sometimes overwhelm and captivate humans. Her representations reshape conceptions of nature in an experimental, uncanny, and strange way—highlighting the sensory and immersive possibilities of human engagement with plant life. In creating her own perceptive and unique relationship with landscape, North acknowledges the inevitable progress of an imperial moment; but she also suggests that such projects may be challenged, as the natural world may have its own unruly, unpredictable, and uncontainable systems.

“Trespassing on Fairies’ Grounds”: Reading the Sensations and Representations of North’s Travel Narrative

Contemporary scholarship on Victorian women travelers tends to hover between viewing these figures as either uniquely equipped to challenge masculine stereotypes of representation or caught within the rhetoric and machinery of imperialism as exhibited in their colonial representations and imagery. North’s botanical pursuits implicate her within imperial expansion, but also allow her to retain and celebrate the unique natural environments in which she immersed herself. Her narrative shifts and complicates the structures of gender and science as it does notions of race and culture. Unlike many women’s travel journals of the time, hers has few descriptions of social, personal, or cultural life within the landscape she experienced. Her *Recollections* mention a few of the British expatriates she encountered on her travels, and provide some descrip-

tions of native habits and lifestyles, but her main focus is upon the variety of flora and fauna she encounters and the strategies she employs as an intrepid and careful plant seeker and adventuress.¹⁸

North's travel narrative departs from traditional tropes that dominated women's travel narratives and instead gives her readers a vision of vast landscapes and sublime scenes that emphasize the unattainable qualities of the natural world. Breaking the tradition of women's travel accounts that often focused upon domestic life, titillating scenes of harems, or encounters with native servants and cultural traditions, North instead provides a sweeping, picturesque display of larger-than-life geographical scenes—which, nonetheless, are exotic and sensual. When she does describe native servants, ayahs, and children, she suggests that they hinder the important work of illustration and painting. In the opening pages of volume 2 of her *Recollections* she writes: "Two ayahs followed me in, and fought for the possession of me, though I wanted neither."¹⁹ Abandoning her role as domestic manager or bearer of respectable British values, North instead focuses upon the world outside the confines of English compounds and homes. During her time in Jamaica, she writes, "after about a month of perfect quiet and incessant painting . . . people began to find me out" and "I begged to let off formal breakfasts, went out after my cup of tea at sunrise as I did at home, and worked till noon."²⁰ In general, people are not her focus; they are the background to her paintings, while botanical subjects are in the foreground, and her narrative seems to function in a similar way. Once she arrives in Darjeeling, "the finest hill place in the world," she describes the sublime qualities of the landscape and her need for solitude to digest its wonders:

The flowers about Darjeeling seemed endless. I found new ones every day. The *Thunbergia coccinea* was perhaps the most striking; it twined itself up to the tops of the oaks, and hung down in long tresses of brilliant color, the oak itself having leaves like the sweet chestnut, and great acorns as big as apricots almost hidden in their cups. There was another lovely creeper peculiar to Darjeeling,—the sweet-scented cluster ipomoea, of a pure pink or lilac color. The wild hydrangea with its tricolor blooms was also much more beautiful than the tame one. I worked so hard and walked so much that after a dinner or two with Sir Ashley Eden and other grandees, I refused any more invitations.²¹

In this description, North privileges the "wild" hydrangea over the tame one and presents her readers with a visual archive of the plants she

encounters. The flowers are “endless” and varied and far more intriguing to her than the English inhabitants she encounters—she favors her interaction with plants over her “invitations” from others and depicts these as distracting from her work. North’s narrative traces an endless stream of visits to botanical gardens and walks through forests to study plants and record them within their natural environments. She immerses herself completely within these tropical “pleasure gardens,” viewing them microscopically and from all angles. In New South Wales she writes: “At the lake of Illawarra we again found ourselves in the tropics, all tangled with unknown plants and greenery, abundant stag’s-horns, banksias, hakea, and odd things.”²² Both she, and the plants she describes, have physical qualities that become entangled and fused. From one location to another, she records the wonders of being submerged within nature and plant life—highlighting the joy of the rare discoveries with strong and spirited proclamations: “In the jungle, I found real pitcher-plants (*Nepenthes*) winding themselves amongst the tropical bracken. It was the first time I had seen them growing wild, and I screamed with delight.”²³ The pleasure and delight of garden hunting far exceed the need for ladylike behavior when it comes to North’s descriptions, and in one scene after another she describes what appears to be her unending joy in engaging with plants. North’s descriptions focus upon the sensations she feels during her journey and inspire readers to imagine the density and intricacy of the wild tropics. She depicts herself as a figure embodied and submerged in the tropics and presents plants as her equal sensory partners within the landscape. But unlike popular images of the tropics as dangerous and potentially unhealthy or unappealing spaces, North presents them as attractions that can provide thrilling and transformative experiences.

Like other women travelers of the nineteenth century, North describes her discoveries as a source of liberation and self-awareness. In Chile, one object of her pursuit is the “blue puya” plant, a rare specimen that she became aware of before her travels. She is driven to see the plant and writes:

Of course the first thing I tried to get was the great blue puya. I was told they were all out of flower; indeed, some people declared they did not exist, because they had not seen them. At last an energetic English lady bribed a man to bring me one from the mountain. It was a very bad specimen, but I screamed with delight at it, and worked hard to get it done before it was quite faded, for it was past its prime.²⁴

Although a specimen is brought to her, North is determined to find the plant on her own and witness it within its natural habitat. After climbing up a steep mountain, she writes:

I could not see a yard before me, but would not give up and was rewarded at last by the mists clearing, and behold, just over my head, a great group of the noble flowers, standing out like ghosts at first, then gradually coming out with their full beauty of color and form in every stage of growth; while beyond them glittered a snow peak far away, and I reached a new world of wonders, with blue sky overhead, and a mass of clouds like sheets of cotton-wool below me, hiding the valley I had left.²⁵

North initially shows delight over the specimen she is presented with, but her real goal is to experience the plant's powerful aura in its natural environment. For North, these "noble" flowers represent a magical vision—both ghostly and wondrous. Her pursuit of plants is strangely scientific and supernatural at the same time; while she is well versed in the scientific nomenclature of plants and comfortably describes plants using their Latin names within her text, she also highlights a spiritual, sacred aspect to plant life that moves beyond objective definition. North's pilgrimage up this steep mountain is a somewhat treacherous but also contemplative experience, providing her with an almost mystical sense of the environment. Her visit allows her to witness new wonders rarely seen, and she exposes the experience to her readers, creating a distinctive vision in both her narrative account and visual sketches. Although North was known for her very secular beliefs, her descriptions of botanical subjects emphasize that plants are an entryway to the unknown and to the sacred. She produced a series of paintings on sacred plants of India, and described native beliefs about the hidden healing powers of plants. After discovering the puya plant in Chile she comments that "the gum of the plant is valuable in medicine," and in India she notes her work of "hunting up the Sacred plants" and learning about them from a "learned baboo" who said "it pleased him much that I should take so much trouble about the plants that Siva loved."²⁶

North contrasts these wild, joyous, mystical, and immersive descriptions of her travels with scenes in London where she describes the fate of tropical plants on display. Recording a walk with Asa Gray and his wife in London, she writes:

One day I went with them both through Veitch’s hot-houses, and we were shown all his wonderful hybrid orchids, with the parent plants, and the clever man who hybridized them. We saw also houses full of pitcher-plants, baby pitchers, not bigger than pins’ heads, including the “*Nepenthes Northiana*,” in search of which a traveller had been sent across the world to Borneo after seeing my painting at Kensington. But it will be difficult to imitate, in a cramping glass house in foggy London, the abundance of air, though hot, in those limestone mountains.²⁷

Although much of North’s early engagement with plants was through the domestic glasshouses her father built, she privileges the experience of witnessing plants in their “natural” states over the process of propagating and transporting them in artificial surroundings.

While North may be read as an agent of imperial expansion, she also appears as an environmental activist arguing for the need to grow and retain plants in their native settings. As Dea Birkett has noted, North engaged with the larger network of scientific and colonial pursuits overseas and established several greenhouses by her home where she grew and painted tropical orchids and specimens.²⁸ But her narrative also describes the need to preserve natural environments and suggests that plants cannot thrive when uprooted from their tropical landscapes and transferred to the artificial conditions in hothouses. For example, in a passage that describes the joy of “hunting up all kinds of orchids” and hanging them to view, she writes: “I fear few of my treasures lived long.”²⁹ In the highlands of Brazil, she describes nature as gorgeous, enticing, and yet unattainable: “Gorgeous flowers grew close, but just out of reach, and every now and then I caught sight of some tiny nest, hanging inside a sheltering and prickly screen of brambles. All these wonders seem to taunt us mortals for trespassing on fairies’ grounds, and to tell us they were unapproachable.”³⁰ In an age of imperial and scientific expansion, North alludes to the inevitable desire to hunt plants and the urge to consume or dominate tropical lands. And yet her descriptions also suggest a circular dynamic between plants and the world of imperial science—one in which the tropical gaze is returned to remind “more mortals” of the potentially challenging dynamics of trespassing.

As her narrative unfolds, North establishes the process of painting as completely immersive, consuming, and addictive—she is lost in the landscape and the image she is creating, and her descriptions suggest the

power of plants to entice and attract humans. Day after day she describes the pleasures of her “work” and oil painting as an irresistible experience. Describing a scene upon her arrival in Jamaica, she writes: “I was in a state of ecstasy, and hardly knew what to paint first.”³¹ North’s narrative emphasizes the sensational qualities of engaging with nature; while she documents the plants she sees in a thorough and systematic way, she is driven by feeling, and her framing of the natural world—in both her journal and her images—emphasizes the intimacy of her relationship with the plants she encounters. She describes the “never-ending delight” of gardens, and her memoir traces landscapes and specimens from one chapter to the next in an ever-expanding process of description and aesthetic immersion.³² The highlands of Brazil are “a perfect fairy land” (1:118), and a fern walk is described as having “lovely, fairy like beauty” (1:89), the ferns being “most delicious to look at” (1:89). While her catalog of plant life makes botanic specimens an object of study and aesthetic vision, she seems to challenge the nineteenth-century pursuit of plants as objects of circulation and travel—opting instead to produce a unifying, global vision of plant life that connects one part of the globe to the other, and that produces a massive “wonderland” of plant life across the globe.³³ Thus, her narrative creates a catalog of sensational representations that entice readers to imagine, from a distance and up close, the wonders of the natural world.

North’s Visual Perceptions: Image and Display

North’s visual work also displays her immersive and experiential approach, both through her use of materials (primarily oil paint) and through the unique perspective, depth, and framing of her subject matter. Much of the botanical representation produced by women in the Victorian period was through sketching and watercolor—this was partly due to an established tradition of feminine styles of painting and the fact that women often painted at home and not in larger studios. As a number of critics, including Sheffield and Losano, have noted, North, however, chose to produce oil-based paintings, and she produced works that were aesthetically and spatially different from those of botanical illustrators of the time. Working with oils was a more complicated process—especially for an artist traveling to different locations—but oil paint captured the lushness and rich color of her surroundings and enhanced the visually stimulating and layered qualities of her images. With oil paint,

North could produce more vivid images that could capture the majestic qualities of plants that she described in her writing. Instead of floating independently on a page, her plant forms burst out of colorful scenes, and often her paintings capture one part of a larger scene—evoking a sense of the grandeur of the landscape. She is experimental with her paintings, and her vision is flexible and broad. Some of her paintings provide lush, panoramic scenes with an expansive focus, while others take a microscopic, albeit sensual and fleshy, approach. North describes the process of trying to capture the intensity and breadth of the natural world in her art:

When I went to finish another sketch I was astounded at the sight of a huge lily, with white face and pink stalks and backs, resting its heavy head on the ground. It grew from a single-stemmed plant, with the grand, curved leaves above the flower, and was called there the Brookiana lily, but Kew magnates call it *Crinum augustum*; its head was two feet across, and I had to take a smaller specimen to paint in order to get it into my half-sheet of paper life-size. It was scented like vanilla. Another crinum has since been called Northiana, after myself. It has a magnificent flower, growing almost in the water, each plant becoming an island at high tide, with beautiful reflections under it, and its perfect white petals enriched by the bright pink stamens which hang over them.³⁴

While in this case North finds a specimen to fit on her paper in life-size form, sometimes a portion of a leaf or plant will burst from the seam of a painting, or burst in from the edges evoking how plants exist in a large, rich, exotic landscape, not in isolation. As Patricia Murphy notes, North avoids the “subtle shades typically associated with Victorian woman’s artwork.” Instead, she “frequently opts for bold, startling colors that seem to issue a visual challenge to an observer.”³⁵ The visual intensity of North’s work—in her saturated and deep choice of colors, and direct, immersive choice of design—have inspired critics to describe her work as frightening and unsettling. Lynn Merrill writes: “The brilliant colors and otherworldly rococo forms of the plants in her tropical paintings pulsate with garish ominousness: they are so *other*, they are almost frightening. Botanical records, grounded in fact and precise observation, they nonetheless spark emotional fires.”³⁶ Further, Antonia Losano notes that North “paints vegetable chaos. Flowers tumble over the canvas, one scientifically interesting part of one flower hidden by

another. . . . One always has the sense of something—animal, mineral, vegetable, spiritual—lurking in the shadows at the boundaries of the vividly cheerful flowers.”³⁷

North’s images do seem to inspire a sense of otherness—one that I would suggest vindicates nature as a powerful force that is almost beyond representation. Instead of representing the “specimen-like” quality of a plant—its ability to float independently on a page or lie static in glass jar—her plants are consistently alive in their natural environments. North’s paintings depict plants in a way that emphasizes their movement and growth, as well as their potential to overwhelm us in a sensory way. North seems acutely aware of the simultaneous vulnerability of nature and the power of it. Her paintings allude to cultures of scientific illustration, but are not concerned with providing simplified, objective renderings of exotic specimens. Instead, they provide a more immersive view of the natural world and inspire viewers to imagine being and feeling within a foreign landscape. One of many examples of this is her *Red Water Lily of Southern India*.³⁸

North presents not one red lily, but many red lilies, and she depicts them at various stages of development and in tandem with other natural scenery. Like her description of the “great group of noble flowers” in Chile, she depicts the red lilies as a continually evolving and intertwined group of flowers. While the image has a close-up, almost microscopic view of the botanical subjects, it evokes the fullness of the landscape—there are plants on each side of the central lily, and several plants confront the viewer from the borders of the scene. The image includes insects that are hovering among the flowers, revealing the variety of natural life within the scene. North also depicts the image in a way that suggests the painter is directly engaged with the space—immersed within the plants and conveying the overall sensations they evoke. North confronts nature directly and refashions its representation, challenging and expanding our notions of Victorian botanical illustration and suggesting that while nature may capture the gaze of eager viewers, it also is constantly in flux. North catalogs plant after plant, in both her textual descriptions and her brilliant paintings, in a highly sensory way, and as she traces and records these visions from her travels, she provides a connective thread from one location to the next. Her vision for capturing the connections among natural life across the globe extends as she continues her travels from one continent to the next and she imagines capturing her global immersion visually and with a tactile approach.

Although North is remembered for her unusual and evocative imag-



Fig. 3.1. Marianne North, *Red Water Lily of Southern India*, 1878. (Courtesy of the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens.)

es and her entertaining narrative, she also produced her own unusual plant displays and recorded memories of her travels by creating physical arrangements and exhibits. When she travels to the United States she notes:

I had intended on putting an enlarged map of the world on the ceiling, coloured according to the geographical distribution of plants, in different shades of green and brown, the sea also shaded as it is in nature. . . . I meant to add an index of fruits painted by myself, on the cornice, and twelve typical trees between the windows, but every one was against such an unconventional idea, except my old friend Mr. Fergusson, and he wanted some good geographer to make a model, and suggested consulting Francis Galton or Mr. Wallace. The first was most kind and helpful as usual, but covered the map he started on with level lines and curves from 500 to 10,000 feet, and that was of no use on so small a scale. Then I made a pilgrimage to see Mr. Wallace, and found him most delightful, and much interested in my plan. He recommended asking Mr. Trelawney Saunders to make my map, which he did,—a most exquisite piece of hand-shading for which I

paid £120,—but it was not in the least what I wanted. . . . I also got woods from all parts of the world to make a dado of. . . . It was a great difficulty to arrange them, but time mended all. The catalogue I wrote on cards, and stuck them under the paintings; and after I had put down all I knew, Mr. Hemsley corrected and added more information, which he did so thoroughly and carefully that I asked him to finish the whole, and to put his name to the publication.³⁹

I provide this lengthy quotation to emphasize how North creates her own unique process of “systemizing” nature in a sensory way. She has the social rank and experience to build relationships with these scientific men, but the attention she receives is limited as she succumbs to “Mr. Hemsley” to “put his name on the publication.” She also has an unusual vision for how a project that displays nature could function and offers a varying approach to the cataloging and display of botanical culture. Her painted “index of fruits” is viewed as unconventional by the men who view it, although it represents the range of plants she has encountered. While she attempts to engage with the scientific trend of cataloging and displaying the “wonders” of nature, her approach contrasts with traditional methods of categorizing global plant life and instead attempts to capture feelings and sensations as she displays the rare plant specimens of the globe. She emphasizes the “curves” and the range of shades in her map, which functions not as a two-dimensional arrangement, but instead as a tactile and physical object with materials like wood from different parts of the globe. Once again, North reveals her interest in producing a global connectivity through plants while capturing and exhibiting nature. While she aligns herself with the men who were producing similar kinds of objects of scientific categorization, she also lets her readers know about her own unique and contrasting approach to botanical display as her “unconventional” ideas are dismissed. As imperial science worked toward compartmentalizing, hybridizing, and breeding nature, North focuses upon retaining and capturing its intrinsic systems while highlighting its wildness and diversity.

North’s organization of her gallery at Kew Gardens provides a similarly unconventional mode of display. It is here that North appears to have had more of a say in the presentation of her work. North selected how her paintings should be hung, and within the gallery her paintings are displayed in very close proximity to one another as a massive collection of frames from floor to ceiling, creating, once again, an almost claustrophobic, but also immersive, sense of plant life around the globe.



Fig. 3.2. The Marianne North Gallery at Kew Gardens. (Courtesy of the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens.)

While the compressed display may be a result of the limited space within the gallery, it also supports North’s global vision—her paintings are arranged in relation to the continents in which they reside, and the walls of wood from native trees connect the paintings to their original environments. While her exhibit produces what could be read as a vast imperial catalog of botanical life, it defies simple categorization and instead produces a more immersive and infused sense of the linkages between various geographies and environments. By placing the images directly next to one another, with hardly any space in between, North also produces a sense of the plants being linked together in an intimate way as they would within a natural environment.⁴⁰ Further, within the enclosed space of the gallery, the abundance of North’s images, placed in a continuum, reproduce the overwhelming colors and sensations she would have witnessed in the tropics.

While, on the one hand, North’s categorization and pursuit of plants opens them up to scientific inquiry and contributes to nineteenth-century colonial exploration, her display and representation of the plant world as an overwhelming, powerful, and somewhat secretive space provides an alternative vision of the natural world that challenges notions of scientific objectivity and order. In her narrative, paintings, and gallery,

North ultimately asks us to shift the expectations and boundaries of scientific and imperial knowledge and to expand our notions of scale and perspective. As her own narrative suggests, she herself did not want to be categorized in any one way. After a meeting with Louis Agassiz and his wife she writes, “Mrs. Agassiz and I agreed that the greatest pleasure we knew was to see new and wonderful countries, and the only rival to that was the one of staying quietly at home. Only ignorant fools think that because one likes sugar one cannot like salt; those people are only capable of one idea and never try experiments.”⁴¹ North certainly lived a life that pushed boundaries and was driven by a constant sense of the pleasures and possibilities of experimentation. Her sense of wonder allowed her to engage with imperial science in a way that brought to light the vulnerabilities and complexities of it—by producing powerful and uniquely exhibited scenes of nature, North asked viewers to analyze the structures of botanical knowledge and to question what it meant to be a human subject assuming authority over natural life. She straddled the worlds of professional and amateur science, imperial culture and travel, and art and literature, constantly identifying herself with more than one discourse, and emphasizing the importance of spontaneity and feeling. Knowledge and subjective pleasure come together in North’s “strange science,” and within her narratives, she balances imaginative and subjective discovery and professional pursuit, producing a unique, perplexing, and visually stunning display of her travels that ultimately reveals the immense longing and bountiful pleasure North sought from nature.

Notes

1. Catherine Symonds, preface to *Recollections of a Happy Life*, by Marianne North, ed. Mrs. John Addington Symonds, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1894), n.p.
2. Susan Morgan, introduction to *Recollections of a Happy Life*, by Marianne North, ed. Susan Morgan, 2 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), xii. See also her chapter on North in *Place Matters: Gendered Geography in Victorian Women’s Travel Books about Southeast Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 100–101, for more detail about the North’s life and her gallery at Kew Gardens. Michelle Payne also provides biographical background about North as well as information about the formation of the North gallery. Michelle Payne, *Marianne North: A Very Intrepid Painter* (Richmond: Kew Publishing, 2011), 87–89.
3. See Ann Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora’s Daughters and Botany in England, 1760–1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Shteir notes: “From the 1780s on, botany accorded with conventional ideas about women’s nature and ‘natural’ roles. It fit the gendered assumptions of many writers

and arbiters about women and domestic ideology and was thought to be a way to shape women, or to shape them better, for their lives as wives and mothers” (35). She argues that during 1830–60 the direction of botanical culture became more “scientific” and professionalized with the influence of men such as John Lindley (153). Thus, botany and the study of the natural world was a growing academic practice as well as an entertaining and educational domestic pursuit. Barbara T. Gates has also traced the gendered shifts in the study of botany and natural history and the different tropes necessary for women in her book *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For additional material on gender and botany, see Sam George and Alison E. Martin, eds., “Women and Botany,” special issue, *Journal of Literature and Science* 4, no. 1 (2011).

4. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 31. Pratt outlines the “systematizing of nature” through many examples, including the important scientific expeditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the development of Linnaeus’s *Science of Nature* in 1735. Thus, she reveals how cultures of travel and botany both participated in the formation of a more systematic and classificatory way of viewing the globe.

5. David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 5.

6. Janet Browne, “Biogeography and Empire,” in *Cultures of Natural History: From Curiosity to Crisis*, ed. Nicholas Jardine, James Secord, and Emma Spary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 305.

7. Morgan, *Place Matters*, 119. In her rich and thorough reading, Morgan concludes that North represents the “union of imperialism, women’s emancipation, and the natural sciences in nineteenth-century Britain” (132).

8. Antonia Losano, “A Preference for Vegetables: The Travel Writings and Botanical Art of Marianne North,” *Women’s Studies* 26 (1997): 428.

9. Barbara Gates describes this dilemma of the female explorer: “A different set of tropes was necessary for women who had to work to make their scientific discoveries known. North had collected thousands of plants for Kew gardens and had discovered five species later named for her—*Kniphofia northiana*, *Areca northiana*, *Crinum northianum*, *Nepenthes northiana*, *Northea seychellana*, a tree of Seychelles (possibly the one she sketched for Allman), which Hooker named in her honor—but still did not win acclaim the scientific community routinely awarded to men who had accomplished far less than she.” Gates, *Kindred Nature*, 99.

10. Eadaoin Agnew, “‘An Old Vagabond’: Science and Sexuality in Marianne North’s Representations of India,” *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011), <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue72/agnew.htm>.

11. Payne, *Marianne North*, 2011; Laura Ponsonby, introduction to *Abundant Beauty: The Adventurous Travels of Marianne North, Botanical Artist* by Marianne North, ed. Laura Ponsonby (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2011).

12. Ponsonby, introduction to *Abundant Beauty*; Suzanne Le-May Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds: Three Victorian Women Naturalists* (London: Routledge, 2001), 111–115.

13. See Payne, *Marianne North*, 14; and Lynn Merrill, *The Romance of Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 164.

14. Karen Morin, *Frontiers of Femininity: A New Historical Geography of the Nineteenth Century American West* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 168.

15. Morgan, *Place Matters*, 132. Morgan also describes North as a “naturalist hero” (119).
16. North, *Recollections*, 1:31.
17. *Ibid.*, 2:99.
18. Susan Morgan reminds us that North’s journal was edited and published posthumously, which means there may be descriptors in the original text—particularly comments about some of the Europeans she encountered—that were omitted by her sister before publishing. However, even given these omissions, the text is full of descriptions of plant life highlighting that plants have a more powerful influence on North than the people she meets. See Morgan’s *Place Matters* for commentary about the original text and Catherine Symond’s editorial work. Morgan writes: “Until someone publishes a comparison of the manuscript and the books, we cannot assess how much Catherine domesticated the memoirs by removing the obstacle of ‘their very peculiar character’” (106).
19. North, *Recollections*, 1:6–7.
20. *Ibid.*, 84, 87.
21. *Ibid.*, 2:28, 29.
22. *Ibid.*, 2:137.
23. *Ibid.*, 1:233.
24. *Ibid.*, 2:315.
25. *Ibid.*, 2:316.
26. *Ibid.*, 2:26–27.
27. *Ibid.*, 2:213.
28. Dea Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad: Victorian Lady Explorers* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1991), 21.
29. North, *Recollections*, 1:244.
30. *Ibid.*, 157.
31. *Ibid.*, 83.
32. *Ibid.*, 118. Subsequent references from this volume are included parenthetically in the main text.
33. For example, she connects the Australian ranunculous plant to the bean plants she has seen in India—tracing a familial connectivity between plants and different global locations. North, *Recollections*, 2:186. Similarly, in South Africa, the aloe trees remind her of the grass trees of Australia (*Recollections*, 2:238).
34. *Ibid.*, 2:100.
35. Patricia Murphy, *In Science’s Shadow: Literary Constructions of Late Victorian Women* (Columbus: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 152.
36. Merrill, *Romance of Natural History*, 168.
37. Losano, “Preference for Vegetables,” 443.
38. Marianne North, *Red Water Lily of Southern India*, painting 818 (1878), Marianne North Online Gallery, accessed February 1, 2015, <http://www.kew.org/mng/gallery/818.html>.
39. North, *Recollections*, 2:210–211.
40. Marianne North Online Gallery, accessed February 1, 2015, <http://www.kew.org/visit-kew-gardens/explore/attractions/marianne-north-gallery>.
41. North, *Recollections*, 1:48–49.