

## Kwalt: Reflections on the Lived Experience of Colour

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Tim Rogers is a scholar (University of Calgary) and a farmer (East Kootenay region of British Columbia). His writing is located between these two different worlds, exploring tensions that define this vibrant transitional space: urban/rural, tame/wild, textual/lived, intellectual/emotional. He deals with threatened nature by treating it as a major character in his writing, not as a backdrop to human activity. A major goal of his work is to delineate the manner in which our knowings about the world derive from our embodied engagements with it and the implications this has for moving toward increasingly responsible approaches to our world.

Somewhere between yellow and green lies a special colour that can't be captured in a paint can or on a Munsell chip. There's no matching Pantone® swatch. Wedged in between Y and G in my childhood rainbow mnemonic ROYGBV, this half yellow, half green appears as a shock of vitality. It defies words.

I first met this striking yellow-green on my farm in East Kootenay, southwestern British Columbia. It was everywhere—in the new springtime leaves; poplar and willow; the new evergreen growth; fir, spruce, pine; the emerging alfalfa; couch grass, timothy, rye; leaves on fresh raspberry canes, leafy buds on Saskatoon bushes. In every nook and cranny, this near-fluorescence accompanied the warm spring breezes looping in from the south and west. An April concert of yellow-green celebrating new beginnings. It freezes emerging life cycles for a moment, a snapshot of genesis.

I touch the new leaves, yellow-green's first standard bearer, silky, soft. I smell them, a hint of freshness, newness. I roll them between my fingers, pliable, flexible. I watch them waving in the warm breeze. I can almost hear them grow as they reach out into the springtime air and yellow-green floods across the place.

Colour defines the contours of life in East Kootenay. With the passage of time and lengthening days, yellow-green transforms to lush greens, verdant, chaotic, infinite summer hues. When the days once again shorten and fall behind the nights, the cacophony of green begins to

retreat. Briefly, September, October, the yellow-green returns; poplar leaves in that fleeting moment before they golden, new growth on the evergreens preparing for winter, grass before it browns off, Saskatoons, for an instant. All indulge in yellow-green again, now tinged with the sadness of the coming winter; a promise of return in the spring.

This pendulum-like cycle from yellow-green to green and back again makes a mockery of my rigid boundary between these two colours. It points to a place at the edges where my long-held categories of colour disappear into a wondrous mix of onrushing life. Yellow and green become fused and confused, welded to the cycles of renewal and death; bookends to the growing season; anchors defining the fabric of that place.

An interior decorator might call this colour chartreuse, named by monks after a pale, apple green on their land near Grenoble. But the yellow-green on my farm is different, more vibrant, deeper. It cannot be captured on a sample card for some glossy paint. I search the house for things to make a list but can't find an example, not one. Nothing, despite our preferences for so-called "earth tones." No help in my bulging bookcases either, places of infinite hues and saturations, at least so I thought. Yellow-green, so prominent in the world of my farm, is shut out in town; perhaps the victim of our domination of the world; too fragile to survive our cementy cities.

Scientists too, shut out my yellow-green. Anthropologists argue that the divide between yellow and green is universal. They base this on the way various peoples see rainbows, with the division between yellow and green said to be a constant. Indeed, there is a line between yellow and green when I look at the rainbows which crown my East Kootenay farm, sometimes double. I cannot deny this. But my yellow-green lives in between. It defies the line so evident as I look across the southern sky. This colour is both green and yellow. It challenges the boundary so clearly visible. At the same time it is neither green nor yellow. Both and neither at the same time, confusing, contradictory. While a conundrum for rainbows, yellow-green thrives in the life cycles of my farm.

The Shuswap are one of the First Nations people of East Kootenay. In their language, the word for yellow is "kwalt." Their word for green is, likewise, "kwalt." They don't draw a distinction like we do. The boundary disappears. Yellow-green thrives in their talk because of this. Engagement in the life cycles of the land becomes manifest with their undivided colours. There's no need to separate yellow and green because they meld and converge with each other in that place. These colours are one and the same, as they are lived. Words and life meld into a singularity when tales told around campfires, chants, casual

conversations, embody the lives they lead. Yellow is green, green is yellow, as lived in East Kootenay.

Someone who hasn't been in this place might think "kwalt" is the sign of an impoverished language. They might suggest that having the same world for yellow and green is a naive confusion of a lesser tongue. I think not. There is a treasure chest of sophisticated understanding in this gentle difference. The pendulum swing of the seasons, so important to survival in the Columbia River valley, is exposed to anyone who cares to listen. The wisdom of the land is revealed.

Perhaps this is why yellow-green, "kwalt," defies words and paint swatches. Perhaps this is why we should take great care when we dissect the cycles of life with our scientific jargon and unthinking categories. Perhaps these words borrowed so readily from science are why we are so inept at understanding our human engagements with the Earth. Perhaps these words are why we prefer to live alienated, cut off from the lifeblood of the land.

We should celebrate "kwalt." We should embed ourselves the cyclical swings between green and yellow. We should live in that border space. If we did we may learn to embrace the vitality of the planet that sustains us.