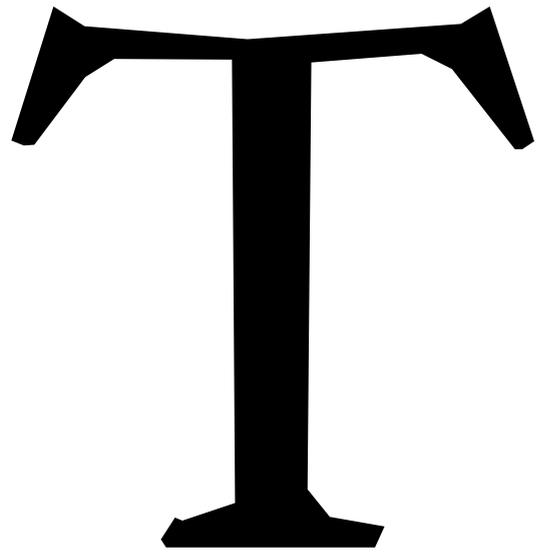




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I Vera List  
Center Prize  
for Art  
and  
Politics



THE VERA LIST CENTER Prize for Art and Politics honors an artist or group of artists who has taken great risks to advance social justice in profound and visionary ways. International in scope, the biennial prize is awarded for a particular project’s long-term impact, boldness, and artistic excellence.

The prize is named in honor of New School trustee Vera G. List (1908–2002) and reflects The New School’s commitment to take intellectual, political, and creative risks to bring about positive change. This commitment goes back to the university’s founding in 1919 as a forum for progressive American thinkers and the creation in 1933 of the University in Exile as a refuge for scholars persecuted in Nazi Germany.

The inaugural Vera List Center Prize was awarded to Theaster Gates for *Dorchester Projects* in Chicago, Illinois. The Vera List Center Prize 2014–2016 was awarded to anonymous filmmakers collective Abounaddara from Syria. The Vera List Center Prize 2016–2018 is bestowed on Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves for her ongoing project *Seeds of Change*.

The biennial prize initiative unfolds across various platforms and over two years. It serves as a catalyst for activities that illuminate the important role of the arts in society, and strengthen teaching and learning in public and at The New School in art and design, social science, philosophy, and civic engagement. Rather than a single moment of recognition, it represents a long-term commitment to the question of how the arts advance social justice, how we speak of, evaluate, and teach such work.

The prize recipient is honored with an exhibition of the winning project, an international conference, deep and scholarly engagement by New School students and faculty, a publication, the award — a sculpture by Yoko Ono — as well as financial recognition and a New York City residency. In celebration of the Center’s 25th anniversary, the Prize Finalists have also been invited to New York, to share in the urgently needed conversation on art and social justice as global issues that engage audiences in New York City, nationally, and around the world. •

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FOUNDING  
SUPPORTERS

James Keith (JK) Brown and Eric Diefenbach  
Elizabeth R. Hilpman and Byron Tucker  
Jane Lombard  
Joshua Mack  
The New School

Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics, 2016–2018

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FINALISTS

London-based interdisciplinary research agency  
Forensic Architecture  
Gulf Labor Artist Coalition  
House of Natural Fiber (HONF), a new media arts  
laboratory in Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
IsumaTV, a collaborative multimedia platform for  
indigenous filmmakers and media organization  
in Canada  
MadeYouLook, an artist collective based in  
Johannesburg, South Africa

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RECIPIENT

Maria Thereza Alves, Berlin

---

JURY

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, chair  
Ruth Wilson Gilmore  
Charif Kiwan, Abounaddara  
Carin Kuoni  
Radhika Subramaniam

---

NOMINATORS'  
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Joanna Warsza  
Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

2

# 2 Maria Thereza Alves

Who belongs, and who does not? What do stories afford? How is value defined?

Maria Thereza Alves' *Seeds of Change* studies settler colonialism, slavery, global migration, and commodification through the lens of displaced plants in ballast — the waste material historically used to balance sailing ships in maritime trade. Dumped in ports at the end of passages as the ships took on more freight, ballast often carried “dormant” seeds collected from its place of origin that remained in the soil for hundreds of years before germinating and growing.

Scientifically these plants are categorized as “ballast flora” for no other reason than that they come from elsewhere, in this sense the plants are metaphors for today’s undocumented immigrants. The ballast plants speak specifically to the forced displacement of lands and peoples through the transatlantic slave trade, but in Alves’ project they also literally and metaphorically hold open a space at the intersection of art and science to challenge and think expansively about our social, cultural and political history and possible futures.

*Seeds of Change* is a long-term project started in 2002 that has been presented in several European port cities — Marseille, Liverpool, and Bristol among them. This is its first iteration in the Americas.

How to present such a project in the U.S. at this moment?

In order to contextualize Alves’ project in New York, and to understand distinct and often violent ways of land creation here, *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization* is conceived as an ongoing collaboration between horticultural experts, students, and local communities at four sites: The High Line in Chelsea, Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Weeksville

Heritage Center in Crown Heights, and The New School in Greenwich Village. Each of them brings their own distinct history to this project: the rails of The High Line tracked the seeds arriving in New York from the West on the underside of freight trains that would connect the industrial 19th century metropolis with the rest of the rapidly expanding country. The gardens at Weeksville Heritage Center contain the history of one of the first free black communities in the U. S., founded in 1838 by stevedore James Weeks, himself a freed slave. Perhaps most obvious is Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn, a site built entirely on ballast ground.

The ballast plants in the Aronson Gallery stem from these collaborations, were propagated and cared for by students, children, and other community members since June 2017 at The New School and Pioneer Works, and will be transplanted into outdoor ballast flora gardens in spring 2018. In the exhibition, the plants are supplemented by Maria Thereza Alves’ paintings, drawings, maps, and poems made for the New York iteration of *Seeds of Change*.

Jury Citation:

“The jury unanimously awards Maria Thereza Alves the third Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics for her boldness in addressing through art urgent questions of resistance to the homogenization of life itself. By reimagining the historical geography of the contemporary world, she practices globalization from below to understand the planet as a holistic ecology. *Seeds of Change*, since 2002, tracks the routes of transport of goods and people while making visible the dormant potentialities of soil, seas, and people. Artistic excellence is expressed across mediums and Alves’ critical practice inside and outside of the art world is key to the precise forms of impacts her projects achieve.” •

## Exhibition Checklist

*The Entire Coast of Long Island*, 2017  
Acrylic and ink on linen  
59  $\frac{7}{8}$  × 162  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (152 × 412 cm)  
MTA\_0104

*In Ballast: To and From New York*, 2017  
Acrylic and ink on linen  
115  $\frac{3}{8}$  × 61 inches (293 × 155 cm)  
MTA\_0111

*Common Ballast Flora on Long Island*, 2017  
1 vase on shelf with a fresh bouquet every week,  
consisting of dandelion, daisy, buttercups,  
chicory, plantain, clover, burdock, and wild carrot

*Untitled*, 2017  
Acrylic and ink on linen  
44 × 32  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (112 × 82 cm)  
MTA\_0119

*Untitled*, 2017  
Acrylic and ink on linen  
44 × 32  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (112 × 82 cm)  
MTA\_0123

*Untitled*, 2017  
Acrylic and ink on linen  
44 × 32  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (112 × 82 cm)  
MTA\_0127

*Untitled*, 2017  
Acrylic and ink on linen  
44 × 32  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (112 × 82 cm)  
MTA\_0114

*Untitled*, 2017  
Acrylic and ink on linen  
44 × 32  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (112 × 82 cm)  
MTA\_0124

*Untitled*, 2017  
Acrylic and ink on linen  
44 × 32  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (112 × 82 cm)  
MTA\_0115

*Ballast Indicator: Atriplex rosea*, 2017  
Watercolor on paper  
11  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (30 × 30 cm)  
MTA\_0193

*Ballast Indicator: Verbene officinalis*, 2017  
Watercolor on paper  
11  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (30 × 30 cm)  
MTA\_0191

*Ballast Indicator: Mercurialis annua*, 2017  
Watercolor on paper  
11  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (30 × 30 cm)  
MTA\_0195

*Ballast Indicator: Diplotaxis tenuifolia*, 2017  
Watercolor on paper  
11  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (30 × 30 cm)  
MTA\_0194

*"Peach Tree War"*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (61 × 46 cm)  
MTA\_0182

*"Whenever people were transported..."*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (61 × 46 cm)  
MTA\_0183

*Caribbean Coral Sand in Manhattan*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (46 × 61 cm)  
MTA\_0190

*"Spring had come..."*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (61 × 46 cm)  
MTA\_0185

*"The Liberia"*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (61 × 46 cm)  
MTA\_0184

*"Much Ballast arrived in 1877 from Norway..."*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (61 × 46 cm)  
MTA\_0186

All works height × width. Courtesy the artist  
and Galerie Michel Rein

*"Documents of Disturbance"*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (61 × 46 cm)  
MTA\_0187

*"Inwood Park"*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (61 × 46 cm)  
MTA\_0188

*Traces from the Past: Some Ballast Material and Flora*, 2017  
Watercolor and ink on paper  
24 × 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (61 × 46 cm)  
MTA\_0189

## A Botany of Colonization Maria Thereza Alves

Over 400 species of plants, mostly European in origin, were growing on ballast grounds throughout New York and New Jersey, from where they've spread further since. Ships arriving with ballast over the last few centuries were responsible for introducing much non-native flora to the East Coast of the U.S. So much so that botanist Viktor Muhlenbach writes, "Combing ballast grounds [...] for the appearance of new plants was a popular botanical pastime of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."

Earth, stones, sand, wood, bricks, and whatever else was economically expedient was used as ballast to stabilize merchant sailing ships in relationship to the weight of the cargo. Upon arrival in port, the ballast was unloaded, carrying with it seeds native to the area where the ballast had been picked up.

*Seeds of Change* unearths historical ballast sites and ballast flora. It is an ongoing investigation of ballast flora in numerous port cities. Projects have been developed for Marseille, Reposaari, Dunkirk, Exeter, Liverpool, Bristol, and now New York.

When New York was a British colony, British commercial regulations stipulated that commodities could only be imported via England; likewise, ships from the colonies were allowed to sell their goods in just a few foreign ports. Thus the colonial ships based in New York would return home completely in ballast rather than plod the seas to England because only there would they be allowed to pick up goods.

The added complexity of trade along the East Coast expanded the likelihood of ballast flora arriving in New York. Between 1732 and 1763, for instance, the majority of the ships sailing from St. Augustine in Florida, which was then a Spanish colony, to British New York left "in ballast." Ballast and seeds could have arrived from any point of the vast Spanish colonial empire.

Hundreds of thousands of tons of ballast arrived in New York City each month. Take June 30, 1900, when 7,584,000 tons of ballast reached the city's ports from a range of destinations—Colombia, various Caribbean islands, Venezuela, British Guyana, the "Chinese Empire," the Dutch East Indies, Japan, and the British Cape Colony in today's South Africa.

Accumulations and processes between different beings including the land make a place specific. Earth itself becomes a witness and provides testimony of the multispecies relationship of "place-making." Architect Charlie Hailey observes that, "... ballast collapses distance: how else can we reckon thousands of miles of geography, terrain, city-states, nations, and natures?"

In New York topographical particularities, specificities, and relationships were literally crushed. Water was banished: rivers, creeks, streams, and ponds were drained, filled in, or covered over. Non-linearity was banished with the leveling of hills, nooks, crannies, niches as well as gullies and ravines. Marshlands and swamps were considered an affront to the settlers, and were filled in. Among the Guaraní in South America it is unfathomable to remove a hill as it would result in a change of the currents of air. In New York City, a hill became a street or material to be used to fill in a swamp. The river was defined as a set of potential real estate plots, and pieces were sold to be filled in: converting water to land to property. Thinking forests were made dumb as their mycorrhizal networks were severed.

Middle East scholar Laleh Khalili writes that, "Landscapes were harvested of ballast, looted clean of sand and shingle and rock. [...] This resource extraction transformed landscapes in ways that have been forgotten." Hailey further reminds us that, "discarded ballast spawned landscapes born of displaced materials from far-flung lands."

However, this is not a question of reconstruction of a lost landscape or purity but of acknowledgement of the present we all find ourselves in.

As we walk we are, at times, 33 feet above the place that was a New York for many more species than ours. River silt, Native American relics, household and industrial waste, ecological wreckage, hills torn down with earth removed for tunnels, and ballast was used to level New York, and that began quite early in colonial history—1646.

By 1790 New York was the most important port in the country due to its central location in relation to the North American colonies. It connected Europe to the West Indies, and later also the

Midwest via the Erie Canal, and later still via the rails arriving in New York at what is today called The High Line.

Contrary to our ideas of mercantile shipping practices of the Atlantic triangular slave trade, it was more profitable to return in ballast than wait for sugar, rum, cotton, etc. especially during the early days of colonization as this freed up the ships to sail to Africa more quickly and pick up more slaves—"cargo" that was four to six times more lucrative than colonial goods. Slave trade was the cornerstone of the New York economy, much of it via the West Indies. And the transport of bodies in ships required ballast to offset their movement. In New York, ships arrived from England with ballast material such as English flint, iron, and soil, and from other areas of the world with ballast consisting of large chunks of coral as well as coral sands from the Caribbean, volcanic sand, bricks, stones, and rocks. Much of England, specifically chunks of Devon, Cornwall, Poole, and Bristol ended up in New York.

While elsewhere solid ballast was slowly replaced by water in the 1920s, in New York, solid ballast continued to arrive well into the early 1950s. During World War Two, for instance, the U.S. Navy shipped weapons to the Allies, with boats returning in ballast as no goods were available. After World War Two, American ships brought goods to devastated Europe and, again, would return with earth or now also war rubble as ballast. Upon arrival in port, the ballast was unloaded, carrying with it seeds from the area where it had been collected. And lots of bal-

last was used as landfill throughout the boroughs of New York City, hence for example the name "Bristol Basin" where East 25th Street meets the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive along the banks of the East River.

"Displanting humans and plants are elements of the same multispecies colonial endeavor," says philosopher Tomaz Mastnak as he argues for the importance of "botanical decolonization." But in New York we are also faced with a colonized earth. Let's begin by looking at these plants that both indicate ballast ground and are witnesses to the submersion of New York into a colonized earth. As such, they teach us that we are in spaces of coloniality which, however, must not become the sole defining feature of these places. At the same time, we must acknowledge that these are landscapes of violence.

Mastnak calls for attention to "place-based" relations between plants. People must be placed within the context of how that place, its flora and the geographic specificity are constituted by settler-colonialism. Geographer Omar Tesdell echoes this when he argues, "that scholars must examine how wildness, native-ness, and agro-climatic suitability are scientifically constituted with and not apart from colonial conquest."

Art historian Wilma Lukatsch reminds us that, "Things come and have a walking history. And when we think of soil we do not think about traveling soil. There is history in soil."

Colonization is built into the very soil of New York. A process of decolonization must begin on the ground. •

Maria Thereza Alves is an artist, a founding member of the Green Party in Brazil, and the recipient of the Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics, 2016–2018.

## Sites as Citations of New York's Colonial Past in Ballast Carin Kuoni and Amanda Parmer

"The earth you think you're on is not, it is someplace else, the only way you would know the place is from the flower."

—Maria Thereza Alves

Over eighteen years, Maria Thereza Alves has disentangled the naturalization of bodies, ideas, and objects through her ongoing project *Seeds of Change*. Presented in various iterations and in collaboration with different communities, organizations, and art events, in countries ranging from England to France and Finland, Alves' momentous body of work — encompassing an entire human generation — has given form to ongoing legacies of colonization that have recently come into sharp, violent focus in Europe and the United States.

For Alves, the use and occupation of conventional tools of analysis and scientific proof are the fodder for pointing to and delimiting modes and spaces for thinking anew about how and what we know. As Audre Lorde wrote in *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, "those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference [...] know that survival is not an academic skill." In *Seeds of Change* Alves considers ballast soil — used to balance ships during colonial trade and displaced onto the shores of port cities — to steer her research. Working with soil as an interlocutor she traces the effects, impacts, and distribution of plants that can be seen as ciphers for individuals and communities sold as commodities in the transatlantic slave trade and branded accordingly. The persistence and survival of these beings form the literal and metaphorical ground of the exhibition.

By making this marginal byproduct of colonial trade — seeds inadvertently carried by ships as part of their ballast — the focus of her work Alves activates the knowledge of botanical experts, historical records and the "silent archive" Saidiya Hartman speaks of in relation to slavery. In so doing, she decolonizes the ways we know and engage with our surroundings. The exhibition *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization* reworks the physical and discursive material that we shape and that shapes us in order to sug-

gest a proximity between human body and land, both branded and marked by processes of often violent, sometimes inadvertent migrations. The artist's constellation of markers elicits new modes of recognizing where we are, who we are, where we are from, and what we are responsible for — and to.

To understand this history from a material perspective, Alves researched the stories ballast flora tells us about migration, movement, trade, and valuation. Not surprisingly, the connection is immediate to pressing issues of our contemporary moment such as indigeneity and belonging: which plants do and do not belong to this land; which plants stand to threaten "native" species and vice versa, and which have the "right" to be here? Rather than provide a comprehensive history of plant migration in the New York area, the artist examined, in detail, key moments of such encounters. She parsed, for instance, the *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club* from 1879 to 1881 and then developed a list of ballast flora sites, including specific locations in New York City such as 107th Street and 8th Avenue in Manhattan, Hunter's Point in Queens, Gowanus Creek in Brooklyn, Mott Haven and Oak Point in the Bronx, and Communipaw and Hoboken in New Jersey. The names of ships arriving or departing "in ballast" appear in the painting *In Ballast: To and From New York*. Another work, *Traces from the Past: Some Ballast Material and Flora*, shows ballast flora, ballast, and earlier manmade landfill that may, or may not, have included ship's ballast.

These maps of land displaced in trade are supplemented by a series of watercolor paintings of ballast indicators and entitled accordingly: *Ballast Indicator: Atriplex rosea*; *Ballast Indicator: Verbena officinalis*; *Ballast Indicator: Mercurialis annua*; and *Ballast Indicator: Diplotaxis tenuifolia*. Stylistically these works are akin to those of botanical illustrations produced during the 18th and 19th century that were seen as both appealing and scientifically valid. Alves has also included seven text-based works that relay specific narratives from ballast dumping sites in the New York area. These are transcribed by the artist into poetic accounts: "Peach Tree War," "Whenever people were transported ...," "Spring

had come ...," "The Liberia," "Much Ballast arrived in 1877 from Norway ...," "Documents of Disturbance," and "Inwood Park."

Historical records and botanical journals cite the plants that have grown out of ballast soil as "non-indigenous." Outside of botanical gardens and the realm of horticultural expertise, they are often referred to as "weeds" growing out of the cracks in the sidewalks, city parks, and suburban landscapes. *Seeds of Change* familiarizes visitors with these persistent and enduring plants through the extended project of the exhibition. Through this they begin to operate as keys to knowing an alternative, extra-anthropocentric mapping of the New York landscape and the traces of colonialism that continue to shape it.

In this New York iteration, the first in the Americas, the exhibition scales between micro and macro iterations through a network of partner sites around the New York area: The High Line in Chelsea, Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Weeksville Heritage Center in Crown Heights, and The New School in Greenwich Village. In the spring of 2017 approximately four hundred individual plants selected from thirty-eight species were propagated at Pioneer Works and The New School. These plants populate the gallery for the November 2017 exhibition at the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center. In the spring of 2018 the same plants will be distributed to the full list of partner sites to live indefinitely as ballast flora gardens in those spaces.

This cultivation and dispersal organically tie together each site's distinct history of trade and the distribution of people, plants and goods. Pioneer Works near the banks of the East River in Brooklyn is literally built on ballast: in the 1851, an Irish immigrant, William Beard, purchased land and gained permission to build the Eerie Basin, originally marsh land below the Brooklyn Docks where ships from around the world would dock. Beard invited ships to dump their ballast at the Basin to shore up the space producing a landmass that is largely made of ballast

Carin Kuoni and Amanda Parmer are the curators of *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization*.

soil and populated by ballast flora. Weeksville Heritage Center is testimony to a community founded by African American freedmen, located between Bedford Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, and Brownsville, Brooklyn. After abolition purchasing land became a means for freed African Americans to gain economic and political freedom. Weeksville was established by stevedore James Weeks and others in 1838 to accomplish this. By the mid-1800's Weeksville was providing for a community of five hundred people with their own newspaper, school, orphanage, housing and, perhaps most importantly, \$250 worth of property owned by every non-white man — the ticket to democratic participation, i.e. a vote. The High Line is a public-private partnership park in Chelsea that was opened to the public in 2009 on elevated train tracks. Here, the story of ballast dispersal shifts from the ports to the Western frontier of this country. As goods arrived at the city's ports, carrying seeds with them, they were loaded onto the trains that had traveled on what is now The High Line, themselves the carrier of seeds from the West and now transporting "non-native" seeds across the United States on their undercarriage.

In these pieces, Alves works an idea eloquently articulated by scholar Fred Moten, "seeing is a sensuous assemblage." Using paint, text, and imagery the artist evokes an alternative way of knowing, by layering the stories plants tell as witnesses in the anthropocentric histories of trade and migration. The traces these plants leave, as annuals and perennials, create a map of colonialization that is deeply embedded yet often invisible in the landscape of New York City. Selected for their presence in sites around the New York area, the ballast flora in the exhibition sets up a key for the map of the city's sites of colonization. In the shape-shifting cultural, economic and social environments of New York, *Seeds of Change* holds open physical and temporal spaces for thinking with the plants about the reasons that these landscapes are constructs we all actively co-produce. •

## Transcending Movements: Weeds as Queering Species Boundaries

Marisa Prefer

Anthropocentric ideologies and the reigning dominance of humans has ushered an era of global climate temperature variation, creating perfect instances for species to migrate. Opportunistic seeds travel on wind, in fur and beneath human feet, these plants are often coded as threatening, labeled “weeds” or “invasive.” What if instead of deeming these plants unwanted and warranted of expulsion, we were able to consider them as part of a transitory continuum, where the cycling worlds of physical space, energy and spirit, combine to uncover an inter-species liquidity? Through an expansive lens of queer ecology, we may embark down winding paths towards softening the rigid cultural boundaries between living beings.

Earth is a series of rocks, now dominated by human-centric realities. From crumbling neoliberal infrastructure to political upheaval driven by social inequalities, humans tend to build and contend with systems for and about themselves. The recognition of this period as the Anthropocene also signifies the possibility of a juncture: the *Anthropocene* can serve as a moment to begin a deep dive into theories that blend intrinsically human behavior with that of concurrently evolving species; the work of tapping into interspecies magic seems more necessary than before. In particular, how can we illuminate the most prolific of oxygen-bearing species, plants which some call “weeds,” as embodied outliers? Can we welcome them as entities that help to lubricate the fold between sentient beings and other Eukaryotes? I turn here to Donna Haraway’s instance of *natureculture*, (Haraway 1) in which the two terms cannot be separated from, and are in fact tied together by, the forces of each other. If we use this as a lens to consider plants that exist *en masse* largely as a result of human interference, perhaps we may begin to uncover the power enmeshed within.

Along dusty urban roadsides and beneath the cracks of seemingly impermeable asphalt, plants thrive in mutualistic conditions amidst fleshless beings, including mycelial networks interspersed with endobacteria that transfer carbon and nitrogen between species. These pioneering plants partner with

other life forms to penetrate ruderal physical landscapes, blanketing spaces of transition by creeping into slivers of dirt, emerging year after year beyond instances of their origins. Migration can be described as a “movement of one part of something to another” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In Eastern North America, when late summer heat sets in, tiny inconspicuous mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) seeds develop, ripening while bitter compounds complexify within its leaves. Autumn winds sweep through alleyways and empty lots, and the seeds of mugwort are released from their pasts, projected by wind into their potential futures. It is fairly easy for these tiny seeds to find a new home, they carry only the weight of themselves and need little to thrive, doing so in most soils and light conditions. In some ways mugwort seems to even be drawn to the interstitial spaces between here and there, finding ground that is not already occupied by any other of its kind. Is this true for humans as well, if to be human is to be enmeshed in a series of transitional moments, elements bound up in matter that exist between one space and another? If all living beings are considered part of this transitory continuum, between the cycling worlds of physical space, energy, and spirit, are humans all always some type of migrant? We are also all energies that inhabit space in relation to each other, for a time that on some days might seem like forever, but in relation to some ancient species, is a mere instant.

Some species are seen to stand on the shoulders of others, utilizing abundant forces (wind, water, sun, earth) in building communities; grasping chance and, under the right circumstances, becoming prolific. The conditions are a product of whole and symbiotic ecosystems, photosynthetic eukaryotes (plants) which feed and are also decimated by *Homo sapiens sapiens* (humans), which are continuously being colonized by prokaryotic microorganisms (bacteria). Anthropocentric ideologies and the reigning dominance of humans have ushered in an era of global climate temperature variation, creating perfect instances for other species to migrate. Opportunistic seeds travel on wind, in fur and beneath human feet, these plants are often coded as threatening, labeled “weeds” or “invasive” (Van der Veken 212–216).

Mugwort is often marked by both of these terms, in the Northeast region of North America, to which it is not “native” (Swearingen, 2017). The exact origins of a plant can be somewhat difficult to decipher, some plants have been deemed to be “from” many places. Mugwort is believed to have been found earliest in Asia and Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>. It carries a habit for vigorous reproduction via rhizomatous rootstock beneath the ground, using lateral methods to inhabit waste places or urban lots and sandy roadsides. It is also a known phyto-accumulator, performing well when employed to remove Cadmium from soil compounds (Rebele, Lehmann 93–103). Mugwort has a longstanding history of widespread usage in relation to the human body; externally for rashes, internally as a bitter stimulant for the circulatory and nervous systems and for the relief of abdominal cramping, but it is also a powerful spiritual and energetic healer when it is dried and burned in an act of cleansing (Fern, 2017). The idea that plants can reach or encourage transcendental spaces moves beyond a place where its phytochemicals are assessed for measurable impact, beyond facts, and towards interspecies experiential storytelling. Having migrated to the Americas by many means, mugwort has been “... introduced to at least six separate locations in North America via ship ballast, ranging from the arctic to both oceanic shorelines, and on multiple occasions in several of these locations” (Barney 8, 703–717). It is not alone in this duplicitous travel: stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) has similarly noted origins in Asia and Europe (Schellman, 2008). In the quest to unpack “origins” — and encircling the idea that everything *must* come from somewhere — how do species that once shared space, having journeyed beyond those places, experience new grounds and build symbiotic community with new others?

All living things have ecosystem functions; every being serves an energetic purpose in relation to any number of modulating forces. Humans are major players here, but are far from the majority. We are all voids holding space; containers for relationships with species that are not us. In organizing ourselves culturally, we make up a portrait of culture, one that is cobbled atop the colonial forces that cannot be divorced from the drive of human-instituted systems like global capitalism. As humans, we are always becoming but never arrive. Can we ever actually *move* somewhere else? Assigning functions, actions, and meanings to other species separates

human thought from “other.” Or does it actually help humans to biologically relate with other species? We can experience this exchange without opening windows or even forcing something out of the ordinary, but by becoming another *immediately*. To allow plants like stinging nettle to penetrate this edifice of controlled or neat categories, by welcoming it into or onto one’s body, we are paying attention to it as a force for healing. Nettles have been used for generations in a practice of *urtication*, or hitting of oneself with the plant for the circulation of blood, quelling of allergies, and simultaneous relief and onset of stinging, burning symptoms (LeBaron-Botts, 2017). It is the irony in this that astounds many; why a human would engage in a relationship with a plant that would at the same time *inflict* pain as it heals? Nettle carries this enigmatic agenda in its growth habit as well, often reproducing under damp, wilder conditions in stands that quickly tend towards dominating other species of plants.

Or maybe that’s the anthropomorphic speaking; there is always a transition moment. When upon setting out for a walk in the woods alongside a creek, you unknowingly brush by a patch of stinging nettle and your hand grazes its stalk, soon you can’t feel your fingertips, and your human blood starts pumping more vigorously. What if our species is calling us to sit in this transitory space, to observe and listen, letting the desire of ever becoming next fade away? What do the plants want, or should we ask this of them? Humans seek to integrate “useful” attributes into agriculture, or functions that benefit humans and capital accumulation. Conservationists and foragers capitalize on inherent opportunities of productive “wild” plants, reaping the benefits of prolific species and extracting use value for food and culture.<sup>2</sup> This interchange allows humans to eat, produce, to heal and build. Plants have been erupting from the soil for hundreds of millions of years, and only in the last 23,000 have humans begun to interfere with their whereabouts (Snir, et al, 2015). How did pre-human beings interact with their co-inhabitants, and can humans listen, observe, and learn without looking to assign human qualities to other species? Plants are actants upon humans as much as humans are shaping landscapes by eradicating plants. Plants transcend “utility” as the ruling forces of the Holocene; their tendencies are to reproduce in abundance, encouraging relationships with other species. What if we let them? One step forward might be in

1—Mugwort is listed as an “invasive” species in New York, according to Cornell University, as cited in “New York Native Species Information: Mugwort.” Web, 2017

2—Lots of foragers and ecologists encourage readers to “eat their weeds,” see <http://eattheinvaders.org/> and <http://www.eattheweeds.com/>.

not claiming totality; but rather inhabiting a conscious praxis of decentralization regarding dominant cultural forces, a push to unpack and dismantle environmental binaries.

If we are to sit in the space of twisting binaries and opening doors between worlds, we must look to dismantle forces that control by understanding how they are built. The United States Government defines “invasive” species “as a species that is non-native (or alien) to the ecosystem under consideration and whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health” (Beck, et al., 2006). Signifying plants as “invasive” enables a cultural alarm for humans managing land—to eradicate. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing speaks of disturbance as a product that lays the groundwork for cultural usage of resources in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*:

“While I refuse to reduce either economy or ecology to the other, there is one connection between economy and environment that seems important to introduce up front: the history of the human concentration of wealth through making both humans and nonhumans into resources for investment. This history has inspired investors to imbue both people and things with alienation, that is, the ability to stand alone, as if the entanglements of living did not matter.” (Tsing 5).

Many of these now revered plants were once treasured and cultivated by humans. Forces that encourage plant species to migrate and reproduce are based on ecosystem symbiosis; humans have driven warming planetary conditions as a result of global trade, which has left in its wake a wealth of ruderal lands. Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*, reported as an “invasive” by the U.S. Forest Service in twenty states,<sup>3</sup>) is an early colonizer of bare ground, a biennial plant, and one that reproduces only in its second year if it is able to accumulate enough biomass to produce a large stalk that tends often to reach up taller than most humans. According to (somewhat) modern scientific inquiries, “the rate of biomass accumulation by the rosette is influenced by the environmental conditions occurring at the time of growth” (Booth, Murphy, Swanton 256). Do exclusionary identities help to separate nature from culture, therefore severing a holistic view of humans as part of nature? If

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3— See [https://www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp/invasive\\_plants/weeds/common-mullein.pdf](https://www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp/invasive_plants/weeds/common-mullein.pdf)

symbiosis were a liquid, enveloping all of its inhabitants, volunteer plants are merely performing in relation to other biota. Similarly, the act of citing plants or humans as immigrants merely marks a moment in time. Who, when and what exactly constitutes something, or someone as “native” or “immigrant?” (Marinelli 2016). These terms are signified based on any number of markers, and appropriate acknowledgement of time, place, context, identity and social conditions are all needed to assign any being (human or non-) to an affinity group or category for cultural convenience.

Permaculturalist and former conservationist Tao Orion opens space for the blending of terminologies, when she says “modern research increasingly shows that all native plant communities are, to some extent, the products of human intervention” (Orion 154). Forces of attribution are never sincerely distributed evenly; whether by color or style, or origin; by which no human follows these markers without direct relation to the self. Observation based on sublime reality can be an organizational method for understanding species, (here or there, present or absent;) instead of meticulously assigning identities to plants, animals and microbes. Mullein leaf has been used for centuries as a lymph and lung medicine, for coughs and congestion. Physiomedicalist William Cook called mullein an “absorbent” of “peculiar and reliable power” (McDonald, Herbcraft.org). Can we identify a set of inclusive methodologies that speak across disciplines and beyond known categories in order to reach the power of something considered unwanted; or so to say, somewhere that might work towards understanding the desires of others, which might look something like species solidarity? Timothy Morton calls upon this species-blending transcendence in *Humankind*, arguing between disciplines and states of thought, “worlds are perforated and permeable, which is why we can share them” (Morton 14). Cellular walls separate plants from animals; these walls help to bind, nourish and regulate growth, providing strength and protection. What can humans learn from these permeable walls between worlds, between species? •

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# The Importance of Words and Action

## Jean Fisher

"In this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth — even though it be covertly, and by snatches." — Herman Melville<sup>1</sup>

Debates on the relationship of artistic practice to the sociopolitical sphere have gained momentum as the more negative effects of globalization have visibly extended what Walter Benjamin called "states of emergency" beyond their *apparent* earlier confinement to colonial geographies and into the dark and dissimulating heart of the western world. When Benjamin coined this phrase, however, he also noted that these states were not the exception but the rule.<sup>2</sup> And, indeed, as the democratic mask of globalized neoliberal capitalism has slipped, so it is now clear that most of us are vulnerable to economic, political and military forces that undermine the concept of the nation-state as a benign agent of the social contract and expose its capacity to treat its own citizens as the enemy, increasingly bereft of legal or political agency. This state of affairs had, of course, long been experienced by peoples under hegemonic colonial rule and post-independence state violence; and it is from a deeply felt engagement with the visual and verbal representations that sustained social injustices in these geographies that, I suggest, the work of Maria Thereza Alves gains its resonance.

In retrospect, it is not surprising to find that artists and scholars from the geographies of the global South, long subjected to oppressive regimes, were engaged in sociopolitical counter-hegemonic tactics of resistance whilst Northern artists were merely tinkering around the edges with the "institutional critique" of an elitist Euro-American art system. From the late 1960s throughout the 1980s, there were few Latin American and Caribbean countries (or Arab states, for that matter) that had not been

forced into repressive dictatorships by the combined interference of the world's financial organizations and the United States' covert CIA operations or blatant military invasion. Amongst Southern artistic responses to the repression of the nineteen seventies one can cite a tendency to act through collectives, which provided modest support; whilst artists in Brazil — Maria Thereza Alves' place of departure — produced additional interventionary tactics: most well known in the West are Cildo Meireles's *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, and Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica's interactive sculptures that sought to redefine the relationship between art and society as an embodied experience. To an extent, however, these artists emerged from a background outlined by Oswald de Andrade's "Anthropophagic Manifesto" (1928), which redefine Brazilian culture in terms of native "cannibalism", which, for Andrade, was the form of appropriation by which Brazilian national culture would find its own identity against the historical imports of the European. One notes here, however, a parallel *criollo* misinterpretation and misuse of indigenous cultures whilst ignoring the state and corporate violence enacted upon them. Although Alves was educated and lived during much of the 1980s in New York,<sup>3</sup> and although she may well eschew any concept of national identity as a fabricated and dangerously divisive form of exclusivity, one might suggest that her work inherits this Southern sensitivity to sociopolitical injustices. However, she understands their roots not in the de-colonizing struggle between European settlers and imperialists, but in the actual and linguistic violence against indigenous peoples, an understanding that she carries over into Europe with her archival research into the concealed histories and the prejudices embedded in language that form or deform local experience and identities.

The art practice of Maria Thereza Alves does not lend itself to easy categorization. For the

most part, she eschews the concept of art as a discrete object, which, whatever its author's initial intention, is too readily commodified by the wealthy elite as an asset to trade in the auction houses. With Alves' work we have to ask different questions about art's purpose; we therefore have to abandon the notion of aesthetic objects and look to the productive effects of imagination, process and social or inter-subjective relations. One can perhaps suggest that Alves's work proposes an "aesthetics of resistance" against the norms of western art alongside the "world of lies", as Melville put it, peddled by the hypocrisy of the political classes everywhere. Such an art practice is bound to the political insofar as it is deeply implicated in the conditions of life, but realistically knows it cannot claim to impact on politics as such. Its sphere of action is therefore the "local," listening and seeing beyond the surface appearance of things, identifying other ways of seeing and reading towards reclaiming the power to act in and against the limits imposed by power and its mediated versions of reality. The form her work takes is therefore an *art engagé*, in which participation, both at the point of initiation of a project and during its execution, has been a central aspect of her practice to date.

To reclaim agency demands a *proactive* subject armed with knowledge. The problem is that the subject is not only oppressed by power but is itself its product, suggesting that the subject is always somehow complicit in its subjugation. So how to imagine a politically viable agency capable of overcoming this impasse? In the colonial scenario, Frantz Fanon insisted that it was impossible to do so by a *nostalgic* retreat into some lost or fragmented pre-colonial past. As Fanon said, one had to recognize the dynamics of repression and reconfigure social narratives from the conditions of the present. One might add, considering the centrality of archival research to Alves' work, that one must first understand how the past is selectively used by the powerful to write its own version of history. To reclaim agency meant turning language towards re-imagining an existence not defined by trauma and victimhood, a role Fanon assigned to the intellectual and storyteller.<sup>4</sup> Edward Said likewise suggested that the intellectual had a responsibility to 'speak truth to power', to give voice to injustice, which was best done by the 'amateur' uncontaminated by the institutional pressures to which academics were inevitably subjected.<sup>5</sup> Such a descrip-

tion fits the unaffiliated or "nomadic" artist like Alves, whose "home" is located in the processes by which the *work* of art comes into being. We therefore arrive at another issue raised by Said that is pertinent to Alves' working process, namely, the space of exile. In his essay "Reflections on Exile," after disparaging some of the least attractive tendencies of the exiled subject, he comes to Adorno's commentary in *Minima Moralia*, in which, as Said relates, "he argued that everything that one says or thinks, as well as every object one possesses, is ultimately mere commodity. Language is jargon; objects are for sale. To refuse this state of affairs is the exile's intellectual mission." Exiles cross boundaries, break barriers of thought and experience; and "seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision."<sup>6</sup> This form of being, simultaneously *outside and belonging* to the world, is how I understand Alves' position: a "storyteller" and "exile," who adopts the procedures of the investigative scientist, anthropologist or ethnographer, not, however, to produce a reverse anthropology in which the "native" looks at the "European" using the latter's criteria, but to disclose the distortions of language and history by which hegemony exerts its control.

*Seeds of Change* is an extensive project that Alves researched and conducted in several port cities across Europe and Scandinavia. In one sense it is an extension of her earlier active engagement in ecological issues: she was a founding member of the Brazilian Green Party (*Partido Verde*), which was constituted in 1986 after the military dictatorship and committed to furthering social democracy and sustainable development. *Seeds of Change* is not an artwork in the conventional sense, nor does it possess an outcome that could be anticipated in advance; it is better described as an experimental, multidisciplinary collaboration by Alves with various environmental scientists, botanists, engineers, local authorities and communities, in which Alves applies an artistic imagination to specific contexts in order to disclose hitherto concealed sociocultural histories. The "point of departure" of the work was the observation that the ships that plied the trans-Atlantic colonial trade routes deposited ballast in their ports of call: ballast was loaded onto ships to control stability and later off-loaded — as Alves found, in legal and illegal sites — in order to lighten the ship to receive further cargo. Ballast would, however, consist of

1 — Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," *The Literary World*, August 17 and 24, 1850. <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/nh/hahm.html>

2 — Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 257.

3 — Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, [1961], trans. Constance Farrington, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 193.

4 — Edward W. Said, "Speaking truth to power" in *Representations of the Intellectual*, London: Vintage, 1994, p. 65.

5 — This was a time nonetheless of expanding postcolonial studies and insistent critique of the mainstream art world by ethnic "others."

6 — Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1983.

whatever natural aggregate material was available, with the result that plant seeds from the collection site were transported to the ports of deposit, where they may germinate, remain dormant for several years, or be dispersed even further afield.

Alves' process was firstly to research shipping and municipal archives and maps to identify ballast sites. She would then take core soil samples from these sites and observe what "exotics" germinated under controlled conditions. The next phase of the project was to engage the local community in constructing a "ballast flora garden," which, certainly in the case of Bristol and Liverpool as the most notorious slave and immigrant ports, would be likely to reflect the triangular trans-Atlantic slave trade. In Bristol, Alves indeed found an Argentinean and a Portuguese plant, which linked the Bristol-based adventurer Sebastian Cabot with the Anglo-Portuguese slave trade in Brazil, which, as Alves relates, even well into the twentieth century had repercussions on the sense of security of the local people of the Mato Grosso. If this part of the project was curtailed in Marseilles due to a change in local politics, the idea was received with enthusiasm in Bristol, whilst in Reposaari, Finland, Alves discovered that the local population already valued and nurtured the "exotics" that had sprung up in their midst to the extent that they functioned as a form of social currency.

Ballast flora are of course "illegal immigrants," and *Seeds of Change* presents an elegant allegory for complex human identities that expose Europe, not as a discrete set of monocultures but as the result of ongoing intercultural exchanges that undermine fantasies of national identity — a relatively recent construct born during the political and colonially inscribed upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Benedict Anderson's seminal book *Imagined Communities* makes clear.<sup>7</sup> As Alves notes, given that the process of exotic seed dissemination has continued for several centuries, both through inadvertent immigration and deliberate introduction by plant collectors, in places like the British Isles plants introduced centuries ago are now regarded as "indigenous."<sup>8</sup> But as her earlier work *Wake* (2000–01), a project for Berlin sponsored by the DAAD, revealed, plants are also emotively bound up with nationalist symbolism, despite the fact that they persistently fail to respect national borders. As *Wake* demonstrated, Bismarck's attempt to define a

national flora like Nazi Germany's later disastrous attempt to define an authentic German *Volk*, were doomed to failure.

With a few rare exceptions, plants tend to stay within their species categories, unless genetically modified by humans, although they may naturally adapt to differing environmental conditions. Humans, of course, are a single species despite the rhetoric of "race"; there may be ethnic or cultural differences, but these do not preclude interethnic mixing. One might be wary of calling this "hybridity," if only because this word tends to sediment onto "things" when cultural exchange is a fluid *process*. Rather, Gramsci's notion of "war of position" often best describes the relation between minority and majority cultures, where differences are negotiated either as a matter of political expediency, or in acknowledgement that there is something useful in the "foreign" to be incorporated into existing cultural traditions. Likewise, in discussions of the relation between the "global" and the "local" in art practices, Gerardo Mosquera disputes the notion that this leads to the global homogenization of art practices, arguing that the local "re-signifies" the global to suit its own concepts and needs.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective we may see Alves' work as a "war of position," exploring the various negotiations that take place in intercultural exchanges.

Three of Alves' works in particular narrate different perspectives on the complexities of intercultural negotiation: *Oculusics: An Investigation of Cross — cultural Eye Contact* (2008), *Iracema de Questembert*, 2009, and *Orée*, 2011. *Oculusics* presents the viewer with the alternating images of two men: one, a "typical" white Northern European dressed in a suit, stares unblinkingly at the camera, whilst the other, dressed casually and whom we take to be an Arab possibly from North Africa, occasionally glances at the camera, but whose gaze mostly drifts elsewhere. Meanwhile the text captions, which appear to be "voiced" from a female perspective and derive from Alves' associates in the art world, relate differing responses to these gazes although they not do necessarily coincide with each face: the steady frontal stare was "predatory," "disconcerting," "encouraged" or "didn't encourage" conversation; whereas the Arab man's gaze signaled "inattention" and "disrespect." It is not until the end of the video that we learn that the European world regards its

own tradition of maintaining eye contact as a "universal" sign of politeness, ignorant of the fact that most other peoples interpret this as aggressive and disrespectful.

Alves' *Fair Trade Head* (2009) made for the "Museum of European Normality," is also concerned with European disrespect for other cultures and peoples, which is nowhere more grotesquely illustrated than by the nineteenth century habit of collecting "native" body parts. Ethnographic museums in many ex-imperial countries have returned these human remains to their communities for proper burial, but the French Ministry of Culture blocked the return of a Maori person's tattooed head by Rouen's Museum of Natural History on the extraordinary grounds that this was an "art object" and part of French "national heritage." Alves notes a similar reluctance by the Musée du quai Branly in her video *Iracema de Questembert*. Alves' ironic proposal in *Fair Trade Head* is a tattooed white female head as a reciprocal "gift."

It may be remembered that the remains of Saartjie Baartman (known as the "Hottentot Venus") were only returned by France to South Africa during 2002 at the specific request of Nelson Mandela. Baartman was paraded in European freak shows during the early nineteenth century, because her steatopygic buttocks and genitals excited attention. Sander L. Gilman plausibly shows how popular images of Baartman merged with those of white prostitutes showing exaggerated buttocks, as signs of an "intrinsic" excessive and corrupting female sexuality.<sup>10</sup> It is to this history of the displayed female body, the fetishization of which seemed to increase during the height of nineteenth century imperialism,<sup>11</sup> that Alves' video *Beyond the Painting* (2012) alludes. The artist invited several "Caucasian" women, most of whom were not professional models, to choose and present poses from historical paintings of the nude. Each woman enters the frame and adopts the pose in a scene of simple black drapery; she holds the pose, candidly addresses the camera and exits the frame. Most of these poses are recognizable — examples from Boucher, Goya, Ingres, Delacroix and Manet, amongst others, are all presented — but they are no less discomfiting for all their familiarity when one knows that most of the original sitters were either the mistresses of the wealthy elite, prostitutes by economic necessity, or the objects of an artist's colonial fantasies. The Renaissance established the lex-

icon of poses for the female nude genre, which, whilst initially depicting proactive women like Diana the Huntress, became increasingly addressed to the lascivious gaze of the male observer until all pretense to classical myth was abandoned in Boucher's sexually posed *Miss Murphy*, 1752. This gaze gained added frisson with "Orientalist" fantasies of the "Turkish" or "Arab" seraglio introduced with European military campaigns in North Africa and the Middle East — an allusion that Alves does not ignore in her inclusion of the prostrate woman posed in Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827 — or later, with Gauguin's nubile Tahitian girls. The female viewer might despair at the extent to which these poses have become naturalized within western depictions of the female body, and the amnesia about the realities from which they derived. Nonetheless, it is the spell of the exotic fantasy that Alves breaks by presenting the everydayness of the model's work, reminding us that these women were real people.

*Iracema de Questembert*, however, provides a counterpoint to what might seem to be *Beyond the Painting's* depressing visual history of female objectification. The video presents a financial account of an indigenous Brazilian woman, Iracema, who inherits her father's wealthy French estate. We see her move from her forested home, passing the logging trucks, the farmland clearances and the mining companies, on her journey to France to take up her inheritance, where racial bigotry is figured in her encounters with the lawyers, who, with "false manners like anthropologists and missionaries," try to persuade her to return. She does not; instead, she takes up the life of an artist in the intercultural milieu of French "primitivist" modernism and founds an Institute for Science and Art. As she says, from the gracious cultural perspective of indigenous America, she is "returning the gift of inheritance by accepting it"—and also by passing it on. *Iracema de Questembert* circulates around a critique of what commonly constitutes a national belonging and identity, questioning what "Frenchness" means for both the peoples in the country's colonized "départments" around the world and for their reception inside France. The name "Iracema" refers to a fictional founding myth of Brazilian national identity formed by the union of a native woman, Iracema, and a Portuguese colonizer, Martim. This sexualized myth, in which the native woman is both vilified as a traitorous whore and valorized as the mother of the

7— Maria Thereza Alves, "Seeds of Change", in *Plot*, Simon Read and Jean Fisher (eds), London: Middlesex University, p. 44.

8— Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile", in *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, London: Granta, 2001, pp. 184–186.

9— Gerardo Mosquera, "Alien-Own, Own-Alien," in Nikos Papastergiadis (ed), *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference*, London: Rivers Oram Press, 2003, pp. 18–29.

10— Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ed), *Race, Writing, and Difference*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1986, pp. 223–261.

11— The era coincides with the fashionable bustle of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, which also exaggerated the buttocks. It is considered to be a covert "contained" sign of male ascription of dangerous excess to female sexuality.

(settler) nation, is a common trope in the Americas and was a way of legitimizing colonialism — one recalls the similar narratives of Malinche and Cortés in Mexico and Pocahontas and John Rolfe/John Smith in the Virginias. On the surface, therefore, it would seem that Iracema’s “assimilation” into French society is an example of cultural “hybridity,” but Alves’ story is not so simple. Iracema’s cultural integrity is maintained in terms of ethical responsibility and adaptation — as, for instance, indigenous dishes adapted to available local ingredients. “Adapting” is not quite the same as “hybridizing”; it implies a movement of change, whereas hybridity, as already mentioned, identifies “things.” In the end, we discover that Iracema is not the descendent of an interethnic liaison, and is French not by “ethnicity” but by choice; and perhaps the most significant statement of the work is: “Home, where is that? If home is not found in the intellectual life of friends and discussion, it is only a tomb.”

Alves returns to the issue of intercultural exchange in *Orée*, which explores an aspect of the linguistic traditions of La Réunion, a department of France located in the Indian Ocean. Seemingly uninhabited, the island was undoubtedly known to Arab and Swahili sailors trading between Africa and India; but by 1665 it had been officially claimed and settled by French colonizers with their African slaves and indentured workers from India and South-East Asia. La Réunion therefore presents a specific colonial history of multiethnic cultural exchange, whose common language is creolized French. In *Orée*, a fixed camera is positioned in a tropical forest touched only by a faint breeze, whilst two female voiceovers individually narrate a text delivered in tones that are alternately seductive, sing-song, or indignant, ending in the exclamation, “... bois de négresse!” The French and creole text describes the names of indigenous plants used by local people as food, medicine, spices and teas — knowledge developed by ancestors who escaped into the forests to avoid slavery. Given that no indigenous names could have been installed on an uninhabited island, plant names reflect the ethnic diversity and socio-political history of La Réunion’s colonial relations: “bois de négresse” is, it seems, regarded as an imitation of a tree named “bois mazelle” (mademoiselle), reflecting the hierarchical value assigned to enslaved black women and privileged white women on the island.

The “importance of words” is again a cen-

tral issue in Alves’ collaboration with Shirley Krenak (the actor who plays Iracema) and Jürgen Bock of Maumaus, Escola de Artes Visuales, Lisbon, in the translation and production of *Dicionário: Krenak-Português/Português-Krenak*, 2010. During the filming of *Iracema de Questembert* in Minas Gerais, Shirley, with her brothers Douglas and Tam Krenak, approached Alves with a proposition: to translate a late nineteenth century German dictionary of the Krenak language into Portuguese. Alves in turn approached Bock, who enthusiastically supported the project, and enabled the translated dictionary to be incorporated into Alves’ exhibition in Maumaus, *On the Importance of Words, A Sacred Mountain (stolen), and the Morality, of Nations* (2010). The significance of this project cannot be overstated; after hundreds of years of physical and cultural genocide, dispossession of land, constant relocation and official denial of existence, initiated by the colonial Portuguese and continued by the Brazilian government and corporate interests, the Krenak population had been reduced to around six hundred souls. Nonetheless, they were fiercely intent on cultural survival; and to this end the translation of the old German dictionary<sup>12</sup>, distributed to every surviving member of the Krenak, would enable them to reclaim a language that had all but been lost through systematic deculturation. The dictionary project is a rare example of an artistic intervention resulting in a positive outcome for the community in question: insofar as language describes the meaning of the world for its users, there is no more significant route to agency than its reclamation.

One might conclude by suggesting that *Orée*, despite the apparent cultural specificity of its context, functions as an appropriate allegory of Alves’ search for Melville’s “sacred white doe of truth” among the forest of visual and verbal signs that entangle us in dissimulation about the real state of affairs — political and ecological — of our relations to the world. If Alves has focused her attention primarily on the indigenous or local situation it is not simply because it is a discursive terrain with which she is familiar, but because it is here, first, in lived realities, that the proliferating effects of political injustices, born of abstract ideologies and vested corporate interests that respect neither sustainable ways of life nor the finitude of the earth’s resources, are most keenly and impotently felt. It is, then, to solicit in the viewer a more creative way of thinking about how we in-

habit and understand the world as an irrevocably shared inheritance that Alves’ work is directed. As Jean-Luc Nancy has said: “‘I’ is always and already ‘us’ s... there is no meaning if meaning is not shared.”<sup>13</sup>

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Jean Fisher (1942–2016) was a writer, professor emerita in Fine Art and Transcultural Studies at Middlesex University, and the editor of *Third Text*.

12 — The obsessive documentation of indigenous cultures by European colonizers, to “prove” their “primitiveness” and justify the “civilizing mission,” sometimes *does* present an archive for the reclamation of buried histories. As Alves’ work demonstrates, *reinterpreting* archival data from its misuse in colonial ideologies is an essential part of this process. However, Alves’ logical proposal that the Krenak data be incorporated into a website for local and scholarly research, has so far — at the time of writing — met with no interest from Brazilian educational institutions.

13 — Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 2.

# The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors

## Saidiya Hartman

*The slave ship is a womb/abyss.* The plantation is the belly of the world. *Partus sequitur ventrem*—the child follows the belly. The master dreams of future increase. The modern world follows the belly. Gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery. What it created and what it destroyed has been explicated by way of gendered figures of conception, birth, parturition, and severed or negated maternity. To be a slave is to be “excluded from the prerogatives of birth.” The mother’s only claim—to transfer her dispossession to the child. The material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women’s historical experiences as laborers and shaped the character of their refusal of and resistance to slavery.<sup>1</sup> The theft, regulation and destruction of black women’s sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery.

Most often when the productive labor of the slave comes into view, it is as a category absent gender and sexual differentiation. In two of the greatest works of the black radical tradition, W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* and C.L.R. James’ *Black Jacobins*, the agency of the enslaved becomes legible as politics, rather than crime or destruction, at the moment slaves are transformed into black workers and revolutionary masses fashioned along the lines of the insurgent proletariat. However, representing the slave through the figure of the worker (albeit unwaged and unfree), obscures as much as it reveals, making it difficult to distinguish the constitutive elements of slavery as a mode of power, violence, dispossession and accumulation or to attend to the forms of gendered and sexual violence that enable these processes. In *Black Reconstruction*, women’s sexual and reproductive labor is critical in accounting for the violence and degradation of slavery,

yet this labor falls outside of the heroic account of the black worker and the general strike.

Black women, too, refused the conditions of work on the plantation, and Du Bois notes their presence among the “army of fugitives” rushing away from the fields. Yet, in the shift from the fugitive to the striking worker, the female slave becomes a minor figure. Neither “the potentialities for the future” represented by the fugitive nor the text engendered by flight and refusal and furnished for abolition idealists embraced her labors.<sup>2</sup> Marriage and protection rather than sexual freedom and reproductive justice were the only ways conceived to redress her wrongs, or remedy the “wound dealt to [her] reputation as a human being.” The sexual violence and reproduction characteristic of enslaved women’s experience fails to produce a radical politics of liberation or a philosophy of freedom.

Black women’s labors have not been easy to reckon with conceptually. Feminist thinkers, following the path cleared by Angela Davis’ groundbreaking essay “Reflections of the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” have considered the significance of gender, sexuality and reproduction in defining the constitutive relations of slavery and the modes of its violence.<sup>3</sup> It has proven difficult, if not impossible, to assimilate black women’s domestic labors and reproductive capacities within narratives of the black worker, slave rebellion, maroonage, or black radicalism, even as this labor was critical to the creation of value, the realization of profit and the accumulation of capital. It has been no less complicated to imagine the future produced by such labors as anything other than monstrous. Certainly we know that enslaved women fled the plantation, albeit not in as great numbers as men; poisoned slaveholders; plotted resistance; dreamed of destroying the master and his house; utilized abortifacients rather

than reproduce slaves; practiced infanticide rather than sentence their children to social death, the auction block, and the master’s bed; exercised autonomy in suicidal acts; gave birth to children as testament to an abiding knowledge of freedom contrary to every empirical index of the plantation; and yearned for radically different ways of being in the world. So where exactly does the sex drudge, recalcitrant domestic, broken mother, or sullen wet-nurse fit into the scheme of the general strike? If the general strike is a placeholder for political aspirations that Du Bois struggles to name, how does the character of the slave female’s refusal augment the text of black radicalism? Is it at all possible to imagine her as the paradigmatic slave or as the representative black worker?

Reproductive labor, as scholars Hortense Spillers, Jennifer Morgan, Dorothy Roberts, Alys Weinbaum, and Neferti Tadiar note, is central to thinking about the gendered afterlife of slavery and global capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Yet attending to the status of black women’s labors has confounded our conceptual categories and thrown our critical lexicon into crisis. On the slave ship, captive women were accounted for as quantities of greater and lesser mass, and the language of units and complete cargo eclipsed that of the subject, the person or individual. The “anomalous intimacy of cargo,” according to Stephanie Smallwood, represented a new social formation. Those African persons in Middle Passage, writes Spillers, were “literally suspended in the oceanic.” They were “culturally unmade.” “Under these conditions one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as quantities.”<sup>5</sup> For Spillers, the categories of flesh and body are deployed to describe the mutilation, dismemberment, and exile of captivity and enslavement. Flesh provides the primary narrative rather than gendered subject positions. The flesh is produced by the violence of racial slavery and yet it brings into view a new mode of relation.

On the plantation, black women were required to toil as hard as men, and in this way “ungendered,” according to Spillers, by which she means that “female and male adhere to no symbolic integrity.” *Partus sequitur ventrem* negated kinship and denied it any “legal or social efficacy.” The condition

of the mother marked her offspring and was “forever entailed on her remotest posterity.” We carry the mother’s mark and it continues to define our condition and our present.

The role of gender and sexual differentiation in the constitution of labor is especially complex in the context of slavery. On one hand, the category of labor insufficiently accounts for slavery as a mode of power, domination and production. The fungibility of the slave, the wanton uses of the black body for producing value or pleasure, and the shared vulnerabilities of the commodity, whether male or female, trouble dominant accounts of gender. Depending on the angle of vision or critical lexicon, the harnessing of the body as an instrument for social and physical reproduction unmakes the slave as gendered subject or reveals the primacy of gender and sexual differentiation in the making of the slave. Natal alienation is one of the central attributes of the social death of the slave and gendered and sexual violence are central to the processes that render the black child as by-product of the relations of production.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the lines of division between the market and the household which distinguished the public and the domestic and divided productive and reproductive labor for propertied whites does not hold when describing the enslaved and the carceral landscape of plantation. Reproduction is tethered to the making of human commodities and in service of the marketplace. For the enslaved, reproduction does not ensure any future other than that of dispossession nor guarantee anything other than the replication of racialized and disposable persons or “human increase” (expanded property-holdings) for the master. The future of the enslaved was a form of speculative value for slaveholders. Even the unborn were conscripted and condemned to slavery.

“Kinship loses meaning,” according to Spillers, “since at any moment it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by property relations.” Extending and revising this line of argument, Morgan notes the importance of maternity and reproduction in the evolution of the legal codification of slavery. “Women’s bodies became the definitional sites of racial slavery.” In North America, the future of slavery depended upon black women’s repro-

1—See Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6, 75; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). *Laboring Women* was one of the first historical monographs devoted to examining enslaved women’s sexuality and reproductive lives and the centrality of reproduction to the social and legal machinery of colonial slavery.

2—W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (1935; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1992), 13, 44, 39, 67.

3—Angela Davis, “Reflections on Black Women’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Black Scholar* 13 no. 4 (1971): 2–15; Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14 no. 4 (1989): 912–20; Darlene Clark Hine, “Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 3 no. 2 (1979): 123–27.

4—Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in her *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 203–29; Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Alys Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Alys Weinbaum, “Gendering the General Strike: W.E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* and Black Feminism’s ‘Propaganda of History,’” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112 no. 3 (2013): 437–63; Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Neferti Tadiar, “Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism,” *Social Text* 31 no. 2 (2013): 19–48.

5—Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Spillers, *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*, 215. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley describes this anomalous intimacy in terms of a queer Atlantic in “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” *GLQ* 14 nos. 2–3 (191–215): 191–215. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe the experience of the shipped as “hapticality in the hold” in *The Undercommons* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013).

6—Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

ductive capacity as it did on the slave market. The reproduction of human property and the social relations of racial slavery were predicated upon the belly. Plainly put, subjection was anchored in black women's reproductive capacities. The captive female body, according to Spillers, "locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange."<sup>7</sup>

Forced to labor for the "satisfaction of the immediate needs" of their owners and overseers, however, those needs were defined, the captive female body was subjected to innumerable uses. It could be converted into cash, speculated and traded as commodity, worked to death, taken, tortured, seeded, and propagated like any other crop, or murdered. The value produced by and extracted from enslaved women included productive labor — their labors as farm workers, cotton pickers, tobacco hands, and rice cultivators — and their reproductive capacities created "future increase" for farms and plantations and human commodities for markets, yoking the prospect of racial slavery to their bodies. Even the unborn figured into the reproductive calculus of the institution. The work of sex and procreation was the chief motor for reproducing the material, social, and symbolic relations of slavery. The value accrued through reproductive labor was brutally apparent to the enslaved who protested bitterly against being bred like cattle and oxen. This reproductive labor not only guaranteed slavery as an institutional process and secured the status of the enslaved, but it inaugurated a regime of racialized sexuality that continues to place black bodies at risk for sexual exploitation and abuse, gratuitous violence, incarceration, poverty, premature death, and state-sanctioned murder.

The sexuality and reproductive capacities of enslaved women were central to understanding the expanding legal conception of slavery and its inheritability. Slavery conscripted the womb, deciding the fate of the unborn and reproducing slave property by making the mark of the mother a death sentence for her child. The negation or disfigurement of maternity, writes Christina Sharpe, "turns the womb into a factory reproducing blackness as abjection and turning the birth canal into another domestic middle passage."<sup>8</sup> *Partus sequitur ventrem* — replicates the fate of the slave across generations. The belly is made a factory of production incommensurate with notions of the maternal, the conjugal or the domes-

tic. In short, the slave exists out of the world and outside the house.

Labor remained a category central to the fashioning of gender and sexuality in the context of slavery's aftermath. In *The Negro American Family*, Du Bois writes that the slave ship and the plantation revolutionized the black family primarily by destroying kinship and negating conjugal relations. Invariably the remedy proposed for this wounded kinship converged on the figure of the (restored) husband-father as the primary breadwinner. The problem of black women's labor made apparent the gender non-conformity of the black community, its supple and extended modes of kinship, its queer domesticity, promiscuous sociality and loose intimacy, and its serial and fluid conjugal relations.

The "lax moral relations, promiscuity, easy marriage and easy separation," which Du Bois identified as the consequences of slavery, continued in the aftermath of emancipation, extending the plantation to the city. "Plantations holdovers," to his dismay, shaped life in the emergent ghettos of northern cities. The ghetto became the third matrix of black death and dispossession, after the slave ship and the plantation, and anticipating the prison.<sup>9</sup> The urban enclosure produced another revolution of black intimate life, another rupture in the social history of the Negro.<sup>10</sup> Mothers and wives and daughters were forced into unskilled and low-paid work, with the overwhelming majority confined to labor as domestics. Black women served as the primary breadwinners in households that bore no resemblance to the patriarchal nuclear family. These black laboring women troubled gender conventions by being "outfitted like men," as was the case with their enslaved mothers and grandmothers. The independence granted by wages, even low wages, made them less willing to marry or live with men unable to provide and granted them a degree of sexual autonomy that made Du Bois shudder. He longed for a future where the "betrayed girl mothers of the Black Belt," while retaining their economic independence, would be transformed into virtuous wives and married mothers.

The continuities between slavery and freedom were underwritten by black women's domestic labor. Their "success or frustrations in influencing the character of domestic labor," writes Tera

Hunter, "would define how meaningful freedom would be."<sup>11</sup> Slave women working as domestic laborers in white households experienced forms of violence and sexual exploitation that troubled simple distinctions between the privileges of the house and the brutalities of the field. Nowhere was the heterogeneity or discontinuity or instability of the category gender more apparent than in the plantation household. No uniform or shared category of gender included the mistress and the enslaved. The white household, as Thavolia Glymph documents in *Out of the House of Bondage*, was a space of violence and brutality for the black women forced to serve as housekeepers, caretakers, nannies, and wet-nurses. The domestic space, as much as the field, defined their experience of enslavement and the particular vulnerabilities of the captive body; and it continued to define the very narrow horizon and limited opportunities available to black women in the first decades of the 20th century.

Black women regularly complained about being forced to labor as domestics. Domestic work carried the taint of slavery. While Black women's physical and affective labors were central to the reproduction and security of the white household, their own lives and families remained at risk. As free workers in the North and South, black women continued to labor as poorly paid workers in white households, tended and cared for white families, endured the exhaustion and the boredom part and parcel of caring for children, cooking, cleaning, and servicing the lives of others.

In northern cities like Philadelphia and New York, the overwhelming majority of black women were confined to domestic and service labor. Besides the arduous toil that characterized this work, black women experienced great isolation and were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation by the men of the household. While social reformers and Progressive intellectuals encouraged domestic work as a form of moral tutelage and training, black women knew first-hand that they were safer in the streets and the tenements of the ghetto than in white homes. Domestic work subjected them to forms of intimate violence as well as exploitation as low-wage workers.

The systematic violence needed to conscript black women's domestic labor after slavery re-

quired locking them out of all other sectors of the labor market, a condition William Patterson described as economic genocide. Race riots, the enclosure of the ghetto, the vertical order of human life, and the forms of value and debt promulgated through emergent forms of racism, what Sarah Haley terms "Jim Crow modernity," made it impossible for black women to escape the white household.

As domestic workers, black women were conscripted to a role that required them to care for and replenish the needs of the white household, and tend to the daily activities necessary for its maintenance. They were forced to perform the affective and communicative labor necessary for the sustenance of white families at the expense of their own; as surrogates, they were required to mother children who held their children in contempt; to cook, clean, and comfort white men enabling them to go out into the world as productive laborers; and submit to intimate relations with husbands and sons and brothers or be raped by them — you cannot choose what you cannot refuse. In this labor of service to the white household, the domestic worker struggled to enable the survival of her own.

Her lover, her spouse, and her kin depend on this labor for their subsistence, as does her community. As a consequence, she comes to enjoy a position that is revered and reviled, essential to the endurance of black social life and, at the same time, blamed for its destruction. The care extracted from her to tend the white household is taken at the cost of her own. She is the best nanny and the worst mother. Yet this labor remains marginal or neglected in the narratives of black insurgency, resistance, and refusal.

Where does the *impossible domestic* fit into the general strike?<sup>12</sup> What is the text of her insurgency and the genre of her refusal? What visions of the future world encourage her to run, or propel her flight? Or is she, as Spillers observes, a subject still awaiting her verb? Strategies of endurance and subsistence do not yield easily to the grand narrative of revolution, nor has a space been cleared for the sex worker, welfare mother, and domestic laborer in the annals of the black radical tradition.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps understandable, even if unacceptable, when the costs of enduring are so great. Mere survival is an achievement

7 — Jennifer Morgan, "Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Slave Law and the History of Women in Slavery," A Workshop with Jennifer Morgan (Irvine: University of California, Irvine, 2014); Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 75.

8 — Christina Sharpe, "In the Wake," *The Black Scholar* 44 no. 2 (2014): 59–69.

9 — Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 73; Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe* 17 no. 3 (2013): 1–15.

10 — W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899; reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1989).

11 — Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

12 — Fred Moten, "Uplift and Criminality," in *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality and W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Alys Weinbaum and Susan Gilman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 317–49.

13 — Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Welfare* (New York: Basic Civitas Book, 2003); Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power*, ed. Toni Morrison and Leon Higginbotham (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 323–63; Fred Moten, "The Subprime and the Beautiful," *African Identities*, 11 no. 2 (2013): 237–45.

in a context so brutal. If we intend to do more than make the recalcitrant domestic, the outcast, and insurrectionist a figure for our revolutionary longing, or impose yet another burden on black female flesh by making it “a placeholder for freedom,”<sup>14</sup> then we must never lose sight of the material conditions of her existence or how much she has been required to give for our survival.

Those of us who have been “touched by the mother” need to acknowledge that her ability to provide care, food, and refuge often has placed her in great jeopardy and, above all, required her to give with no expectation of reciprocity or return. *All we have is what she holds in her outstretched hands*.<sup>15</sup> There is no getting around this. Yet, her freedom struggle remains opaque, untranslatable into the lexicon of the political. She provides so much, yet rarely does she thrive. It seems that her role has been fixed and that her role is as a provider of care, which

is the very mode of her exploitation and indifferent use by the world, a world blind to her gifts, her intellect, her talents. This brilliant and formidable labor of care, paradoxically, has been produced through violent structures of slavery, anti-black racism, virulent sexism, and disposability.<sup>16</sup> The forms of care, intimacy, and sustenance exploited by racial capitalism, most importantly, are not reducible to or exhausted by it. These labors cannot be assimilated to the template or grid of the black worker, but instead nourish the latent text of the fugitive. They enable those “who were never meant to survive” to sometimes do just that. This care, which is coerced and freely given, is the black heart of our social poesis, of making and relation.

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<sup>14</sup>—Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4, 15.

<sup>15</sup>—This is a restatement with a difference of Fred Moten: “All that we have (and are) is what we hold in our outstretched hands.”

<sup>16</sup>—Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 136.

Forensic

Architecture

MadeYou –

Look

Gulf Labor

IsumaTV

3

House Of

Natural

Fiber

## Forensic Architecture

COUNTRY	England and U.S.
PROJECT	Entire Practice, including SITU Research
DATES	2011–Present
NOMINATOR	Mariam Ghani

In 2011, Eyal Weizman described forensic architecture as both the “archeology of the very recent past,” which deploys the practice of architecture as a “sensor” to reconstruct war crimes from the evidence registered in images and materials of the built environment, and a “form of assembling for the future,” in which architecture acts as an “agent” that, by providing new means of interpreting material evidence, begins to construct new forums (or transform existing forums) for judging and acting upon that evidence. This transformation or reconstruction of forums is enacted through the forensic aesthetics of demonstrations, dramatizations, projections, and performances, which constitute the “mode of appearance of things in forums” and build up the credibility of the interpreters of those things-as-evidence. Forensics, in this understanding, is both a “tool of investigation” and a “means of persuasion.”

The projects undertaken by the Forensic Architecture at Goldsmiths College, founded and led by Weizman, as well as SITU Research, led by Bradley Samuels, bring together architects, designers, artists, filmmakers, scientists, lawyers, human rights activists, NGOs, and members of threatened communities to document, analyze, and re-visualize human rights violations. These collaborations have been used in landmark legal cases and human rights campaigns, formed the spine of the influential exhibition and book *Forensis* (2014) at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin, and received both academic reviews and broad mass-media coverage. In short, they have succeeded in transforming both the field and forums in which they work, by developing new tools and techniques to retrieve material evidence, and changing the norms and expectations around how that evidence will be presented. In particular, the techniques they have developed for reconstructing the space-timelines of events in cases where investigators are denied access to the scene — combining remote sensing (detailed

analysis of satellite imagery) with geotagged eyewitness videos and personal testimony — have incredible potential to upend the uneven dynamic of visibility between oppressive states and their citizens, what Weizman has called the “threshold of detectability” of violence.

While the two groups are no longer collaborating, the projects they produced during the period of collaboration have clearly informed the trajectories they are now pursuing separately. The two collaborations I would highlight in this regard are the *Left-to-Die Boat* investigation, which turned the data generated by NATO surveillance of the Mediterranean into evidence of NATO’s responsibility for their failure to assist 63 migrants who died while drifting for 14 days within that surveillance area, and the large-scale *Drone Strikes* inquiry, which uses spatial analysis to map the broader patterns underlying covert drone warfare campaigns, and also examines in detail the architectural aftermath of 30 drone strikes that killed civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Gaza. A later project by Forensic Architecture that continues along the same lines is *Rafah: Black Friday*, which reconstructs the destruction of August 1–4, 2014, in Rafah, Gaza, by cross-referencing geotagged cell-phone videos found on social media with satellite imagery and inputting them into a 3-D model of Rafah. Meanwhile, to help with prosecutions related to the massacre at the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, SITU is currently developing an open-source software platform that can automatically sort thousands of time and location-tagged cell-phone videos of a single event into a searchable space-time-line. And Forensic Architecture has released open-source software called PATTRN that customizes data visualization tools to enable participatory fact mapping for conflict monitoring, citizen journalism, and human rights research.

Many of these projects combine what I would describe as “warm data” — the stories of eyewitnesses or survivors, describing the worst days of their lives — with evidence that can be perceived as “cold data” or more simply cold, hard facts — geotagging, remote sensing, 3-D renderings, forensic

oceanography, forensic audio analysis. We judge warm data based on the credibility of the witness, while we judge cold data based on the competence or reputation of the expert presenting it. Mingling the two forms of data crosses the categories of witness and expert in an unexpected way, inserting into the forum of judgement the suggestion that the ultimate expert on events of this kind — from drone

strikes to boats left to drift — should be the *superstes*, the witness-survivor, the one who was there. And if there is no body left to speak? Look to the shadow left on the wall, the absence of impacts from the fragments of the bomb. That is where the body was, where the flesh absorbed the metal. Forensic architecture tells us: the building can testify; the building was there. •

## Gulf Labor

COUNTRY	U.S. and Middle East / Southeast Asia
PROJECT	Entire Practice
DATES	2011–Present
NOMINATOR	Joanna Warsza

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?  
 In the books you will find the name of kings.  
 Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?  
 And Babylon, many times demolished.  
 Who raised it up so many times? In what houses  
 Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?  
 Where, the evening that the Wall of China  
 was finished  
 Did the masons go? Great Rome  
 Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them?  
 Over whom  
 Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium,  
 much praised in song,  
 Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in  
 fabled Atlantis  
 The night the ocean engulfed it  
 The drowning still bawled for their slaves.  
 The young Alexander conquered India.  
 Was he alone?  
 Caesar beat the Gauls.  
 Did he not have even a cook with him?  
 Philip of Spain wept when his armada  
 Went down. Was he the only one to weep?  
 Frederick the Second won the Seven Years’  
 War. Who  
 Else won it?  
 Every page a victory.

Who cooked the feast for the victors?

Every ten years a great man.  
 Who paid the bill?  
 So many reports.  
 So many questions.  
 — Bertolt Brecht, *Questions from A Worker  
 Who Reads*

Rooted in Marxist ideology, Brecht’s poem states what should perhaps be obvious, but isn’t: no art context is innocent and one cannot look, produce, practice, and speak about art without considering its settings, terms, and conditions. Founded in 2011 in New York City, Gulf Labor Artist Coalition is a loose association of international artists raising another Brechtian question: who is building Guggenheim Abu Dhabi on Saadiyat Island in United Arab Emirates? For seven years Gulf Labor, in a unique strategy merging art, activism, and human rights, has been bringing awareness to the conditions of migrant workers constructing the franchise of “be the largest of the Guggenheim museums.”

The Saadiyat Island or the Island of Happiness is supposed to host some of the most prestigious cultural and academic institutions of the planet, such as the Louvre, New York University, the British Museum, and the Guggenheim, and by 2020 become the cultural center of Abu Dhabi attracting “high-end clientele just like Bilbao, Paris, or New York” and implementing the opulent “Gulf dream.” The UAE’s population of approximately 9 million people is composed of 90% migrant workers, including some international corporate expats, but predominantly contracted migrant workers recruited from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, or the

Philippines — with no formal rights to association, representation, or negotiation over their often much-worse than-promised working conditions. Any attempt to dissent and holding the employer accountable is silenced and can lead to arrest and deportation. Gulf Labor has been boldly and successfully calling on academic and cultural institutions constructed on Saadiyat Island to enforce uniform rules for human rights protection, such as just recruitment fees and relocation costs, and the freedom to change jobs or to form trade unions.

Gulf Labor’s prowess and import is notable for four aspects.

The first regards the performative and political way in which Gulf Labor employs a strategy of boycott, its signature claim being that no work sold to the Guggenheim may be exhibited in Abu Dhabi until the demands are met. It’s interesting to compare it with other boycotts of recent Biennales that occurred regularly between 2013 and 2015, such as in Istanbul, São Paulo, St. Petersburg, or Sydney. Those boycotts also aimed to challenge the politics of art and expose, or even end, what has been called art washing. They resulted from recent political upheavals such as Occupy Wall Street, the rise of activism, and the willingness of art to offer more than just a self-critical attitude. However, in most cases they were, unlike Gulf Labor, primarily symbolic: they did not seek long-term alliances with existing social movements, but rather operated through the economy of momentum. Gulf Labor does both: using the visibility produced by artists (through numerous actions and happenings with its sister group G.U.L.F) and linking their cause to empower the long-term

and tedious work of human rights organizations.

Secondly, Gulf Labor doesn’t produce art that saves the world, and they know it is too pretentious to think that art can do so on its own. Rather they choose to engage in activism as artists, juggling and playing with both roles, and empowering rather than disempowering both positions.

Thirdly, Gulf Labor practices art ecologically — considering both the consequences from silencing dissent to the code of conduct of art institutions, and thus establishes a new sense of solidarity. Their advocacy is a contemporary institutional critique aiming at tangible and reachable goals. Institutions such as the Guggenheim shouldn’t ignore and suppress them (as it recently did by breaking off any negotiations on the museum side), but rather use this moment of vulnerability for a potential change and rethinking their role.

Finally, Gulf Labor is not afraid to enter exhibition spaces as an artist coalition. Their activism obviously cannot be curated, but their influence on programming can challenge biennales and museums, as with their appearance both inside and outside the Venice Biennale exhibition. Gulf Labor also inspired other artists’ advocacy groups, such as Checkpoint Helsinki, that mobilized the art community against erecting yet another Guggenheim in the Finnish capital.

Gulf Labor might be a small fish, but the fact that it attacks a shark like the Guggenheim shows their boldness, courage, and the size of their stakes. Thanks to them the politics of “as if nothing happened” won’t be possible any more. We all want to go on, but we cannot go on undisturbed. •

## The House of Natural Fiber

COUNTRY	Indonesia
PROJECT	Entire Practice, especially Micronation/Macronation
DATES	1998–Present
NOMINATOR	Eungie Joo

The House of Natural Fiber/HONF Foundation is a creative community of artists, djs, physicists, hack-

ers, architects, scientists, makers, activists, expert users, and designers who test the possibilities of media art to address critical social issues through science and technology while pushing the boundaries of art and individual authorship. Founded by Indonesia Institute of Art (ISI) graduates Irene Agrivina, Venzha Christ, and Tommy Surya in 1998 as a place of open expression, art, and cultural technologies,

HONF emerged from the energy of the people’s movement that led to the fall of Suharto’s “New Order” regime. Responding to the context of political corruption, poverty, cultural repression, and nepotism, HONF began as an office, exhibition space, and laboratory conceived as “a place to share ideas and to make something real with a purpose and use for people and their environment.” Rather than focus on a static membership and a leader, this community shifts focus to timely urgencies, and active participation changes on a project to project basis.

Community building, cultural development, science, and new media art are at the core of HONF. Pursuing scientific research from different disciplines and applying DIY (Do it yourself) and DIWO (Do it with others) methodology, HONF produces interactive public works that respond to the particular conditions of Indonesia within the context of the larger world. They have collaborated widely with colleagues in Europe, Asia, and the Americas and function as a cultural laboratory of interdisciplinary knowledge exchange both locally and globally within their Education Focus Program (EFP). Directed at youth and newcomers to new media strategies, EFP is a guideline curriculum that applies critical analysis towards local and global issues to produce innovative ideas to seek solutions.

In response to the 2006 earthquake in Indonesia, HONF began to research the possibility of affordable, locally-made, bamboo prostheses. Together with Yakkum Rehabilitation Center, Yogyakarta, and Waag Society/Fablab, Amsterdam, HONF began *The Low Cost Prosthesis Project* in 2009. With one third of Indonesia’s population living in poverty, the need for affordable prostheses is growing, with amputations on the rise. The objective of this project is to use technological advances in 3-D printing to produce a self-adjusting lower-leg prosthesis for under US\$50. Their collaboration led to the formation of HONF Fablab/Fablab Yogyakarta in 2011 and continued research with Yakkum Rehabilitation Center and Waag Society towards a marketable product.

After the volcanic eruption of Mt. Merapi in 2010, HONF detected dangerous contaminants in the Code River that runs through Yogyakarta, but locals continued to use the water in their daily lives. By hacking expensive water filtration systems,

HONF created a simple DIY system involving coconut palm fibers, gravel, and stones that is easily replicable, and taught local residents how to produce their own filters for everyday use. As their contribution to the “2012 New Museum Triennial: The Ungovernables” in New York, HONF presented *IB:EC (Intelligent Bacteria: Eschericia coli): The Song of the River*, an installation involving projected images from four microscopes that magnify bacterial microorganisms in contaminated river water samples and plants connected to a sound system. Together with high school students from City-As-School, HONF constructed a version of their purification system during a workshop on the importance of access to clean water. To demonstrate the filtered water’s purity, HONF fed five fern plants with this water and amplified the electromagnetic energy emitted from the ferns’ fronds, transformed into sonic waves.

In a country where the GDP per capita in 2012 was US\$3,551.42, the threat of cuts to fuel subsidies led to HONF’s ongoing project *Micronation/Macronation: Democratizing the Energy*. At its core are three components: fermentation/distillation machines, which can transform hay into ethanol; satellite receivers for obtaining data related to agricultural production, such as weather, climate, and season conditions; and super-computers for processing data about agricultural conditions, ethanol production, and food and energy sustainability levels. *Micronation/Macronation* can be described as “action research” — creating added value to the agricultural process, by transforming the hemicellulose found in waste from rice paddies into alternative energy in the form of ethanol. The project is meant to generate affordable renewable energy sources to secure energy independence for Indonesia.

While diverse in shape and scale, House of Natural Fiber’s practices celebrate grassroots-level fluidity and ingenuity, the very things denied by the rigid formal institutions of the establishment. By involving diverse stakeholders, they help inspire and encourage an ecosystem where proactive, collaborative problem-solving increasingly becomes the norm. Presenting important issues through artwork, HONF reaches a broad audience despite the often-technical, inaccessible nature of the subjects themselves. •

## IsumaTV / Zacharias Kunuk

COUNTRY	Canada
PROJECT	Entire Project
DATES	2008–Present
NOMINATOR	Candice Hopkins

IsumaTV is a global movement, it's just not one many have heard of. Launched in 2008 by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, it is an online platform for Indigenous film and video makers to share their work for free and unrestrictedly. At the time of writing, IsumaTV has media in Aymara, Cree, Dehcho, Gitsan, Gwich'in, Inuktitut, Keres, Krenak, Maori, Maya Yucateco, Mi'kmaq, Náhuatl, Quechua, Sámi, Tlingit, Yindjibarndi, and Zapotec, among many others, all original languages that are still spoken in the Americas, throughout Northern Europe, the South Pacific, and Africa. Stemming from the small Arctic community of Igloolik, IsumaTV came about as a way to address a number of urgent conditions. Bandwidth in the global north and in Indigenous communities in the south is extremely expensive and rare, yet it is increasingly the principle way people connect and communicate with one another. By developing online media players that operate on either low or high bandwidth, and by making their catalogue entirely free, IsumaTV has opened a link between audiences and producers from Indigenous and other nations around the world. This platform — one based on an acute understanding of the inequities of digital media access — enables media agency, media literacy, and the spread of culturally-specific information. Importantly, it is a platform for those whose voices most often go unheard or are deliberately marginalized.

For founders Kunuk (Inuit) and Cohn, IsumaTV was initially a means to create space for Indigenous voices in a market where the majority of broadcast and online media is (still) derived from the “south.” They describe the venture as a “collaborative multimedia platform for Indigenous filmmakers and media organizations,” and one where the personalized spaces, or “channels” are culturally-specific and can be customized to reflect the identity of the maker, as well as their mandate and audience. Content is available in over 80 languages — the majority

Indigenous. And they note that their “politics emphasize oral Inuktitut uploads rather than syllabic texts.” What is inferred is how the syllabic writing system was introduced among Inuit society. Syllabics were first used by priests in the newly formed settlements as a way to translate the bible into local languages and dialects, thus enabling assimilationist practices and the deliberate eradication of Inuit spiritual practices and shamanism in exchange for Christianity. Syllabics are bound with the dark history of colonialism, something that Kunuk and Cohn's statement lays bare.

Fittingly, “Isuma” roughly translates into “thinking for oneself” in Inuktitut. Isuma Productions, an initiative of Kunuk and Cohn along with Paul Apak Angilirq and Pauloosie Qulitalik that preceded IsumaTV, is responsible for dozens of films and videos, but it was *Nunavut: Our Land* (1995) that helped define the work of Isuma Productions. Made initially for a northern audience and only available in Inuktitut, the videos responded to a distinct lack of locally produced programming. The few home television sets quickly became communal hubs, yet the majority of programming was in English and non-Inuit. Kunuk was immediately concerned about how television was supplanting traditional pedagogies, oral teachings and stories. Familiar with the format of the television mini-series, he and his collaborators embarked on creating a series fit for Arctic audiences. The series, beginning in the spring of 1945, is based on the transition period from a customarily semi-nomadic lifestyle to re-settlements as part of Canadian government assimilation policies, a move predicated in many areas by the collapse of the fur-trade, and the attendant overhunting of fur-bearing animals.

Education and community collaboration are central to the mini-series. Through their recreation of this time, elders taught younger crew members important survival skills: how to sew waterproof caribou boots; how to hook up sled dogs in a “fan” harness; how to hunt with a harpoon instead of a gun, and build a snow-house in a blizzard. Indeed, each episode of *Nunavut* includes a synopsis that is based on the skills demonstrated rather than a synopsis of

the narrative. In a deliberate inversion of the usual route of broadcast media, it was only after success with a local Inuktitut-speaking audience in Igloolik that English subtitles were added and screenings took place in the south.

Six years later, Isuma Productions released the first all-Inuit, Inuktitut language feature film, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. Made with an entirely local cast and a community-based crew, the film received only lukewarm response in Canada until it was awarded the *Caméra d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival. Kunuk noted that it took the foreign award to gain due recognition back in their home country.

IsumaTV expands upon the important early work of Kunuk and Cohn — one that fore-

grounds Indigenous ideologies and practices — to demonstrate how Indigenous cultures thrive in the media realm, forever eschewing the tired arguments of “authenticity” and the stereotypes first put forward in Robert Flaherty's heavily dramatized film *Nanook of the North*, that Inuit are ignorant in the face of new technologies. While the project is international in scope, the focus for Kunuk and Cohn remains in Igloolik. Cohn noted that through IsumaTV, they installed vital broadband internet hubs in many northern communities in the Arctic, these hubs being the digital connectors between Indigenous and other audiences. IsumaTV merges early conception of public access TV to broadcast stories that otherwise wouldn't find their way to the screen. •

## MadeYouLook

COUNTRY	South Africa
PROJECT	Entire Practice
DATES	2009–Present
NOMINATOR	Nontobeko Ntombela

The approach of MadeYouLook can be described as partly a process of working as artists-as-researchers within a sort of para-archiving practice (in the way that they work with archives to produce other archives) and partly a practice of temporal artistic disruptions/interventions/installations/happenings in the public space. Concerned with the project of historical revisions and memorialization of South African history, this collective is interested in bringing out undocumented histories of the “everyday.”

They are focused on the experiences of ordinary people of color in South Africa, which in turn tend to foreground tensions between the popularized or aggrandized mainstream public histories (of published material and monuments) and the everyday stories that tell us about the daily struggles people face in South Africa (both historical and contemporary). This is intended to subvert what has increasingly become a selective history (commemorations and monuments) of political moments that are used to propagate political power. As such, their projects become an attempt to heroize the ordi-

nary — what is often overlooked — in terms of public memorialization.

The power of the work of MadeYouLook is in the possibility of acknowledging what writer and academic Njabulo Ndebele calls “intimate moments,” when looked through what Molemo Moiloa (one of the collective's members) describes as a “practicing,” meaning “thinking through and making in context.” Such work is political because it speaks to the desire to elevate the value of storytelling at the same time evoking what could be considered the politics of the everyday. Their practice starts to question what counts as grand, spectacular or important history. It starts to write a history of the everyday as a telling of another story not only about the atrocities of apartheid or its sustained effect in the present, but rather how ordinary people deal with this history daily.

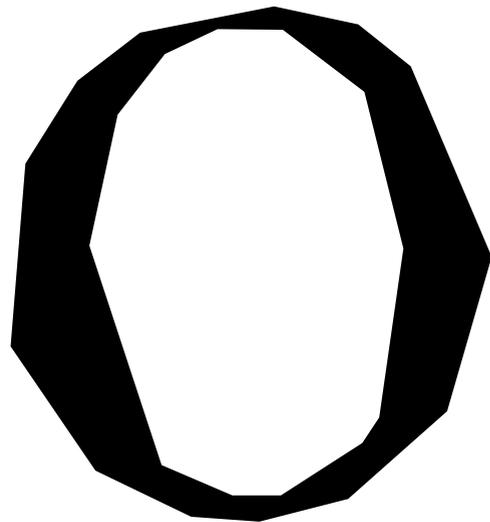
This interest in the everyday therefore offers a different way to memorialize history. MadeYouLook asks us to consider what those daily stories are and mean. What do they tell us about different people's experiences, cultures, and aspirations? What does this everyday history tell us about how people live and exist throughout history? It is a practice of observation and participation — where the researchers are both implicated in the story at the same time as they document it. •

Prize  
and

4

Conference

Program-  
ming



IN THE BRINK OF THE elimination of federal arts funding in the U.S., widespread xenophobia, forced global migration, environmental destruction, and ongoing systemic racism, the Vera List Center Prize Conference looks at the urgent and necessary work of the recipient of the third Vera List

Center Prize for Art and Politics, Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves, and the five Prize Finalists: the London-based interdisciplinary research agency Forensic Architecture; Gulf Labor Artist Coalition; House of Natural Fiber (HONF), a new media arts laboratory in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; IsumaTV, a collaborative multimedia platform for indigenous filmmakers and media organization in Canada; and MadeYouLook, an artist collective based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

As Prize Finalists, these artists have been recognized for a particular project's impact, boldness and artistic excellence, and the risk they take to advance social justice in profound and visionary ways. At the conference, in dialogue with an international group of writers, scholars, and other artists, Maria Thereza Alves and the Finalists consider key topics resonant with their projects, such as the obscured histories of sovereignty and decolonization; anthropogenic movements of soils; migration and environment; media languages and self-representation; everyday infrastructures and labor; as well as the dynamics of the right to visibility and/or invisibility.

The panel discussions survey the field of art and social justice by mining the exemplary projects of the Vera List Center Prize Finalists for their capacity to make legible urgent issues around the world, and to model ways in which

to successfully address them. Each exchange includes writers, thinkers and scholars from the arts, humanities, social and natural sciences, and respondents from The New School community who also moderate the conversations.

The Friday panels are centered on Maria Thereza Alves' prize winning project *Seeds of Change* and culminate in a keynote conversation between her and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. This is followed by the presentation of the Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics, 2016–2018 to Alves and the opening of her exhibition *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization*. On Saturday, the focus is on the projects of the Finalists, and the ways in which they resonate with Alves' *Seeds of Change*. •

# Conference

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 3

12–2pm

## The Ground We're Standing On Panel Discussion I

Vera List Center for Art and Politics  
The New School  
Theresa Lang Community and Student Center  
55 West 13th Street

Unpacking the co-production of land, plants and peoples in the research for *Seeds of Change*, this conversation challenges our assumptions about how and what we think we know about a site. In Maria Thereza Alves' words: "The earth you think you're on is not, it is someplace else. The only way you would know the place is from the flower." By looking at human-instigated histories of soil movements — and plants as evidence thereof — we examine radical forms of geography that help uncover obscured histories of sovereignty and oppression, and consider the potential of interspecies co-operation. In this talk we reframe our relation to place as well as what we risk when we do so when the "local" or so-called native is elsewhere. The New School faculty who guides this conversation considers who and what can call a place home and the means necessary of elaborating on that definition in order to move it beyond exchange.

Seth Denizen, University of California, Berkeley, Department of Geography  
J. Kehaulani Kauanui, Professor of American Studies and Anthropology,  
Wesleyan University

Tomaz Mastnak, Institute of Philosophy, University of Ljubljana

MODERATOR

TJ Demos, Professor, History of Art and Visual Culture, UC Santa Cruz and Director,  
Center for Creative Ecologies

RESPONDENT

Kenneth White, Visiting Assistant Professor of Film History at Sarah Lawrence College  
and Instructor of Curatorial Studies, Whitney Museum of American  
Art Independent Study Program

2–2:30pm

Break

2:30–4:30pm

## Seeds as Storyteller/Witness Panel Discussion II

Vera List Center for Art and Politics  
The New School  
Theresa Lang Community and Student Center  
55 West 13th Street

In their narrative and expository role seeds collude with human actors and fertile ground to tell a story, sometimes a different story than expected, about the history of a place. Alves' work takes up the narratives carried by dormant seeds that endure in ballast, i.e. the soil that was used to balance trade ships as they crossed the ocean. These dormant seeds have the potential to activate alternative ways of knowing buried and obscured histories of oppression that are "flashing up," as Walter Benjamin wrote, in the present. As such, it is our, very necessary, job to grasp these stories in those moments. An environmentalist, a playwright/writer, and an art historian guide this investigation about the illustrative agency of seeds, and elaborate on and bolster the conceptual tools Alves has developed in regards to their own research and practices. The New School interlocutors and respondents, a botanist and a historian, elaborate on these interpretations to

further consider how the sciences, humanities and design collaborate to imagine tangible alternative pasts and futures, and what is lost when we choose not to consider them in concert but select one over the other.

Jane Bennett, Professor, Department of Political Sciences, Johns Hopkins University  
Marisa Prefer, Gardener-in-Residence, Pioneer Works; Horticultural Advisor, VLC  
Radhika Subramaniam, Assistant Professor, School of Art and Design History  
and Theory, Parsons

MODERATOR

Lara Khaldi, Curator, Palestine

RESPONDENT

Katayoun Chamany, Mohn Family Professor of Natural Sciences and Mathematics,  
Lang College, The New School

4:30–5:30pm

Meet & Greet, with conference participants

6:00–6:45pm

## Keynote Conversation with Maria Thereza Alves and Ruth Wilson Gilmore & Prize presentation

Vera List Center for Art and Politics  
The New School  
The Auditorium at 12th Street  
66 West 12th Street

Introduced by Executive Dean Mary Watson, Maria Thereza Alves receives the Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics, 2016–2018 including the prize object, Yoko Ono's sculpture *The Third Eye*, for her project *Seeds of Change*.

Following the Prize presentation Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, moderates a conversation between Maria Thereza Alves and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Professor of Geography and Director of the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics at the CUNY Graduate Center.

7:00–8:30pm

## Exhibition Opening and Reception The Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics 2016–2018: Maria Thereza Alves, *Seeds of Change*: New York — A Botany of Colonization

The New School  
Arnold and Sheila Aronson  
Galleries  
Sheila C. Johnson Design  
Center, Parsons School  
of Design  
66 Fifth Avenue

For the exhibition *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization*, the artist, in association with students at The New School, has been mapping the artifacts and entities that trace the proliferation of foreign flora that travelled to New York and the surrounding region via trade ship ballast over the past two centuries. The installation includes a verdant collection of propagated ballast flora that will fill the Aronson Galleries in the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center at Parsons School for Design. A new series of watercolor drawings supplements this botanical collection and its cultivation, and shows the artist's reflection on these historical ciphers through text and images. In addition, Alves has hand-drawn largescale maps on canvas that further highlight those areas in historical New York harbor sites that have been filled in with ballast over the past few centuries. In anticipation of the exhibition three partner organizations have sourced, potted and germinated the documented ballast flora at their outdoor locations to which they will be returned after the exhibition to create actual Ballast Flora Gardens in the spring and summer of 2018.

12–2pm

## The House We're Building Panel Discussion III

Vera List Center for Art  
and Politics  
The New School  
Theresa Lang Community  
and Student Center  
55 West 13th Street

Try as we might, the materiality of structures and infrastructure still determines much of how we interact with others. Finalists for the Vera List Center Prize, Forensic Architecture and Gulf Labor are artist research groups dedicated to reassessing and activating the visible and invisible aspects of infrastructures. Forensic Architecture has established a form of history writing that skips over the historical significance to architectural forms, to focus instead on architecture's performance as material witness. Gulf Labor has focused on the Guggenheim Museum's labor practices to propose that artistic practices entail ethical positions. Representatives of the two groups discuss the visibility of markers of absences, and how alignments between organic and non-organic matter can result in an affirmative acts of community building.

Hannah Meszaros Martin, artist, Colombia (for Forensic Architecture)

Doris Bittar, Nitasha Dhillon, and Greg Sholette (for Gulf Labor)

MODERATOR

Galit Eilat 2017-2018 Keith Haring Fellow in Art and Activism, Bard College

RESPONDENT

Zoe Carey, PhD candidate in Sociology, The New School for Social Research

2–2:30pm

### Break

2:30–4:30pm

## Languages For Us(e) / Ways of Knowing Panel Discussion IV

Vera List Center for Art  
and Politics  
The New School  
Theresa Lang Community  
and Student Center  
55 West 13th Street

In light of rampant skepticism towards democratic forms of political representation, media platforms have recently been positioned as the new commons. But in the struggle for social justice, visual and discursive media languages can only be effective if they enact as much as they convey social justice values shared among their members. This panel is informed by current debates in the U.S. on self-representation and protocols of accessing images, words and other culturally specific narratives. IsumaTV is a collaborative multimedia platform for indigenous filmmakers and media organizations in Canada; House of Natural Fiber (HONF) is a new-media arts laboratory in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; and MadeYouLook uses Johannesburg's public transportation system in order to stage performative interventions that jolt different relationships among commuters. Here, representatives of all three groups elaborate on the specificities of visual and discursive languages and the dynamics of media production that seeks distinct and different audiences and co-producers especially when addressing trans-local environmental challenges.

Irene Agrivine, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (for HONF)

Sam Cohn, (for IsumaTV)

Molemo Moiloa, Melville, South Africa (for MadeYouLook)

Nare Mokgotho, South Africa (for MadeYouLook)

MODERATOR

Amanda Parmer, Curator, Vera List Center for Art and Politics

RESPONDENT

Whitney Slaten, Assistant Professor of Music Technology, Lang College, The New School

4:30–5:30pm

### Festive Closing Reception

## Walks

### WILD PLANTS, QUEER LANDSCAPES; WEED WALKS IN FORMER BALLAST DUMPING SITES

Along urban roadsides and beneath the cracks of city asphalt, trash collects amidst the living. Volunteer plants penetrate waste-places, or ruderal landscapes, thriving under the harsh conditions of poor soil and post-industrial waste. These “weeds” blanket spaces of transition by creeping into slivers of dirt, emerging year after year, far from their places of origin. Wild plants are often coded as threatening, labeled “weeds” or “invasive” but are also opportunists. They are doing the work of queering the urban landscape.

Join herbalist, educator, and VLC Horticultural Advisor Marisa Prefer for a series of weed walks exploring former ballast dumping sites where many of the plants featured in the exhibition are growing wild.

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 5

12–2pm

### Near the High Line / Western Rail Yards (around 34th Street)

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 12

12–2pm

### Red Hook empty lots / waterfront & Atlantic Docks

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 19

12–2pm

### Canarsie Pier

WALK COLLABORATORS

Next Epoch Seed Library / Environmental Performance Agency

BALLAST SITES (as cited by Addison Brown in the Torrey Botanical Journal):

Hunter's Point

Battery Park City Ferry (former site of Communipaw Ferry)

Atlantic Docks

Gowanus Creek

Harlem River at 8th Avenue (northern most point, down to 140th Street)

107th Street, from 3rd to 5th Avenues

102nd Street, East of 2nd Avenue

100th Street, East of 2nd Avenue

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 8

6:30pm

Kellen Auditorium  
66 Fifth Avenue

### Artist Talk

### Maria Thereza Alves

### Parsons Fine Arts Visiting Artists Series

## Lunchtime Readings

The five Lunchtime Readings that take place biweekly in the context of the exhibition elaborate the narratives, metaphors, and relationships Alves raises in her work. Organized in collaboration with Melanie Kress, Eric Rodriguez, Jasmin and Andi Pettis at The High Line, these readings draw on a community of elected affinities responding to the exhibition and look to the future it promises in the spring of 2018 when the plants are re-sited in ballast flora gardens around New York, including the forthcoming installation at The High Line.

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 7

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12:30–2pm With Wendy S. Walters, poet and Associate Dean,  
Parsons School of Design  
Organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 9

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12:30–2pm With writer and scholar Patricia Klindienst  
Guest curated by The High Line

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 14

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12:30–2pm Guest curated by The High Line

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 16

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12:30–2pm With poet and writer Jennifer Kabat, Lang College,  
The New School  
Organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 21

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12:30–2pm Organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics

## Vera List New School Art Collection Writing Open Call

The Vera List New School Art Collection Writing Awards are bestowed annually to New School students for the best responses inspired by works in the university's art collection. The awards were established in 1996 by the late Vera List, a life trustee of The New School, to celebrate the creative and critical thinking of New School students, and the impact of contemporary art in The New School's academic life.

A rotating panel of judges selects the winning entries — two \$400 first-place awards and two \$200 second-place awards. Winners are announced in The New School News and various New School blogs and social media platforms. In a new collaboration with the U.S. chapter of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), the winning entries will be edited by a professional editor.

For the 2017–2018 competition, students are invited to respond to the exhibition *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization*.

We welcome art historical, iconographic, and contextual studies that expand on this project's cultural, political, ecological, or institutional context.

2017–2018

JURY MEMBERS

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Luis Jaramillo, Director of the School of Writing, Assistant Professor of Writing, MFA  
Creative Writing Program, The New School for Public Engagement  
Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator, Vera List Center for Art and Politics  
Rosemary O'Neill, Associate Professor of Art History Art and Design History  
and Theory, Parsons School of Design  
Silvia Rocciolo, Curator, The New School Art Collection  
Wendy S. Walters, Associate Professor, Literary Studies, Eugene Lang College  
Lilly Wei, International Association of Art Critics

GUIDELINES FOR  
ENTRIES

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Any student currently enrolled at The New School is eligible.

Text entries must not exceed 2,500 words.

All submissions must be emailed to [vlc@newschool.edu](mailto:vlc@newschool.edu) as an attachment, preferably in a .docx or .doc file as opposed to .PDF.

Please note that your submission must list your name, mailing and email addresses, phone number, university program in which you are enrolled, and your New School student ID number.

Entries must be received by December 22, 2017.

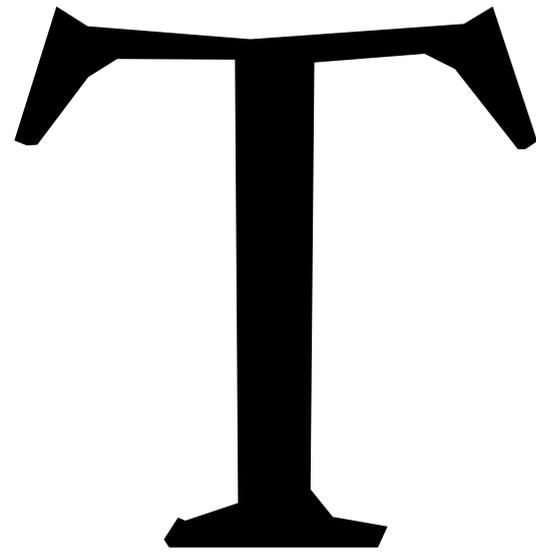
# Vera List Center

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for Art

and

Politics



THE VERA LIST CENTER for Art and Politics is a research center and public forum for art, culture, and politics. A pioneer in the field founded at The New School in 1992, the Center serves a critical mission: to examine, teach and learn from the intersection of art and politics; to advocate for art as a practice

that responds to as it shapes political contexts; and to foster and support vibrant, diverse and international networks of artists, scholars, students, and policy makers who take creative, intellectual, and political risks to advance social justice in their communities.

The Center is the only institution committed exclusively to leading nuanced public debates on the intersection of art and politics. Along biennial thematic investigations, the Center initiates interdisciplinary events and classes, prizes and fellowships, publications, exhibitions and the annual Vera List Center Assembly that probe some of the pressing issues of our time. As a not-for-profit organization, the Center is committed to dismantling hierarchies of teaching and learning, nurturing emerging voices, and supporting artists in their crucial work of imagining better worlds. •

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## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the many who have been instrumental in implementing the Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics 2016–2018, and in helping organize the exhibition *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization*.

### PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

#### *The High Line*

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### SUPPORTING FIELD

James Keith (JK) Brown, John G.H. Oakes, Marjorie Parmer Massie (1920–2017), Mary Watson

This program guide accompanies the proceedings for the Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics, 2016–2018, awarded to Maria Thereza Alves in New York City on November 3, 2017.

It is dedicated to the memory of Tommy Suryo (1976–2017), House of Natural Fiber.

DESIGN  
Other Means

TEXTS  
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The essay by Jean Fisher is was originally published in Maria Thereza Alves' catalogue edited in 2012 by École supérieure des beaux-arts de Nantes Métropole (France) for the research program Pensées archipéliques (Archipellic Thinking) held by Emmanuelle Chérel and Georgia Nelson. It is reprinted here with their kind permission.

The essay by Saidiya Hartman was originally published in *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, June 2016, 18:1, 166–173, and is reprinted here with their kind permission.

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THE NEW SCHOOL



VERA LIST CENTER  
FOR ART AND POLITICS  
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

**HIGH LINE** ART  
Pioneer Works



The earth you think you're on is not, it is some place else, the only way you would know the place is from the flower... p. 12  
— Maria Thereza Alves

Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves' *Seeds of Change* studies settler colonialism, slavery, global migration and commodification through the lens of displaced plants in ballast — the waste material historically used to balance sailing ships in maritime trade. Dumped in ports at the end of passages as the ships took on more freight, ballast often carried “dormant” seeds collected from its place of origin that remained in the soil for hundreds of years before germinating and growing



Maria Thereza Alves, *Ballast Indicator: Mercurialis annua*, 2017. Watercolor on paper 11  $\frac{1}{4}$  × 11  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (30 × 30 cm). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Michel Rein.

end of passages as the ships took on more freight, ballast... p. 7

OVER EIGHTEEN YEARS, MARIA THEREZA ALVES has disentangled the naturalization of bodies, ideas, and objects through her ongoing project *Seeds of Change*. Presented in various iterations and in collaboration with different communities, organizations, and art events, in countries ranging from England to France and Finland, Alves' momentous body of work — encompassing an entire human generation — has given form to ongoing legacies of colonization that have recently come into sharp, violent focus in Europe and the United States.

For Alves, the use and occupation of...