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Seeds of Change
Rahel Aima on Maria Thereza Alves’s Seeds of Change

THE FUNNY THING about ships is that you have to weigh them down to keep them afloat. Historically, stones, soil, sand, wood, and bricks placed inside a ship’s hull have provided this weight. At the end of a voyage, the ballast is dumped, to be repurposed as building materials or to settle as soil. It becomes a pedological archive: A portion of the ground beneath Manhattan’s FDR Drive is built from the rubble of British buildings demolished during World War II; the area came to be known as Bristol Basin. Meanwhile, Liverpudlian stones that were a by-product of the transatlantic cotton and tobacco trades make up Savannah, Georgia’s iconic cobblestone streets. Sometimes, ballast creates new terrain, too, as is the case on Lilla Norge, an island off the eastern coast of central Sweden that blooms with Norwegian flowers found nowhere else in the area.

Ballast similarly anchors Maria Thereza Alves’s project Seeds of Change, 1999–. Like people, seeds can unexpectedly find themselves far from their homelands. They travel in the bellies of animals and amid ballast in the hulls of ships before being discarded as waste on new shores. These seeds can lie dormant for hundreds of years before a chance upheaval exposes them to light, causing them to sprout. Seeds are patient, after all: In 2005, Israeli researchers were able to germinate a two-thousand-year-old date-palm seed; the resulting plant was subsequently dubbed the “Methuselah” tree. Seeds, like colonized populations, bear buried within them the capacity to endure despite the most oppressive of surroundings. In 2012, a team of Russian scientists announced that they had successfully grown a flower from a thirty-two-thousand-year-old squirrel cache of seeds buried in Siberian permafrost. They failed to germinate the seeds but were able to extract cells from their placentas and grow new flowers. The next year, the flowers—which were identical to one another but had narrower petals than the same species of flower today—produced seeds of their own.

Like the best time travelers, seeds are storytellers. Since 1999, Alves has been using these inadvertent hitchhikers to unspool violent histories of colonialism, transnational commerce, migration, and resource extraction. After researching a city’s ballast sites, she takes soil samples, germinates whatever seeds they contain, and consults scientists and archives to identify the flora, later displaying them in gardens. Previous iterations of the project took place in the European port cities of Marseille in France; and Dunkirk, Exeter, Liverpool, and Bristol, in England; and on Reposaari, a small island that was once Finland’s largest port.

In each location, Alves reverse-engineers horticultural history to question what it means to be indigenous to a land. Consider the species Japanese knotweed and kudzu. Both were initially introduced to Europe and North America from Japan as ornamental garden plants, which is to say, as plants that can be controlled and contained. Today, they are billed as invasive alien hordes, kudzu in particular, which has gained the moniker “the vine that ate the South.” Parallels between this extension of xenophobia to foreign-origin plants and the present-day rise of nativist sentiment are clear, if sometimes overdetermined. For example, in Bristol, where Alves planted her garden on a floating river barge, the selection of flora included rocket and marigold. Both plants are beloved for being quintessentially English, and are semiotically loaded as such, but they are also relatively recent products of the shipping trade—the marigold is, in fact, native to the Americas.

A YEAR AFTER winning the biennial Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics, Alves transposed her project to the Americas. The resulting multiyear installation, Seeds of Change: New York—A Botany of Colonization, has displayed flora propagated from ballast seeds in several locations, first as a living installation at the Aronson Galleries at the New School (which sponsors the List Center Prize) in New York this past November, followed by iterations at Manhattan’s High Line, and at Pioneer Works and the Weeksville Heritage Center, both in Brooklyn. Just as the movement of ballast stones is not unidirectional, this New York chapter of her project briefly traveled to Michel Rein in Paris in February and March before returning to the city this spring.

This time, Alves’s process differed, because many of New York’s ballast sites—Red Hook, Inwood Park, and the Gowanus Canal, among them—had been built up and were inaccessible. Instead, she turned to historical records to identify four hundred plants from seven sites. Working with students and faculty from the New School and children from Pioneer Works’ community youth program, she grew seeds from these plants last summer. At the New School, the plants sprouted in plywood boxes alongside some rather lovely botanical sketches of tumbling saltbush, perennial wall-rocket, annual mercury, and common vervain, all so-called indicator plants that signal the presence of ballast. Watercolor maps plotted local ballast sites...
We’re surrounded by the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a massive seed bank located on the Norwegian island of Spitsbergen. The park contains the carapace of Thomas Heatherwick’s Vessel, a public-art centerpiece of the multibillion-dollar Hudson Yards redevelopment project. It looms over the rail yards like a ship nobody is happy to see on the horizon, and suddenly the wattles feel like they’re guarding against more than soil erosion. It’s easy to forget, too, that Wall Street’s foundations sit atop a historical African burial ground, while the city around it is built on land stolen from the Lenape people—the original native New Yorkers. But the seeds remember.

YEARS AGO, I remember looking down at a Manhattan sidewalk and noticing a spray-painted stencil that read, **smile. you live on an island.** We’re surrounded by water and might cross a river several times a day, but this fact, like New York’s shipping past, is easy to forget. Not so on the High Line, where both water views and the memory of a freight depot are inescapable. The park currently features the second installment of Alves’s project, part of “Agora,” a group show organized by Cecilia Alemani and Melanie Kress. Like ballast flora, the installation seems to have arrived there by accident. As at Weeksville, wattles enclose some soil, some hyperlocal ballast flora. On a hillside, wattles evoke topographical contour lines; here, the effect is more akin to the animal waste that carries seeds. Yet plants, like immigrants, just want to put down roots and flourish, and, over time, these seeds have, too.

This iteration of the project underwhelms compared to the other sites. But it becomes interesting when one considers the park’s history. The defunct railroad was slated for demolition, yet thanks in large part to photographer Joel Sternfeld’s documentation of its luxuriant wildscape in 2000 in 2001—the greenery came up from seeds spilled from cross-continental trains in a kind of locomotive analogue to ballast flora—it is now an impeccably manicured, ersatz-wilderness park. To walk the High Line today is to experience a profound sense of loss for Sternfeld’s feral garden, and for an older time when Manhattan was Mannahatta. It shows us history like layers of soil. It is here that *Seeds of Change* feels truly decolonial, in its potential to go beyond awareness and education and refract the landscape into disparate pasts. After all, as much as Alves’ sprouting plants bring to mind New York’s industrial history, they also invoke the ghostly ecology of the pre-colonial period that shipping and transport infrastructure effaced. The remarkable Welikia Project from the Wildlife Conservation Society charts the peoples, plants, and wildlife of the city in 1609, when Dutch settlement started. It suggests that the site of Alves’s project might have been home to red maples, American hornbeam, starved panic grass, prairie fleabane, and white wood aster, some of which would later be displaced by ballast flora.

Hung with wall text on an adjacent fence is a map of ballast sites. In the middle distance is the bedbug-like carapace of Thomas Heatherwick’s *Vessel*, 2018, the public-art centerpiece of the multibillion-dollar Hudson Yards redevelopment project. It looms over the rail yards like a ship nobody is happy to see on the horizon, and suddenly the wattles feel like they’re guarding against more than soil erosion. It’s easy to forget, too, that Wall Street’s foundations sit atop a historical African burial ground, while the city around it is built on land stolen from the Lenape people—the original native New Yorkers. But the seeds remember.

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