

# Stubborn Waste

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“The slaver is a ghost ship sailing on the ages of modern consciousness.”<sup>1</sup>

Through her work Maria Thereza Alves often contests and rewrites established historical narratives, at the same time as overlooked aspects of them are unveiled. This effort involves detailed historical research – which often refers to the shifting ecological manifestations of colonial history – , but also from an observation of the present much in the spirit of Marc Bloch when he thought that “as we already know, our rural environment, in some of its basic characteristics dates from extremely distant periods. But to interpret the few documents that allow us to understand this misty origins, to correctly tackle these problems , at least to have an idea of them, a first condition has been met: observing, analyzing the current landscape.”<sup>2</sup> It is from the present that she starts to pick up the evidences and hints leading her to the past, to the archives that try to contain it, activating them from overlooked perspectives. But in the process of gathering information, her practice also looks at the future through the work done with specific communities who are bearers of knowledge that has been deemed unreliable, or bluntly ignored, by many scholars. It looks at the future because it seeks to create mechanisms that could contain an active, ever-actualising memory of these histories.

As an artist, Alves opens fields of research that historians, botanists, anthropologists and other professional researchers have, more or less intentionally, left untouched, or connects different forms of analysis that are kept estranged by the division of knowledge imposed in the Western canon of education.

In this text, I will deal with a specific, long-term project in which Alves has literally unearthed one aspect of the history of the international trade. In Alves’ words “*Seeds of Change* is an ongoing investigation of ballast flora in the port cities of Europe. (...) Material such as stones, earth, sand, wood bricks and whatever else was economically expedient was used as ballast to stabilise merchant sailing ships according to the weight of the cargo. Upon arrival in port, the ballast was unloaded, and along with it seeds native to the

<sup>1</sup>  
*Seeds of Change: Dunkirk (detail)*,  
2005.



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*Seeds of Change: Dunkirk* (detail), 2005. Demolished Chantiers de France (a shipyard) constructed in 1898. Ballast served as its foundation.

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*Seeds of Change: Exeter and Topsham* (detail), 2004. Sugar, Chocolate, Coffee and Tobacco. Tobacco and cotton were grown on farms by Cherokees in the Carolinas before colonization. All of this was taken away forcibly. Samuel Buttal, owner of the Sugar Factory in Topsham, had an estate in Carolina.

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*Seeds of Change: Exeter and Topsham* (detail), 2004. Gold From Brazil and Mexico came via Portugal and Spain. Most gold in Brazil came from the State of Mato Grosso. Tupã-Y Guarani (Marçal de Souza), indigenous leader, organizing for the recognition of tribal lands, stands on the limit of officially demarcated indigenous lands and points towards a mountain where tribal lands originally extended. Tupã-Y was anxious that the local white landowner who had stolen tribal lands and whose “property” began a few steps from his feet would kill him before he was able to accomplish recognition of the lands. Tupã-Y was killed before he was able to accomplish this.

area where it had been collected. The source of these seeds can be any of the ports and regions (and their regional trading partners) involved in trade with Europe”<sup>3</sup>. As such, *Seeds of Change* not only touches on several important aspects of the history of European colonialism, but also opens a window of opportunity for reanalysing the history of Europe by introducing the indispensable role that colonial subjects, species and produce played in shaping the so-called cultural identities that constitute European nation-states. For the sake of clarity, I will divide this dissertation into three parts, the past, the present and the future, but with the hopes that the interweaving between the three becomes evident. In the first section I will pay special attention to the slave trade and the history of the Atlantic colonial circulation of goods.

*Seeds of Change* looks closely at waste as evidence of what remains untold. Ballast was waste with no value other than its weight. And because a good detective always looks for clues in the trash, Alves knows that this waste produced by the Atlantic trade lends evidence to the history of slavery, its profits and its subjects; but it also carries seeds, it is able of producing life, it is itself used as construction material and it become a perfect representative of what colonial exploitation has meant for Europe and for European capitalism.

### The past

Since the early days of capitalism, the ship has been and still is the vehicle through which commodities have been traded globally. As Markus Rediker brightly asserts: “The ship was thus central to a profound, interrelated set of economic changes essential to the rise of capitalism: the seizure of new lands, the expropriation of millions of people and their redeployment in growing market-oriented sectors of the economy; the mining of gold and silver, the cultivating of tobacco and sugar; the concomitant rise of long-distance commerce; and finally a planned accumulation of wealth and capital beyond anything the world had ever witnessed. Slowly, fitfully, unevenly, but with undoubted power, a world market and an international capitalist system emerged. Each phase of the process, from exploration to settlement to production to trade and the construction of a new economic order, required massive fleets of ships and their capacity to transport both expropriated laborers and new commodities. The Guineaman was a linchpin of the system.”<sup>4</sup>

The image of the triangular trade by which we imagine a colonial flow of goods between Europe, Africa and the Americas has been made much more complex by several scholarly studies on the history of the Atlantic trade — “ships traced circles. Commodities travelled in

a straight line”<sup>5</sup>—, but it is useful to understand the most macabre aspect of this commercial paradigm. This triangulation also helps to describe the non-commercial, yet significant aspects of the flow of stuff and people around the Atlantic. Commodities were shipped from Europe to West Africa to be bartered for human beings (“Senegambia, Sierra Leone/the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and West Central Africa (Kongo, Angola”<sup>6</sup>); these slaves were taken to the Americas (primarily the Caribbean and Brazil, but also to the tobacco and cotton plantations of North America and some Spanish colonies) where they were sold or traded for plantation products, mainly sugar, which, at their turn were sold in the European markets. Sugar, cotton, tobacco were however used to produce goods that were then traded for slaves in Africa such as rum, fabrics or cigars. So in short, slaves harvested the raw materials (including the lumber to build the slave ships) that would become the commodities that enabled European traders to buy more slaves, both directly and by means of the wealth they created. This is perhaps one of the most appalling aspects of the whole “triangular” trade.<sup>7</sup>

The Portuguese, started trading slaves in Africa as early as the 15th century. They were first interested in gold, but soon discovered there was a profit to be made trading slaves between different African regions. These people were used as carriers of the goods African merchants traded with the Portuguese in exchange of gold. Strategically the latter introduced firearms partly to ensure the power of certain native groups over

others, thus fostering wars that would produce war prisoners subject to be sold as slaves. This mechanism was later used by other European enterprises that took over the slave trade, perfecting it over time to its pinnacle in the 18th century. It was so successful that war went from being a tool for internal territorial control, to a means to capture human beings for trade. Evidently the strategy of creating war abroad and feeding it with arms and ammunition for economic profit, which seems so contemporary to us, has a long history.

Estimates on the number of Africans that were shipped to the Americas as slaves vary from one source to the other, but it ranges between 8 and 20 million, although most accounts agree on about 12.5 million people. Many died during the crossing of the Atlantic, known as the Middle Passage, and even more in Africa after being captured. Europeans managed to erase the human factor of this trade, treating it in the most cold, business-like manner<sup>8</sup>. So the engineering around it was developed to increase profitability and reduce risk. Overcrowding or the lack of air were not taken into account as long as they didn’t cause death. Ships started to be built specifically for this trade and the interior space was design to fit in as many people as possible, with adults not being able to stand up right. Over time, they perfected them to reduce the mortality rate (15% on average for the period between the 16th and the 19th centuries<sup>9</sup>) amongst prisoners, as every dead slave was a profit loss. As Marcus Rediker states the Guineaman, or slaver, was at the same time a machine (designed to sail, control captives, defend itself), a factory (in the commercial sense of the factory



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as a trading post and in the modern sense where sailors were waged producers of the commodity known as slaves with the machinery to do so<sup>10</sup>) and a prison (not only for the slaves, but also for the sailors many of whom were convicts). The inhuman conditions of the slave ship were met with resistance from the enslaved, sometimes insurrection, but also suicide.

One of the major ascertainment of *Seeds of Change* is establishing the fact that the slave trade was certainly one of the most, if not the most, profitable of colonial trades, making it worth sailing back to Europe with half empty ships that had to be made heavier for crossing the Atlantic with ballast. Slavers were not necessarily suited to transport other cargo – that is, other than human cargo- and their unpredictable schedules – delayed by waits in the African coasts or difficult sailing conditions during the Middle Passage – meant that crops, namely sugar, tobacco, timber and cotton in the American could not always wait for them to arrive or were not ready to be taken to Europe. Also, planters started trading directly with the commercial agents in the London, bypassing the slave traders they initially relied on to sell their slave-harvested produce. So, in short, the weight left vacant by human beings was replaced with soil, sand, stones that carried seeds, flora, and small fauna.

Through field research (taking samples), archival material and maps, Alves has identified several ballast sites in European ports (Marseille, Reposaari, Dunkirk, Exeter, Liverpool, Bristol and Antwerp), finding evidence of this material being dumped both legally, paying a deballasting fee, and illegally, for free before entering the port, upon arrival. In Liverpool, which from the mid 18th century became the main slaver port of England, ballast was so abundant that, as Alves research has shown, it was used as foundation for roads and public buildings. In Dunkirk a shipyard was build on ballast, and through the canals, seeds may have travelled inland, spreading far beyond the port. In every site, this history is more or less visible depending on the urban development of the ports and the quality of the historical port records, but in every one of them, Alves has been able to confirm the previous existence of ballast sites and the existence of ballast flora. This research however is met with difficulties. Once the original sites are identified, Alves often finds a paved surface or a building standing on the way of collecting samples; and yet, through the cracks of the pavement or around the buildings some of this ballast flora emerges. This living sprouts are contemporary evidence of a history of trade that, like the wealth and the goods that came from the colonies, has spread and merged, becoming “native”.

Needless to say, a wealth of non-European species had been intentionally introduced in Europe, drastically

changing the diet.<sup>11</sup> Most of today’s traditional European dishes include ingredients brought from overseas, a topic Alves dealt with in *What is the color of a German rose?* (2005), a video work which discloses the origin of many fruits, vegetables and flowers Europeans are very used to finding in any local supermarket. Try to imagine Italian food with no tomatoes or corn, Spanish food with no rice; imagine the European diet without potatoes. The introduction of these ingredients greatly improved and enriched what Europeans ate and eat, contributing to change demographic patterns for the best. These examples however are well known and perhaps even obvious, whereas little has been said about all the species that have travelled the Earth as by-products of a different trade.

### The present

By “present”, I don’t mean a philosophical concept defining an unattainable, ever escaping temporality, but more “the contemporary world” in which Maria Thereza Alves acts upon. This world has been largely shaped by colonialism culturally, socially, politically, symbolically, ideologically, ecologically and economically. The current international division of labour was first shaped by colonialism; many of the ecological problems the planet faces today started with colonial land practices; racist stereotypes were born with colonial administration; Western supremacy (Eurocentrism) is a product and an illusion of colonialism; wealth distribution in the world matches, with varying consequences, colonial histories; obviously, the widespread lack of land rights that indigenous people suffer globally is a colonial affair.

In a lecture at Chelsea College London<sup>12</sup>, before describing *Seeds of Change*, Alves introduced the work with a personal anecdote. Her uncle Antonio, a farmer in Brazil, commissioned her, when still a student in Cooper Union (NY) to take pictures of the seasonal workers who were about to start working in a plantation. He wanted to have images that proved that he and the other men existed because he was afraid he could be enslaved. This story, as improbable as it seems in the late 20th or early 21st centuries, is daily bread for many poor farmers in Brazil still today. The Brazilian government estimates that there are still 50.000 people working in slave-like conditions<sup>13</sup> – forced to work for no salary and technically imprisoned in plantations. This colonial practices are closely linked to Brazil being the number one producer of sugarcane in the world – a crop that relied completely on slave work-, to the very late and almost unconvincing abolition of slavery (1888, the last “Western” country to do so), but also perhaps to the blunt glorification of bandeirantes, Portuguese and creole expeditionaries



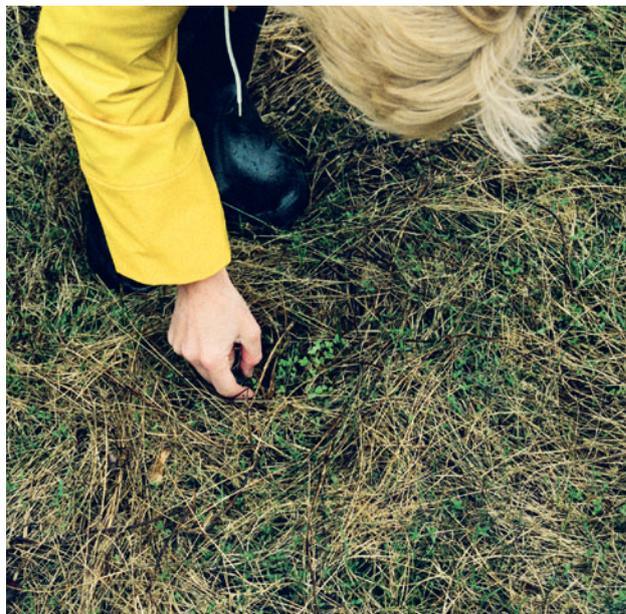
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who opened the colonial frontier and captured and enslaved thousands of indigenous people, which goes largely unquestioned. This is one example, of thousands, of how the colonial past continues to be the present for many.

This understanding of the present, I would say, defines the context in which Maria Thereza Alves' practice is inscribed. *Seeds of Change*, like many other works by Alves, links ecology and colonial history. Nature, even man-made constructions of it, has been the silent backdrop of colonial history and yet, in it, one can find, Alves shows us, a great deal of historical evidence.

About the methodology implemented in this project Alves states that "*Seeds of Change* does not duplicate scientific work within an 'art' context but rather contributes with original research by locating historical ballast sites and ballast flora. Local archives are first researched for evidence and then ballast sites are located with the aid of historical map references. From these sites, samples of earth are taken and potted and the seeds germinate."<sup>14</sup> This means that the project not only contributes to a field of historical research, but in many cases, it also provides information that should open a very important field of study for botanists. Furthermore, Alves' perspective links botany and history in such a way that it opens a potential for innumerable stories about the events that took these seeds through many crossings and that constitute a wealth of small, yet not less important, narratives of colonialism. With rudimentary technical knowledge (provided by Finnish botanist Heli M. Jutila who wrote a PhD thesis on ballast flora in Reposaari, Finland), Alves takes samples of earth, whenever possible, in the ballast sites identified through research. These samples may contain seeds which keep the potential to being germinated for hundreds of years. When they do germinate, ballast flora springs out. A difficulty this project has is that the ballast flora may already be considered as native which leads Alves to ask the question: "At what moment do seeds become 'native'? What are the socio-political histories of place that determine the framework of belonging?"<sup>15</sup>

Why, if botanical species from the colonial domains where so widely accepted in the European diet and landscape, can't people be equally welcomed, especially if "in the decolonisation period following World War II, the majority of, now mostly voluntary, immigration patterns into Europe retraced the old colonial trade routes"<sup>16</sup>? A question that is important because not only species were introduced, but also knowledge about them that ended up being appropriated and "normalized" through supposedly more legitimate Western science. Colombian science historian Mauricio Nieto asserts, in relation to the



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*Seeds of Change: Reposaari* (detail), 2001. Ballast Flora in front of London Villa.

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*Uncle Antonio's Fear of Slavery*. Black and white silver print. Plantation where Uncle Antonio was afraid of being made into a slave, 1982-2013.

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*Seeds of Change: Bristol* (detail), 2007. Members of a community group with germinated ballast samples.

Spanish botanical expeditions in South America in the 18th Century, that “indigenous people in the Americas did not share with Linnaean Europeans of the 18th century notions such as gender or species, nor did they understand concepts like anti-rheumatic, sudorific or solvent. The Spanish, however, had no problem in borrowing and distorting popular histories to legitimate their ‘discoveries’”.<sup>17</sup> According to Nieto, “translation” would be a much more appropriate word than “discovery” to describe the process by which European colonial scientists got to know native species in the colonies.

Eurocentrism, as an ideology, has tended to appropriate material and non-material wealth from other peoples, making it its own, yet deeming the other as intellectually or morally inferior. This attitude today is often expressed through widespread political and social practices towards non-European immigrants, many times treated as leechers of the European social welfare state (even though they pay taxes and in cases like Spain have “saved” the very same system they supposedly take advantage of). Matters of “nativeness” or “purity” are rapidly dismantled when one stops to think about the historical circulation of people, commodities, ideas and living species which intensified and became global from the end of the 15th century.

Urban changes in European port cities at the same time enable and impede the process of research required in *Seeds of Change*. A construction site represents a unique opportunity for the collection of core samples, whereas if the process starts a few months later, a new building may stand on top of former ballast site. These changes are in themselves pointers of economic and social transformations the cities go through, some related to the decline of commerce in a particular port and the opportunity for urban redevelopment and the inception of gentrification.

*Seeds of Change*, because its methodology in particular, but also because the methodology Alves uses in many of her works, has a great potential for community involvement. In some of its chapters, it has required the active participation of certain local groups. In the case of Reposaari, Alves found a very enthusiastic group of neighbours who had good knowledge of ballast flora that had been growing in the island – Reposaari was in the 19th century the main port of Finland; its importance decreased in the 20th century, which also allowed for the ballast flora to survive since no big, concrete infrastructure was built<sup>18</sup>. With different approaches to ballast gardening, some of the neighbours exchanged seeds, relied only on natural pollination and germination, or exchanged seeds for cakes. These people provided non-

specialist, but yet very precise information about the place and its history, otherwise very difficult to find. The project was shown in a museum in nearby Pori and the germinated seeds were named after the people who kept them in their gardens, somehow replicating the traditional system of species naming which often includes the name of who “discovered” it or of a dignitary as a form of homage.

In the case of Bristol, because of the lack of a greenhouse to germinate the seeds, community groups came at the rescue of the samples. Even though 70% of them perished, the importance of people’s involvement and active appropriation of the project proved the potential for engagement of migrant groups who can eventually share their non-specialist botanical knowledge. This aspect is key throughout Alves’ practice. A healthy suspicion of the excessive authority of Western, University-validated knowledge, pervades in her research which often relies on oral history, personal accounts and observations. As an artist she has the freedom to risk associations, connect apparently unrelated data, and foster the emergence of unvisited fields of knowledge, questioning natural history as a “means to build a domestic nature and a colonised humanity”<sup>19</sup>.

## The future

*Seeds of Change* projects itself towards the past as much as it does towards the future. The potential for development, although many times obstructed by the contingent politics of every place, lies in the involvement of cross-disciplinary, specialist and non-specialist research on the distribution of seeds worldwide. In this sense, the valuable contributions of diverse sectors of society can establish a different, however limited, framework for the production of knowledge, not based on academic expertise, but on different forms of experience and apprehension which can extend the outreach of the project.

A temporary *Floating Ballast Garden* just opened in port of Bristol to host several ballast plants which will be looked after by different community groups.<sup>20</sup> Hopefully, plans for the foundation of the Ballast Garden – where the only intervention by the artist would be a series of see-through structures to aid the germination of ballast plants – and the English Landscape Research Institute, also in Bristol, can finally go ahead and open that door towards future projects that can take advantage of the present cultural diversity found in European societies for a better understanding of that big ideological construction called Europe. *Seeds of Change* maybe lurking in the backyard.

- 1 Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, London: John Murray, 2007, p. 10.
- 2 Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1997, Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2006. Editor translation.
- 3 Maria Thereza Alves, "Seeds of Change", in *Confluens*, Simon Read (ed.), Fine Art Research Publications, Middlesex University, 2008, p. 39.
- 4 Rediker, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- 5 Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 6.
- 6 Rediker, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- 7 As put by Marcus Rediker with regards to the lumber from North America used in shipbuilding: "The ships brought the laborers and the laborers cut the wood to make more ships". *op. cit.*, p. 53. Likewise Stephanie E. Smallwood states that English traders "persuade[d] Brazilian slavers to bring gold from the colony's newly developed mines at Minas Gerais and exchange it for slaves at English forts on the Gold Coast. Through this alchemy, proceeds would return to English hands in the form of the gold that African labor had extracted from Brazilian mines, and the gold would in turn be converted back into (embodied in) commodified labor, now available to begin the process anew". *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- 8 As Stephanie E. Smallwood puts it, captives "feature in the documentary record not as subjects of a social history but as objects or quantities". *op. cit.*, p. 2. This machinery of slave-production implemented mainly by the British and the Dutch undermines any idea of European moral superiority (often cited as a motive for colonisation by the colonisers) if one considers that captains of slave ships seemed to have kept sharks around the ships as a way of terrorising Africans who were willing to jump overboard to escape forced labour. The bodies of those who died during the Middle Passage were given to sharks: "The destruction of corpses by sharks was a public spectacle and part of the degradation of enslavement". Rediker, *op. cit.*, p. 39
- 9 See Rediker, *op. cit.* Also, for statistics on the slave trade, see <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces> (last consulted 19 July 2012).
- 10 Rediker states that "In producing workers for the plantation, the ship-factory also produced "race". At the beginning of the voyage, captains hired a motley crew of sailors, who would, on the cost of Africa, become 'white men'". *op. cit.*, p. 10. For Aníbal Quijano, this process was started earlier by the Spanish in their American colonies as a mechanism to organise (forced) labour and establish social hierarchies for the administration of the colonies. It implied a supposedly biological differentiation between conquerors and conquered. See Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Social Classification", in Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, Carlos A. Jáuregui (eds.), *Coloniality at Large. Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008., pp. 181-224.
- 11 In fact, many species travelled the Earth, changing local diets globally. American maize was introduced in Africa, Arabic coffee in various Equatorial regions, South Asian sugar cane in the Caribbean and South America, American tobacco in Asia, etc.
- 12 A lecture organised as part of Everything has a name, or the potential to be named, an exhibition at Gasworks, London curated by Anna Colin and myself. The lecture took place as part of the TrAIN Open Series at Chelsea College of Art on May 26, 2009.
- 13 [http://www.mongabay.com/external/slavery\\_in\\_brazil.htm](http://www.mongabay.com/external/slavery_in_brazil.htm)
- 14 In one of the text banners that are part of the work.
- 15 Heli M. Jutila affirms that more ballast went from Europe to the Americas than the other way around, especially in the case of Scandinavia and North America because heavier materials were exported and lighter ones imported which prompts questions about the reciprocity of these involuntary exchanges. Heli M. Jutila, "Seed bank and emerging vascular flora of ballast areas in Reposaari, Finland", in *Ann. Bot. Fennici* 33, Helsinki: Finnish Zoological and Botanical Publishing Board, 1996, pp. 165-182
- 16 Jean Fisher, "Maria Thereza Alves: Migration's Silent Witnesses", in *Confluens*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
- 17 Mauricio Nieto Olarte, *Remedios para el Imperio: Historia natural y apropiación del nuevo mundo*. Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, 2000, p. 164. My translation.
- 18 See Jutila, *op. cit.*
- 19 Mauricio Nieto. *op. cit.*, p. 13. My translation.
- 20 The design of the floating garden has been developed by German designer Gitta Gschwendtner in close collaboration with Alves and Nick Wray of University of Bristol Botanic Garden.