

Kavior Moon, "Sowing Discourse," *Art in America*, January 31, 2022

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Sowing Discourse

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Precious Okoyomon: View of "Every Earthly Morning the Sky's Light Touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty," 2021 at the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen
Photo: Tony Prikr, Courtesy Of The Artist, The Aspen Art Museum, And Quinn Harrelson Gallery.

In *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (2017), philosopher Emanuele Coccia points out that biology, ostensibly the scientific study of "life," tends to be based largely on concepts drawn from the animal kingdom. Plants have received significantly less attention, in both the life sciences and in philosophy, creating a pervasive zoological bias. Unlike animals (which generally stop developing once they reached sexual maturity), some plants grow continuously, spending their entire lives constructing new organs and body parts. Plants are nonmotile, but can spread to cover vast surfaces, from which they absorb resources and interact with other organisms to support their growth. "Plants participate in the world in its totality in everything they meet," Coccia writes, noting that "one cannot separate the plant—neither physically nor metaphysically—from the world that accommodates it."

Plants have played a fundamental role in shaping Earth's landscape and climate, most visibly over the past 540 million years, and so can be considered “a geologic force of nature,” as botanist David Beerling has put it. They are estimated to account for about 80 percent of the planet's total biomass (animals, by contrast, are said to make up less than half of 1 percent). Photosynthesis, a key function of plants, is what enables other life-forms to breathe. Plants take in carbon dioxide to produce oxygen, collectively contributing to an atmosphere that has made—and continues to make—animal life possible at all.

Humans have also been a “geologic force of nature,” particularly during the past few centuries. Since the early 2000s, the term “Anthropocene” has gained traction as the name of our current geological epoch, one characterized by substantial alterations to Earth's climate and ecosystems due to human activity. Deforestation, mining, industrial agriculture, overfishing, and increasing greenhouse gas emissions are some major factors said to be driving planetary life here toward mass extinction.

Some critics, however, claim there is a racial blindness implicit in the term “Anthropocene.” The current debate over whether to mark the start of this human-driven epoch with the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s (heralded by the invention of the steam engine) or the Great Acceleration of the 1950s effectively ignores what geographer Kathryn Yusoff calls the “shadow geology” created by centuries of colonialism, extraction, and genocide. Is history (yet again) to be understood as a tale of progress forged by the ingenuity of white male entrepreneurs? In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), Yusoff argues against the universal notion of “human” that *anthropos* implies. Such a view denies how the racialization of our species has been part and parcel of a system whereby, Yusoff declares, “imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as [these forces] have been in existence.”

As Yusoff has sought to characterize geology as a discipline implicated in coloniality and dehumanization, so a number of contemporary artists has been using plants in their works to explore histories of extracting, classifying, and subjugating bodies, plants, and other kinds of matter. Works by **Beatriz Cortez**, **Candice Lin**, **Precious Okoyomon**, and **Kandis Williams** speak to the relations between forced labor and landscapes; racial and taxonomic categories; and the forces of capitalism, imperialism, and racism. These artists show how modernity was made possible by agricultural (and other kinds of) labor performed by enslaved and indentured peoples. They reveal a present-day world indelibly shaped by transformative encounters between humans, places, plants, and other natural resources.



Kandis Williams: *Nay, but tell me, am I not unlucky indeed, / To arise from the earth and be only a weed?...* 2020, xerox collage and ink on watercolor paper, 78 by 51 inches.

Photo Marten Elder, Courtesy Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

In Kandis Williams's work, representations of plants—from images of them to artificial ones in containers—evoke agricultural cultivation and forced labor, showing how the production of wealth, land exploitation, and racial subjugation have often depended on one another. At the center of her collage *Nay, but tell me, am I not unlucky indeed, / To arise from the earth and be only a weed?...* (2020)¹ is a black-and-white photograph of a Black man, hands in shackles and legs beribboned with raised scars, capped by a blurry image of a head that appears to be covered by a white hood. Fantastically, two additional dark-skinned forearms extend from the bound man's torso with unfettered hands that seem busy at work. In the lower foreground a group of white men in suits and hats, clearly representing the slave-owning class, stares blankly at the viewer. In four sepia-toned shots at the top, a distant background depicts enslaved men and women working a cotton field in punishingly bright sunlight. Colored squares of spiky bushes photographed against a blue sky and spattered washes of vivid green watercolor interrupt these historical images. When read in conjunction with its title, the collage underscores how social categories mark certain bodies as undesirable, targeted to be uprooted and destroyed, even as it emphasizes the innate vibrancy of human and plant lives in the face of these injustices. A video accompanying the latest Made in L.A. biennial, where the collage was first shown, had Williams reflecting on how the plants exported alongside the transatlantic slave trade adds “another kind of life into the equation in dealing with structural racism.”



Kandis Williams: Installation view of "A Field," 2020 at the Institute for Contemporary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond.
Photo Joshua White, Courtesy ICA Virginia, Richmond.

In her 2020 solo exhibition, "A Field," at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Williams confronted the use of forced labor on prison farms following the abolition of slavery. A small greenhouse stood on a carpet of synthetic turf at the center of the multimedia installation, surrounded by rows of fake potted plants and tall vases with artificial floral arrangements. Panels of the same turf were affixed to the gallery walls. Embedded in these plant simulacra were cut-out photos of Black bodies from earlier eras, captured while working on chain gangs, posing erotically for vintage pornographic magazines, and dancing the tango in pairs. A 10-minute video, *Annexation Tango* (2020), projected inside the greenhouse, showed a Black male dancer undulating and performing the tango alone, green-screened on views of the Lorton Reformatory and the Virginia State Prison Farm, among other nearby sites, where scores of incarcerated people have been made to work as part of their sentences. Williams has spoken about the exhibition as a response to historical erasure, referring to the near-archival invisibility of Black slaves, sharecroppers, and prisoners. Evoking the attendant whitewashing of Black culture is the tango, a hybrid dance form containing elements that Africans and other immigrants brought to the Río de la Plata region in South America during the nineteenth century.

The notion of "invasive" plant species, and the xenophobic tenor that can underlie this classification, has been taken up by other artists, including Okoyomon. In their works, Okoyomon has turned to the kudzu plant in particular (as have other artists, notably Aria Dean). Kudzu, often known by the epithet "the vine that ate the South," was introduced from Japan to the American South in the 1930s, intended as a cover crop to counteract the soil erosion induced by intensive cultivation of cotton during and after slavery. Although kudzu never really took off as a cover crop, railroad and highway developers used the fast-growing plant to cover the steep cuts and embankments newly imposed on the landscape. The plant grew unchecked along transportation routes, its shoots seeming to smother trees, abandoned buildings, and other objects in its path, lending it a mythic and monstrous reputation. As an invasive species, it is illegal to grow kudzu in many states in the US. Okoyomon sees this trajectory from forced migration to criminalization as going "hand-in-hand with how the ecological system of the US relates to Blackness itself."

Rather than presenting kudzu as a rapacious weed to be exterminated, Okoyomon has used the plants as a living medium in which other species of life are able to thrive. In their immersive exhibition

“Earthseed” (2020) at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, Okoyomon installed young kudzu vines and mounds of topsoil in the Zollamt gallery, a former customs office. Six faceless “angels,” constructed from black lambswool, dirt, wire, and colorful yarn, dotted the green field. (The figures resembled dolls the artist’s grandmother once made that could be remodeled again and again, unlike the plastic dolls that Okoyomon would destroy as a child.) Covid delayed the exhibition’s opening for five months, and during that time, the kudzu blanketed the topsoil and half-submerged the uncanny wool figures. The thriving plants had also enticed other creatures to inhabit the space, including crickets, grasshoppers, snails, and spiders. The installation became a scene of unruly abundance. In the spirit of the exhibition’s title, “Earthseed”—borrowed from the name of a fictional religion from the novels of Octavia E. Butler, based on the principle “God is Change”—the kudzu that Southern lore portrays as ominous is here reimagined as a wondrous agent of resilience and revitalization.

Invasive plant species also serve as important metaphors in Okoyomon’s subsequent roof garden project, *Every Earthly Morning the Sky’s Light touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty*, currently installed at the Aspen Art Museum. For this installation, which Okoyomon views as a “portal,” the artist collaborated with local growers to create a large rooftop garden that mixes native plant species with invasive ones, including kudzu. The garden features ponds filled with black-algae-covered water used to irrigate the plant beds watched over by Okoyomon’s black ceramic angel sculptures. Floor tiles are spaced along the footpaths to reveal the plants’ intertwining roots as they develop. The artist explained in *Frieze*: “you will see the roots crawl and grow in between tiles, which is important. . . . I think there’s something especially beautiful about getting to see that errant root system and how those connections happen.” Rather than prohibit “invasive” plants in order to preserve a fixed “native” landscape—a move analogous to trying to preserve racial or cultural purity—Okoyomon (who has spoken of the natural world as “itself an object of colonization and enslavement”) creates a space for the diverse species to cross-pollinate, entangle, and coexist.



Candice Lin: View of *La Charada China*, 2018, the Taipei Biennial, Taipei.

Unlike Okoyomon, who has made it a point to work with invasive plant species, Candice Lin focuses on plantation crops cultivated in colonies, highlighting the brutal systems of extraction and exploitation on which global markets often depended. *System for a Stain*—the centerpiece of “A Body Reduced to

Brilliant Colour,” her 2016 exhibition at Gasworks in London—was an elaborate apparatus formed from glass jars, plastic tubes, a copper still, ceramic vessels, and other objects to distill fermented tea, sugar, and cochineal into a dark red liquid collected in a large rectangular basin. The fluid was then pumped through a plastic tube that snaked into an adjacent room, where the ruddy brew dripped out and slowly accumulated on the floor, covering the faux white marble laminate over the course of the exhibition. The installation referred primarily to the way cochineal insects in Mexico and Central America were collected and crushed to make carmine dye, a high-value colonial product. But the growing bloodlike pool at the end also viscerally evoked the regime of bodily violence that tea and sugar plantation owners inflicted on workers in other colonized lands.

In subsequent works, Lin has continued to explore how shifting desires for certain plant-based flavors and drugs have shaped colonialism and geopolitics. For her 2018 installation *La Charada China* (2018), created for that year’s Made in LA biennial, Lin constructed a memorial to the coolie laborers brought from China to the New World in the nineteenth century. As slavery was being abolished in some colonial empires, indentured workers were transported from China and India to fill labor shortages. More than 200,000 Chinese people were brought to the Caribbean between 1847 and 1874 alone. The center of the installation was a raised earthen platform with a depression in the form of a human body in which seeds of opium poppies, sugarcane, and poisonous plants native to the Caribbean were planted; a watering system was set up to coax their germination. The plant species Lin chose reflect the overlapping histories of the Opium Wars in China and labor rebellions on sugar plantations in the Caribbean. During the latter, workers at times resorted to toxic plants as a last-ditch means of resistance, deploying them to sicken or kill animals, themselves, or other people. The magenta glow of grow lights against the room’s silvery mylar-covered walls imparted an eerie ambiance. On one wall a faintly projected video conveyed accounts of unburied laborers’ corpses deliberately desecrated and even burned along with the carcasses of livestock to make bone charcoal, which was used to refine and whiten the plantations’ sugar.



Beatriz Cortez: View of *Chultún El Semillero*, 2021 at Smithsonian Arts + Industries Building, Washington, D.C.
Photo: Albert Ting, Courtesy The Artist

Beatriz Cortez speaks to a different side of America’s racist agricultural history in her sculptural installations, focusing on the migration of plants between Central America and the US. *The Memory*

Insertion Capsule (2017) is a large steel structure in the form of a speculative dwelling whose design synthesizes Mayan, Spanish Colonial, and Craftsman architectural styles, along with the tents used by refugees and the unhoused, thus evoking the mixture of these structural elements, histories, and people in Southern California and Central America. Inside the capsule, a suspended screen plays a video that tells of other crossovers between these two regions: drawing from historical film clips, photographs, posters, and other archival materials, the video splices together glimpses of plant experimentation and exportation from Central America to the US, intercut with documents related to the eugenics movement in California during the first half of the twentieth century. The Popenoe brothers are protagonists in both stories. Wilson Popenoe was chief agronomist of the notorious United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International). While based in Guatemala, he focused on genetic experiments with bananas and the export of produce (such as avocados, oranges, and loquats) from Central America to California. His brother Paul, meanwhile, helped run the Pasadena-based Human Betterment Foundation, which carried out forced sterilizations of those deemed “insane and feeble-minded,” among them prison inmates, mental health patients, and thousands of immigrants, particularly from Mexico. The Popenoe brothers represent parallel historical developments in botany and eugenics, demonstrating how white supremacist beliefs underpinned the shared logics of selective breeding.

Cortez’s nomadic garden works, on the other hand, seek to bring together knowledge from ancient pre-Columbian pasts and unforeseeable futures. Her installation *Chultún El Semillero*, a 2021 commission for the newly reopened Smithsonian Arts + Industries Building in Washington, D.C., comprises two large steel sculptures whose forms evoke futuristic space capsules, while also recalling *chultúns*, huge spaces that the ancient Maya carved underground to store food and water. One structure, surrounded by grow lights, contains a miniature garden filled with plants indigenous to the Americas. The other capsule holds a seed bank and a welded steel boulder bearing an inscription based on Mayan stone carvings and codices, specifying uses for and future distribution of the seeds. The seeds offer a note of hope—the potential for a world yet to come—as well as a living connection to an ancient world predating the ravages of colonialism.

In using plants as both subject and material for their work, these artists show us how deeply—and irrevocably—our dependence on and manipulation of botanical life-forms have altered the world. They look at certain species that were instrumental in colonialism and imperialism to demonstrate that—in history, science, and metaphor—plants and people alike have been subject to classification, exploitation, and genetic experimentation. Although plants may seem to be passive, mute witnesses to human wheeling and dealing, they continue to adapt to and silently shape our world; they existed before us, and will likely outlast us. Plants contain lessons we haven’t yet learned, and can show us the way toward future worlds.

¹ The work’s full title is *Nay, but tell me, am I not unlucky indeed, / To arise from the earth and be only a weed? / Ever since I came out of my dark little seed, / I have tried to live rightly, but still am a—weed! / To be torn by the roots and destroyed, this my meed, / And despised by the gardener, for being—a weed. / Ah! but why was I born, when man longs to be freed / Of a thing so obnoxious and bad as a—weed? / Now, the cause of myself and my brothers I plead, / Say, can any good come of my being a—weed? / Imagine smoking weed in the streets without cops harassin’ / Imagine going to court with no trial / Lifestyle cruising blue behind my waters / No welfare supporters, more conscious of the way we raise our daughters / Days are shorter, nights are colder / Feeling like life is over, these snakes strike like a cobra / The world’s hot my son got not / Evidently, it’s elementary, they want us all gone eventually / Troopin’ out of state for a plate, knowledge / If coke was cooked without the garbage we’d all have the top dollars / Imagine*

*everybody flashin', fashion / Designer clothes, lacing your click up with diamond vogues / Your people
holdin' dough, no parole / No rubbers, go in raw imagine, law with no undercovers / Just some thoughts . .*

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