

## [Art](#)

### How the Invasive Plants of New York Represent the City's Colonial Past

Plants from Europe, Asia, and Africa recall New York's history of migration in *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization* at the New School.



Installation view of *Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization* at the Arnold and Sheila Aronson Galleries, Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, Parsons School of Design (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The plants growing in the Aronson Galleries at the New School's Parsons School of Design are mostly considered weeds, nuisance plants that burst through cracks in the sidewalk, or creep up along buildings. But Brazilian artist [Maria Thereza Alves](#) recognizes them as a living archive of New York City's often hidden colonial past, where a bright red celosia flower from East Africa, or stinging nettle from Europe, recall migration and forced displacement. All of the around 60 plants, housed in black bags at the center of a gallery, are recognized as ballast flora, or seeds carried in the ballast of ships.

This waste material of sand, rocks, and soil was used in the maritime trade to balance sailing ships, and was usually dumped when a vessel reached its destination and loaded new cargo. [Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization](#) at the Aronson Galleries in the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center chronicles Alves's exploration into this ecological diaspora. The exhibition coincides with Alves receiving the 2016-18 [Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics](#), and is also a culmination of a multi-organizational collaboration.

The partners involved in cultivation and local investigation include [Pioneer Works](#) in Red Hook, itself built on ballast ground; [the High Line](#), where Western plants arrived on the 19th-century freight trains; the [Weeksville Heritage Center](#), one of the first free black communities in the United States; and [the New School](#), where students tended ballast plants in dorm rooms. Next spring, these sites will continue *Seeds of Change* through ballast flora gardens.

Alves started [Seeds of Changes](#) in 1999, with editions in Marseille, Liverpool, Dunkirk, and other European port cities. This New York iteration is its first appearance in the Americas. *Seeds of Change: New York* curators Carin Kuoni and Amanda Parmer write in an exhibition essay, "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."

That includes the transatlantic slave trade. At its height, ships would regularly cross the Atlantic almost entirely "in ballast" as it was more profitable to travel without freight and pick up enslaved people for the return. Ballast was then used on the way back to account for movement of this human "cargo." Significantly, Wall Street's 18th-century slave market only received a historic marker [in 2015](#), and the city's early economic foundation in slavery is often obscured in its history.



Propagating Party at the New School for Maria Thereza Alves, *Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization* (courtesy Philip Van Nostrand)

One of Alves's watercolor maps is called "In Ballast: To and From New York," and charts boats entering and exiting the New York harbor from London, Amsterdam, Cape Verde, Haiti, Algeria, the West Indies, and elsewhere across the globe. Another pinpoints areas of New York City that likely involved ballast landfill, such as Hunter's Point in Queens, Gowanus Creek in Brooklyn, Mott Haven in the Bronx, and 107th Street and 8th Avenue in Manhattan. Whether filling waterways, smoothing valleys, or extending the shore, ballast became a part of the city's altered topography.



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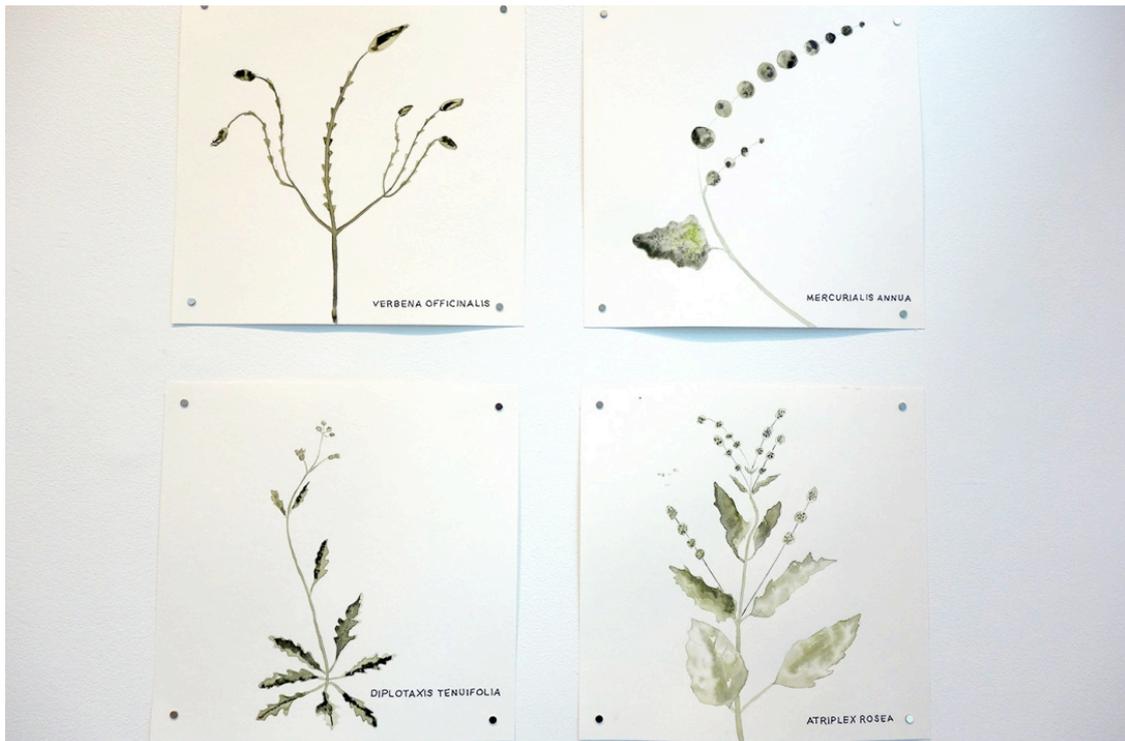
Ballast seeds can remain dormant for centuries, only flourishing when the conditions are right or the soil is disrupted. A vase in a hallway off the main gallery is replenished each week with a new bouquet including wild carrot, plantain, buttercups, and burdock, all indicators of ballast soil. Other indicators like *mercurialis annua* (annual mercury) and *diplotaxis tenuifolia* (wall-rocket) are portrayed in watercolors alongside the garden installation.

As Alves writes in an exhibition essay, 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.” For instance, during and after World War II, “American ships brought goods to devastated Europe and, again, would return with earth or now also war rubble as ballast.” She notes that “Bristol Basin,” at East 25th Street and Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive along the East River, is [named for the rubble](#) of the bombed-out English city that was used as its landfill. A [plaque](#) there from 1942 commemorates these “fragments that once were homes.”

Although the visuals of *Seeds of Change* are fairly minimal, with the strength of the project lying in the field research and community relationships, it’s worth examining its central gallery where the immigrated specimens thrive. Long stemmed St. John’s-wort from Western Europe grows by yellow toadflax from the Mediterranean; dyer’s weed from Eurasia sprouts near curly knotweed from Great Britain. Each is a small reminder that New Yorkers are often walking on earth formed by colonialism’s violent disruption, both of people and the land.



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Maria Thereza Alves, "Common Ballast Flora on Long Island" (2017), with one vase with a fresh bouquet that is changed every week, including dandelion, daisy, buttercups, chicory, plantain, clover, burdock, and wild carrot (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Installation view of Maria Thereza Alves, *Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization* (courtesy Philip Van Nostrand)



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[Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization](#) continues through November 27 at the Arnold and Sheila Aronson Galleries, Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, Parsons School of Design (66 Fifth Avenue, Greenwich Village, Manhattan).