

MARIA-THEREZA ALVES

Borderless Histories

The Botanical Art of Maria Thereza Alves

Ballast flora [plants that grow from seeds that historically migrated by finding their way into ships ballast that was then often dumped at ports upon arrival] therefore uncovers a comprehensive history of a place. A history that must, of necessity, expand to include what I call borderless history. Borderless history must also consider the origins and specific histories of the diaspora of enslaved and Indigenous peoples working in the colonies who might also contribute to the complexity of the French landscape.¹

Maria Thereza Alves

Since the late 1990s, Maria Thereza Alves has used botanical research as an integral component of her art practice, fluidly and subversively blending the methods of the natural sciences, documentary art, historical revision and social/political critique. The resulting works, which I will consider in my discussions here, reveal natural and social histories so inextricably entwined as to challenge the foundational Western ontological distinction between nature and culture that Bruno Latour has described as the 'modern constitution'.² They also disclose colonial histories of migration, exploitation and exchange, growing wild, so to speak, in the national landscapes of European nation states. The work interrogates existing narratives of human and plant migration and proposes speculative counter narratives that are investigated and tested through social and scientific research. The aesthetic force of the work is therefore often dependent on the actual findings of the research and the material presence of specimens. The artist creates the conditions by which we can recognise the agency of plants and seeds, allowing them a role that involves metaphor, but also goes beyond it to their potential as living things.

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Alien Invaders

There tend to be two types of disciplinary transgressors: those working within a discipline who make a carefully calculated intervention to stretch its borders, and those who choose to be oblivious to borders and wander where they will. Alves is the latter; someone who decided early in her practice that the established boundaries between art, politics, science, narrative, everyday life, nature and culture were counter to her own interests, and that attending to them would only impede her way forward.

Alves understands that the plants which grow in orderly fields and gardens, the food crops and decorative plants traded around the world or cultivated in hothouse gardens – even those weeds that find their way wherever they can – have all already been drafted into narratives of religious, national and cultural identity. But, as Jean Fisher notes, this conscription is haunted by a contradiction. Plants are ‘emotionally bound up with nationalist symbolism’, but they also ‘persistently fail to respect national borders’.³ Alves’s art suggests that if we look carefully as scientific observers and as artists, our ideas about flora can be liberated to help us tell stories that blur national borders rather than define them, and reveal often-neglected histories.

Let me begin with an example of how plants – even imaginary ones – might be conscripted into national service. A work of science-fiction provides a promising entry point since, by its very name, the genre straddles the divide between science and fictional narrative. In his popular 1898 novel, *The War of the Worlds*, H G Wells imagines the invasion of earth by an army of technologically advanced Martians. As their deadly tripod war machines sweep England, the Martians also broadcast the seeds of alien flora across the cities and countryside. Wells’s narrator contrasts Martian and terrestrial flora:

And speaking of the differences between the life on Mars and terrestrial life, I may allude here to the curious suggestions of the red weed.

Apparently the vegetable kingdom in Mars, instead of having green for a dominant colour, is of a vivid blood-red tint. At any rate, the seeds which the Martians (intentionally or accidentally) brought with them gave rise in all cases to red-coloured growths. Only that known popularly as the red weed, however, gained any footing in competition with terrestrial forms... the red weed grew with astonishing vigour and luxuriance... its cactus-like branches formed a carmine fringe to the edges of our triangular window. And afterwards I found it broadcast throughout the country, and especially wherever there was a stream of water.⁴

Later, the narrator encounters the red plant in the heart of the capital: ‘I saw the red weed clambering over the buttresses of Waterloo Bridge... The Wandle, the Mole, every little stream, was a heaped mass of red weed, in appearance between butcher’s meat and pickled cabbage.’⁵ These passages provide a vivid example of how botanical fact becomes tangled in narrative and the production of politicised affective responses.

As we read, we track Wells’s effort to give the red weed a credible botanical form and environmental limits. Simultaneously we are subject to a barrage of emotionally charged associations deeply embedded within

this descriptive language. It is an invasive 'creeper' that quickly spreads out its alien vines, 'broadcast throughout the country'. It has 'cactus-like' branches. We are not told whether this means they are thick and tubular or dangerously spiky (or both), but the associations are there to be made, along with the general suggestion of a warmer foreign climate. Descriptions of the plant also disturbingly transgress the boundary between flora and fauna: it is 'blood red' and 'in appearance between butcher's meat and pickled cabbage'. Its redness sits in jarring contrast to the green and pleasant land it is in the process of reshaping in its own image. Thus, transformation of the landscape is easily conflated with an attack on the identity of the nation itself. Lastly, the alien plant is christened with the most anthropocentric, value-laden botanical term of all: weed.⁶

Wells was aware that his book could be read as an allegory of British colonialism.⁷ The narrator even invites the reader to imagine the invaders' side of the situation. He assumes that, being scientifically advanced, the Martians are fellow Darwinists, committed to dominance in their struggle to survive. They probably consider humanity 'as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us'.⁸ Therefore:

before we judge them too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals ... but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?⁹

This passage is a testament to the power of colonial ideology to harness contradiction. Wells manages to evoke the horror of conquest, combine that with a fear of an alien other, and yet, when required, to temporarily channel the empathy of the reader away from the victims and onto the conquerors.

Alves has recognised that the intersection between botany and ideology is a potent space, fraught with narratives and metaphors of migration and invasion that might be applied to her own personal and wider cultural circumstances. Wells, after all, was merely tapping into an established history of conflating migrant and native plants with migrant and native peoples. In *Sowing Empire*, Jill Casid argues that the eighteenth-century disciplines of botany and human biology developed tools of classification in parallel. This, she claims, was not only, as Michel Foucault suggested in *The Order of Things* (1966), to maintain a general sense of the order of nature, but also, she writes, to assure 'that the assumed differences not only between human, animal, and vegetable but moreover between humans as morphological types would blur to the point of being visibly untenable'.¹⁰ Thus, although colonial plantation practices were extremely productive of botanical hybridity (and cultural hybridity in the incorporation of Indigenous plant knowledge) there was a shared anxiety about purity of species and race across the fields of biology and in the wider culture.

It has thus been all too easy to summon botanical metaphors when describing colonial practices. The influential nineteenth-century British botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker, for example, wrote that in America,



English plants were ‘fellow emigrants and fellow colonists with the Anglo-Saxon [who] like him, asserted their supremacy over and displaced a certain number of natives of the soil’.¹¹ The term ‘alien’ has also been applied to both plants and peoples. It took on its pejorative sense in the US not long after the Revolutionary War, when it was used to describe Irish and French immigrants.¹² That negative association transferred easily to alien ‘invasive’ species. Visiting European botanists occasionally responded to the difference of ‘new world’ flora with near hysteria. The Finnish naturalist Peter Kalm, writing of his arrival in the not so very different floral environment of Philadelphia in 1748, describes a crisis of orderly mastery over difference: ‘Whenever I looked to the ground I found everywhere such plants as I had never seen before...I was seized with terror at the thought of ranging to many new and unknown parts of natural history.’¹³

Choosing a Place in Nature-Culture

Alves’s personal stake in discussions of migration is perhaps best introduced through a 1997 postcard project, *Maria Thereza’s Place (in Stockholm)* by Michael. On the face of the postcard is a black and white photograph of Alves standing in a pine forest, the lower part of her

Maria Thereza's Place by Michael

[^]
in Stockholm

By an error of the postal system, I received a package of photographs from a man named Michael in Illinois, USA, which was intended for a friend of his living in Brazil. The note attached said, "Here are some photos we took at your place."

The photos are of a pine tree plantation in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Although all of my family is from Brazil, we have been in a continual process of migration or immigration for generations and therefore have not had the opportunity to own a place. But there's a strong historical sense of trying to be in a place.

The documentation provided by Michael of "my" place enables me for the first time to have an authenticated physical sense of a place which is "my".

I re-create in a physical place the photos which document the existence of "my" place, but in the place I have chosen to live, and not where historical accidents displaced me into.

Maria Thereza Alves © 1997

body obscured by saplings. She is gazing out directly at the viewer. The text on the back of the postcard is reproduced above.

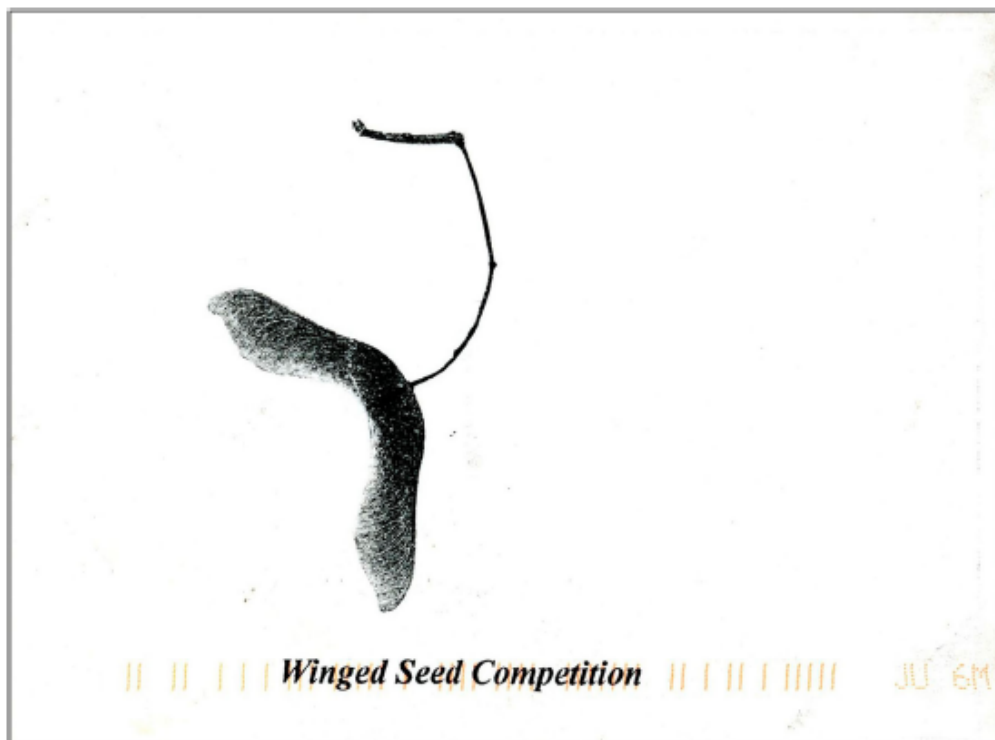
This apparently simple accident of the post has erupted into a flurry of meaning and an opportunity for self-definition and personal agency. Her text politicises her lack of a home place, but uses irony to displace the expected sentimental longing for a return to an imaginary lost place of origin, propelling the reader along with her into a present that she intends to shape for herself, in a place of her own choosing.

Another mail-art project from the following year, *Winged Seed Competition* explored similar territory, but with more whimsy (and botany). Friends and associates of the artist received a postcard announcing a 'Winged Seed Competition' to 'be held on August 22nd, 1998'. They were invited to submit, by mail, a winged maple seed that would then be judged by both scientific and aesthetic criteria: 'first prize will be awarded to the fastest winged seed with the most entertaining flying pattern'. And, perhaps because we know since Duchamp and subsequent practitioners of institutional critique that art occurs through institutions, the prize quasi-ironically offers the gift of potential artworld recognition: 'The winner will have replicas of the award winning winged seed sent to selected art critics and museums.' How do we untangle botany and aesthetics here? The elegance of the spinning maple seed seems so

inextricably tied to the imperative for movement and distribution: we barely have to reach for the metaphor; for all practical purposes, it is inherent.

Alves's concern to liberate a discourse of migration from colonial and nationalist narratives explains much of her interest in engaging with politically loaded botanical discussions. But there is also a longstanding related concern for the environment. Alves was a co-founder, in 1987, of the Green Party in the State of Sao Paulo. Her environmental concern has been defined not by desire to set aside tracks of land from human use, but to imagine how humans can occupy and utilise environments without hugely damaging or destroying them, or oppressing each other in the process. Both agendas are connected by a concern for social and political justice and for a more effective way to think about the relationship between nature and culture.

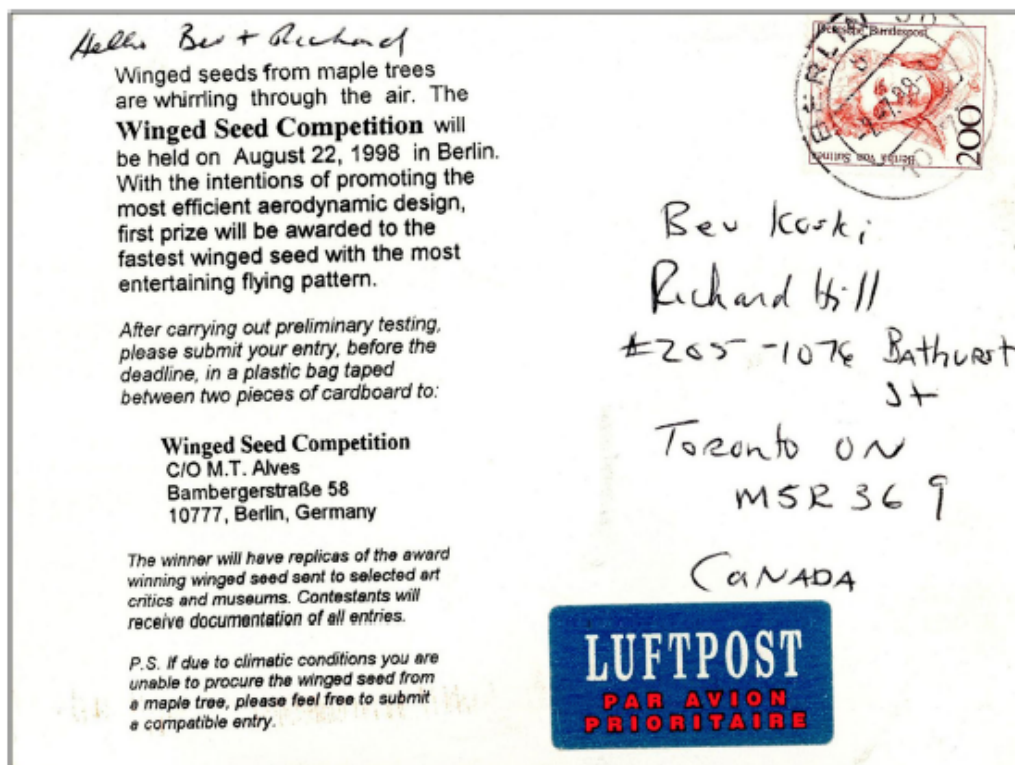
The foundational distinction between nature and culture in Western thought has been much debated since the advent of modernity, with positions taken on either the side of an epistemic and ontological nature-culture divide.¹⁴ Claims to knowledge about nature are often made through some version of scientific realism (or mysticism) or, on the side of culture, through variations of cultural constructivism. From



Winged Seed Competition, 1998, postcard related to a video of the same date and title, 10.5 x 13.8 cm, recto, collection of the author

the 1970s until the late 1990s much writing about art was committed to postmodern approaches emphasising cultural constructivism, sceptical of empirical claims. It also became clear in this period that the nature-culture dualism was foundational to the categorisation of many non-Western cultures as primitive others to Western civilisation.¹⁵ In many cases the solution was thought to be to rescue Indigenous peoples out of the category of nature and into the sphere of culture, rather than to more deeply challenge the dichotomy itself.

The emergence in the 1990s of ideas that are now often described as 'new materialism' or 'the ontological turn', struggled to find a language that could account simultaneously for both the social processes of meaning-making and their material situatedness in a world that, although not graspable without social mediation, is also not reducible to that mediation.¹⁶ Materials and non-human beings have agency of their own, which inevitably influences our attempts to define them and our understandings of them are therefore not merely arbitrary social constructs. At the same time, we cannot simply untangle material reality from its particular socio-cultural framework to arrive at an objective view. A notable move in this direction was Bruno Latour's influential book, *We Have Never Been Modern*, which argues that the modern



Winged Seed Competition, 1998, postcard related to a video of the same date and title, 10.5 x 13.8 cm, verso, collection of the author

ontological division between nature and culture reveals a constant but hidden traffic between the two categories that involves the constant (and constantly elided) production of what he describes as nature/culture hybrids.¹⁷

Although Latour has many critics, most are focused less on his diagnosis of the problem than on the solutions he offers. The relativist turn, first taken in *We Have Never Been Modern* and the resulting 'post-critical' position, seem to wander into many of the paradoxes relativist thinking has always posed.¹⁸ My own concern is how often I have seen new materialist arguments slide into a kind of theoretically super-charged neo-primitivism in which, for example, Indigenous ontologies take on a revered or mystical status that is beyond critical evaluation or even discursive engagement.¹⁹

The value of Alves's work then, is that it offers a series of case studies in which the boundary between culture and nature is visibly and productively traversed without falling into either antagonism or romanticism.

The Nation's Flora and the National Landscape

The distinction between national and alien flora that Wells trades on depends on the notion of the pure home space that we have already seen Alves resisting. Many European nation states have versions of this mythology, from militaristic 'blood and soil' rhetoric to subtler forms of geographic determinism. In almost all cases these notions were established around a pastoral ideal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that increasingly contrasted both with the industrialisation and the resulting cultural transformation occurring in cities and with primitive 'pre-agricultural' societies. The artistic component of this phenomenon was the rise of landscape painting during this period. Casid describes how the development of the picturesque 'as a way of seeing, transformed land into landscape'²⁰ – naturalising both ideological organisation of the home territory and, in the examples she gives, an 'imperial picturesque' in the plantation landscapes of the Caribbean.²¹

This latter contrast was used against the Indigenous peoples of what is now the eastern US, whose dispossession from their lands was justified explicitly on the imperative to move the land into a productive state through farming. It was conveniently overlooked that all of the Indigenous communities in the region did practice agriculture and actually introduced Europeans to many crops that would become European dietary staples, such as maize, squash and common beans. (Two other European staples, potatoes and tomatoes, have their origins in Central and South America.)²²

In 2009 Alves created a series of carefully painted botanical illustrations of Amazonian fruit called 'This is not an Apricot'. The title might lead us to expect some post-Foucauldian surrealist play on the relationship between language, images and things-in-themselves, but the irony is that we are actually considering a much more literal failure of language.²³ These *really* are not apricots.

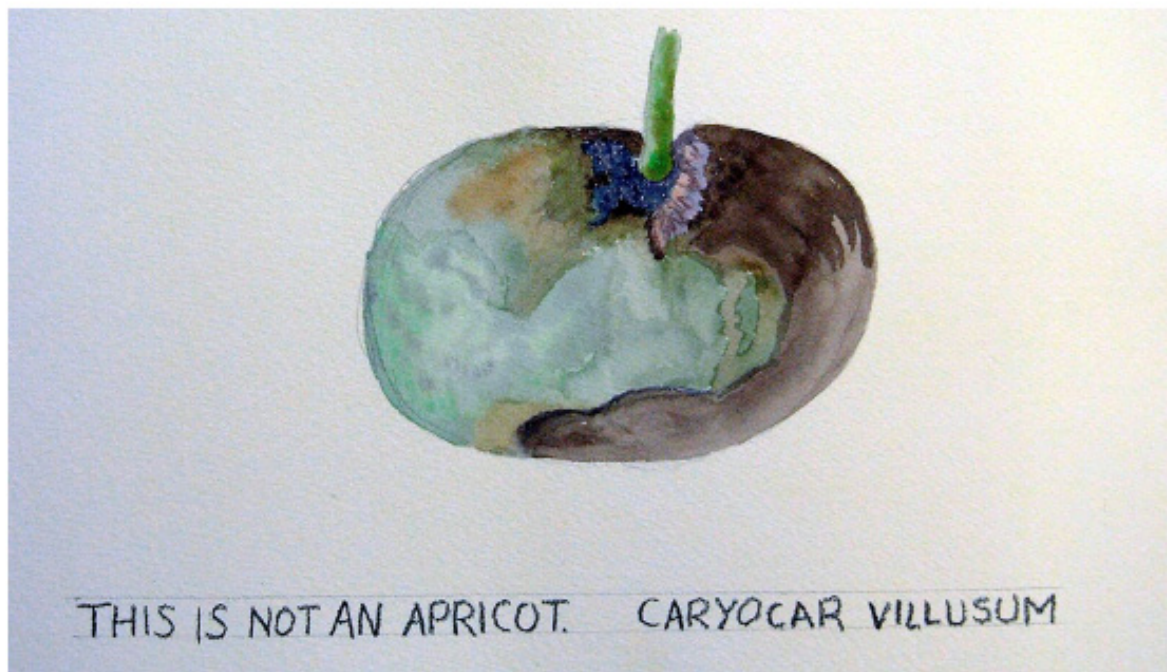
In a market in the Manaus – which is located in northern Brazil and is the largest city in the Amazon rainforest – Alves found four different rainforest fruits that she was unfamiliar with offered for sale. In each case

when she inquired about a particular fruit, the seller described it, in Portuguese, simply as an 'apricot'. In her subsequent travels around Brazil she found an additional sixteen distinct fruits that were also circulating bereft of their specific names.

This was not an innocent misrecognition, but an act of colonial will. Why else would someone short-circuit the process of signification by persisting in deploying a European signifier across such an absurd range of potential meanings? It could only be to avoid using existing names from local Indigenous language and thus to avoid acknowledging an Indigenous connection to that landscape and its floral bounty.²⁴

The wilful persistence of colonial assumptions about flora, landscape and identity continues in Alves's adopted home of Europe too, and the artist's various projects move back and forth across Europe and between Europe and its former colonial territories. The certainty that the pastoral ideal is central to English identity is well illustrated by Prince Charles's efforts to share his wisdom about English architecture with his subjects. In his 1989 book on architecture, *A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture*, he naively – but perfectly – inhabits a nineteenth-century view of the relationship between landscape and national culture: 'I would suggest that most of us are probably very proud of our country and feel there is something rather special about Britain, about our landscape, about our villages and our towns, and about those aspects of our surroundings which provide us with what we rather loosely call character.'²⁵

Like other European landscapes, England's is the product of a long history of human interventions, the most transformative likely being repeated waves of deforestation for a variety of reasons and the fencing



This is not an Apricot, (detail), 2009, watercolour on paper, one of twenty individual paintings, each 26 x 30 cm, courtesy of the artist

of agricultural commons during the enclosure movement of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁶

The pastoral fantasy, however, requires a particularly aestheticised notion of cultivation, often centred around the idea of a manor house and its rural landscape. Christopher Hussey, the editor of *Country Life* magazine in the 1950s, claimed that eighteenth-century England's 'greatest contribution to the visual arts' was 'the synthesis of classical mansion and park landscape'.²⁷

With manor and garden so intrinsically linked, there are many convenient opportunities for slippage between the cultivation of gardens and landscapes and the cultivation of cultural sophistication. This is especially the case in the context of a religious tradition that had, since the Middle Ages, interpreted nature as fallen and dangerous, but also as a deliberate creation designed to provide metaphorical lessons for humanity. The eighteenth-century poet Edward Young wrote of gardens:

Nor is a garden only a promoter of a good man's happiness, but a picture of it; and, in some sort, shows him to himself. Its culture, order, fruitfulness, and seclusion from the world, compared to the weeds, wildness, and exposure of a common field, is no bad emblem of a good man, compared to the multitude. A garden weeds the mind: it weeds it of worldly thoughts, and sows celestial seed in their stead. For what see we there, but what awakens in us our gratitude to Heaven? A garden to the virtuous is a Paradise still extant, a Paradise unlost.²⁸

But even without explicit religiosity, the cultivation of nature is a morally charged, civilising business. The architect Isaac Ware, in his *Complete Body of Architecture* (1756) wrote that, in a properly landscaped space:

What we propose now in gardens is to collect the beauties of nature; to separate them from those rude views in which her blemishes are seen, and to bring them nearer to the eye; to dispose them in the most pleasing order; and create an universal harmony among them: that every thing may be free, and nothing savage; that the eye may be regaled with the collected beauties of the vegetable world, brought together from the remotest regions...²⁹

In informing us that the sources of the ideal English garden will include items from 'the remotest regions', Ware provides a small lever with which we can begin to pry open this discourse and expose the incredible global traffic that actually constitutes it. If I can paraphrase Trinh T Minh-ha:³⁰ In every 'first world' centre of empire there was a hothouse cultivating 'third world' flora, and in every colony there was a botanical garden where colonists could wander amongst species from home, while also cultivating knowledge of valuable exotics.³¹ Eventually the markets became filled with food and flowers from all corners of the globe. So, while England was creating the idea of an English landscape, the idea was being reified through the constant introduction and 'nativisation' of plants from around the world. Alves's research suggests that many



What is the Color of a German Rose? 2005, still from video, 6:14 min, image: courtesy of the artist

common ‘English’ plants have only been introduced since the mid eighteenth century.³²

In her short video *What is the Color of a German Rose?* (2005), Alves addresses the wilful ignorance that develops regarding flora that has been naturalised for so long that it is assumed by many to have originated in their own nation. I say ‘wilful’, because it seems tied to a political desire to repress contemplation of the sources of European wealth, of the indebtedness to other parts of the world and to the movement and migration that this implies.

The film is deceptively simple. It begins with the sound of a gently strummed guitar and then a disembodied male voice (that of Andreas Van Dören) asking, ‘Where is that from?’ At the same time a woman (Laura Munévar) enters the screen from the left and turns to hold up an apple. Another woman’s voice (that of Bianka Göbel) then answers in voice-over: ‘Apple. Asia Minor’. Munévar then presents a series of flowers and produce, with occasional questions from Van Dören and regular explanations of the global origins of each item from Göbel. The transitions are sometimes handled simply by fading in and out, but often involve Munévar entering from either side of the screen. Munévar presents each item in a distinct way, drawing attention to the act of presentation itself. Each time, she offers the viewer her direct gaze and a twinkling smile that invites the viewer into complicity with her parody of the television ‘spokes-model’. Van Dören’s questions are spoken with a slightly sceptical leer, as though his character has little interest in being convinced.

The video ends with a view of a table piled high with a bounty of fruit and vegetables, topped with bunches of brilliantly coloured flowers. Aside from the image’s inherent seductiveness – the colour, the mouth-watering fruit – it also brings to mind every bountiful still life and cornucopia in the



What is the Color of a German Rose? 2005, still from video, 6:14 min, image: courtesy of the artist

history of Western art. The link between an entire visual history of European affluence and the movement of flora from around the world is thus decisively made. But the structural subtext of the video is also important, because the video is, from that perspective, also about the continuous repetition of Munévar entering the frame and presenting an item in response to a questioning voice. This constant interrogation and entering into and disappearing out of public view echoes the struggle for recognition that underlies the work. For me it evoked a sympathetic bond with Munévar and I began to ask, 'when will it be enough?'

If the aestheticisation of land into landscape and flora into picturesque countryside and garden is fundamentally an ideological project, then the use of floral ornamentation is no less worthy of investigation. When floral motifs are used to soften the brute impact of a barrier such as a wall, fence or gate, the relationship to power is all the more significant for being deliberately difficult to register. This is illustrated by the copy for an online advertisement for a Canadian custom ironwork company: 'The first line of defence in security is to create a deterrent that's strong and noticeable enough to discourage criminal activity in the first place. With wrought iron, you can do that with style.'³³

Or, in other words, you can live in a fortress without having to think too hard about the fact.

A wrecking yard might encircle itself in razor wire, but genteel authority will likely choose to protect the top of a fence with a decorative spread of pointed metal leaves. Alves's floral ironwork sculpture, *Through the Fields and into the Woods* (2007), is not quite a fence or a gate. Although roughly gate-sized, it is not hinged, but hangs from the ceiling by a chain. The chain is a continuous length, fastened at the left



Through the Fields and into the Woods, 2007, sculpture, iron, metal chains, 225 x 70 cm, courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein Paris

and right upper corners of the outer framework, with surplus coils dangling down to pile on either side. The chain is the only nakedly instrumental element of the work and, one suspects, given its excess, that its job is not only to suspend the work, but also to provide a material and ideological contrast to the delicate and whimsical ironwork on display.

Alves created the work for a summer group exhibition, 'Affinata – Arte in Cantina', curated by artist Mario Lamorgese in the Castello di Torre in Pietra, Italy (24 May – 14 June 2008). The castle includes a working vineyard on its grounds and is located near Rome's Fiumicino International Airport. Airports tend to be odd international non-spaces. Many, like Fiumicino, are sited on the distant outskirts of destination areas and take little interest in their immediate locality. The proximity to the airport and its weak relationship to its immediate surroundings intrigued Alves. As she describes her process:

I went into the vineyard and had a look and took photos of the local flora that grew around the vineyard. [I] drew them onto a large piece of heavy paper and had an ironworker make it. To me it was important that it was a local 'normal' field, but near an international airport and so who knows what flora was from where. But they were all around the nice grapes producing good wine for all of us.³⁴

The overall design itself, however, was inspired 'by the vines that grow in the Atlantic Rainforest and how [their growth] brings everything so clearly together visually'.³⁵ The playful, spidery design of looping and swirling vines, punctuated by emerging thorns, leaves and flowers looks a little like something Paul Klee might have made if he had been an ironmonger rather than a water colourist. The unrestrained dynamism of the design has a deconstructive effect on the logic of security-oriented gate design and, although bounded by two structural vertical edges and a horizontal base, the flora erupts from the top with the unrestrained growth of vines and flowers.

Seeds of Change and Wake

Through the Fields and into the Woods hints at the unintended human distribution of seeds, a theme that Alves has taken up directly in her best-known projects. These are the many iterations of *Seeds of Change* (1999 to the present), which investigates ballast flora in European ports, attempting to recover seeds that have travelled in ships ballast and several iterations of *Wake* (2000 to the present), which looks at (and for) seeds that have migrated in other ways.

At a conference on art and science in Finland, Alves learned of the work of the botanist Dr Heli Jutila, who had written what was then the only study on the seed bank of an area in which ballast had been systematically dumped.³⁶ Historically, ships would take on whatever material was economically expedient as ballast, often including earth and stone that harboured dormant seeds. Jutila had been able to recover long-dormant seeds and sprout them. Alves, who was then living in Marseilles, began to wonder what hidden socio-botanical history might remain in the ballast dumpsites of this important port – lit-

erally waiting to sprout. The question, as she saw it, was fundamentally about how particular plants get framed as 'natural' to a particular location: 'At what moment do seeds become native and what are the socio-political histories of place that classify the framework of belonging?'³⁷ As Jean Fisher puts it, 'like people immigration, seed immigration problematises the means by which national identity and belonging is defined',³⁸ blurring 'our concept of what does and does not represent an "authentic" national flora.

The artist contacted Jutila, who agreed to advise her on how best to recover and germinate the seeds. Alves also began to search the libraries and archives of Marseilles for evidence of this history. She was able to identify several sites set aside specifically as ballast depots and to uncover a documentary record, including a letter from a citizen of Marseilles to the local Marquis in 1816, making him aware that the city's original ballast depot had been destroyed during the revolution and that a new one was needed. From the complicated record that follows, Alves was able to identify several likely ballast sites around the port. And naturally we can also imagine the many ways that material may have been disseminated beyond the official ballast sites. Alves found a record of one example, in a letter from a local countess, complaining that when the ballast depots were overwhelmed ballast was illegally dumped in the countryside on private property.³⁹

Alves took soil samples from five likely sites around Marseilles and potted it.⁴⁰ Some held seeds that germinated and grew. Her intention was to create a ballast garden in Marseilles that could bring local residents and scientists together to exchange knowledge about flora in the region, acting as a forum for discussing this history.⁴¹ A rightward shift in local politics ultimately made the creation of the garden impossible, but Alves continued the research in other ports and was finally able to complete a ballast flora garden in Bristol ('Seeds of Change: A Floating Ballast Seed Garden for Bristol, 2012–2016').⁴² She has also undertaken ballast flora research in Liverpool (2004), Exeter and Topsham (2004), Dunkirk (2005), and Reposaari (2001). Each project has revealed a unique history of colonial migration of persons, goods and flora, as well as different local contemporary responses to the histories her research has revealed.

In Liverpool, a centre for the slave trade, she discovered that so much ballast was unloaded that it was used as the base-fill for local roads, so that 'today, when roadwork is done and the ballast-laden earth under the asphalt disturbed, exotic plants bloom'.⁴³ She notes that the transatlantic slave trade increased the amount of ballast arriving in European ports, because, rather than wait to take on resource cargoes in the colonies for their return voyage, ships would race home empty – that is, full of tons of ballast – to take on another cargo of slaves, who were much more valuable.⁴⁴

Alves was invited by the Taidemuseo in Pori, Finland to continue the investigation begun by Heli Jutila on the Finnish port of Reposaari Island. As Alves writes: 'Jutila's research had been limited to those public areas where it is unnecessary to seek permission; therefore... we agreed that my project would be most useful to ballast flora studies if investigations were made in the more private domain of residential gardens.'⁴⁵

This scientific choice was also an aesthetic choice with relational and socio-political consequences. Alves writes: 'the local community revealed an enthusiasm for their ballast plants and was keen to show us specimens and tell us about them. As a consequence, I realised that it was essential to work with the local community and to include them as active participants alongside the botanist's research.'⁴⁶

The locals, already aware of ballast sites, were pleased to be able to show exotic ballast plants in their own gardens that they had cultivated and even bartered with neighbours for. They were also able to lead the artist to specific locations where ballast had been used as fill for adjusting the gradient of roads and other spaces, far from the original dump sites. One man, Vekko Andersson, took Alves to a building site where old ballast material had recently been excavated as part of the building process. She writes: 'The excavated soil had been piled up to the side forming a small hill, which was speckled with ballast stones and where already a garden of ballast flora had sprung up.'⁴⁷ Samples of ballast flora were potted and cared for in the museum in Pori, which then became 'a meeting place for sharing information between the residents of Reposaari and Pori and the scientific community'.⁴⁸

Alves brought her *Seeds of Change* project to the 2007 group exhibition 'Port City: On Exchange and Mobility' (15 September to 11 November) at the Arnolfini Gallery. Alves visited Bristol, researched and located ballast sites and took earth samples. Bristol is, like Liverpool, a port with a history of involvement in the slave trade. She worked with Tony Smith of the Bristol Naturalists' Society to identify ballast seeds. Her goal, as always, was to create a public ballast garden, and at last the political will existed to make it happen. The Bristol City Council, through Aldo Rinaldi, its Senior Public Art Officer, funded the project and worked with the Arnolfini and the University of Bristol Botanic Garden to realise the project.

An old concrete grain barge was procured as the home for the garden and it was moored near Castle Park ferry landing in Bristol harbour. The floating garden itself was designed by Gitta Gschwendtner, with raised planted areas to either side of a central path and areas at either end for groups to sit surrounded by ballast flora.⁴⁹ The garden is irrigated by water pumped from the river and electricity for lighting is supplied by solar panels. The barge can be seen from the park above, but can only be visited by ferry.

The garden's plantings were chosen and laid out by Nicholas Wray, the Botanic Garden curator. He allowed the plantings to overlap one another slightly, so that although the species are organised so that they can be visibly differentiated they are, appropriately, not divided by rigid boundaries.⁵⁰ In 2015 Cathy Lewis researched plants from other UK ballast sites and introduced several of these as 'guest species' to the garden. One is the Blue Pimpernel, also known as the Poor Man's Weatherglass for its ability to close up its brilliant blue flowers when the weather turns bad.⁵¹ The most dramatic plant, the Squirting Cucumber, was part of the original planting. When ripe, the fruit of this plant bursts explosively at the slightest disturbance, broadcasting its seeds in a gooey stream that can carry them distances of up to thirty feet.⁵²

The garden has been a hub of activity, with regular public tours and community activities. As of 2015, eleven schools and five community

groups had created their own ballast seed gardens.⁵³ Reading the literature announcing and documenting these events I was intrigued at how easily the very same events, objects and narratives arising from the project can exist within discourses of botanical education or art. Obviously each partner in the project understood its value from their own disciplinary perspective, but while you are engaged with a particular aspect of the project the distinctions hardly seem to matter. You are having an aesthetic experience that is also an experience of botanical education and also an exploration of social and political history. Trying to extract one aspect or another would be to miss the point, as Alves's practice in general makes clear.

Writing about the project Jean Fisher summed up its significance this way: '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'.⁵⁴ This allegory is crucial to understanding the project, but at the same time a ballast plant is not only an allegory of these histories, but also an index of them. It is a material record waiting to be brought to life if we can gather the cultural and botanical resources to see it.

I suspect that the recent attention Alves's work has been receiving is more than simply a case of an artist finally getting her due. It suggests that the boundaries that she has crossed for all these years, with such apparent ease and disregard, have now come to appear insubstantial (or, when substantial, unnecessary and oppressive) to many others. The timely linking of borderless history with ongoing experiences of migration and ecological crisis now seems vital to our political moment, even if, like migratory flora, they have been crucially present all along. There is a powerful tension in her practice between our sense that we are seeing documentation of the factual and obvious, evidence that is often right before us, and our recognition that we had nevertheless been unable to see it without the artist's assistance. This lacuna seems to coincide directly with the space of hybridity described by Latour in which the illicit traffic between nature and culture occurs. With Alves's help we see that this borderless space is a busy intersection indeed, with many human and floral travellers struggling for space and opportunities to thrive. Despite the constant jostling, her work suggests we are only at the beginning of a process of investigation of our various positions within (and complicity with) a network of relations that we might eventually recognise as a shared reality.

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This scientific choice was also an aesthetic choice with relational and socio-political consequences. Alves writes: 'the local community revealed an enthusiasm for their ballast plants and was keen to show us specimens and tell us about them. As a consequence, I realised that it was essential to work with the local community and to include them as active participants alongside the botanist's research.'⁴⁶

The locals, already aware of ballast sites, were pleased to be able to show exotic ballast plants in their own gardens that they had cultivated and even bartered with neighbours for. They were also able to lead the artist to specific locations where ballast had been used as fill for adjusting the gradient of roads and other spaces, far from the original dump sites. One man, Vekko Andersson, took Alves to a building site where old ballast material had recently been excavated as part of the building process. She writes: 'The excavated soil had been piled up to the side forming a small hill, which was speckled with ballast stones and where already a garden of ballast flora had sprung up.'⁴⁷ Samples of ballast flora were potted and cared for in the museum in Pori, which then became 'a meeting place for sharing information between the residents of Reposaari and Pori and the scientific community'.⁴⁸

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- 1 Maria Thereza Alves, *Seeds of Change: Marseille*, video 11:59 mins, 2009 ('Seeds of Change', 1999–ongoing)
- 2 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Catherine Porter, trans, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993
- 3 Jean Fisher, 'The Importance of Words and Actions', in Alves et al, *Maria Thereza Alves*, Mai Tran (Ecole supérieure des Beaux-arts de Nantes metropole), ed, Musée du Château des ducs de Bretagne, Nantes, 2013, p 9
- 4 H G Wells, *The War of the Worlds and The Time Machine*, Dolphin Books, Garden City, New York, 1961, p 136
- 5 Ibid, pp 183–184
- 6 In chapter five, 'A History of Weediness' of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's book, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, the author describes the shared human, animal and floral environment of the central Meratus Mountains on the island of Borneo, Indonesia. She highlights the ways in which categories used by outsiders with both economic and conservation agendas create distinctions between human, animal and floral uses of the land that the inhabitants, the Meratus Dayaks, do not recognise. Tsing argues that they live instead in a 'weedy', category-defying space (a weed is just a plant that grows where it is not supposed to) that in fact constitute 'species-rich landscapes in which human livelihood maintains forests', p 176.
- 7 Science fiction has continued to explore botanical themes. There have been several influential botanical-invasion works, for example: Jack Finney's, *The Body Snatchers* (1955) and John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* (1951). See also Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, eds, *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016; as well as many stories focusing on the exploration of extraterrestrial floral environments or the colonisation of barren worlds with earth flora. There is also a sub-genre of ecological science fiction that explores anxieties about environmental destruction as well as fantasies of human harmony with nature (for example the feminist eco-sci-fi 'Zanne' series by Gwyneth Jones, writing as Ann Halam). Some authors deal with the relationship between race or colonial politics and the environment, for example: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* [1968] and Ursula K Le Guin's, *The Word for World Is Forest* [1976], in which colonists from earth enslave the indigenous population of a planet in the service of extracting timber from the planet's forests.
- 8 Wells, *The War of the Worlds and The Time Machine*, op cit, p 14
- 9 Ibid, p 15
- 10 Jill H Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005, p 6
- 12 Ibid, p 14
- 13 Quoted in Alfred W Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, Series: Studies in Environment and History, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p 11
- 14 The first study I know to rigorously examine the nature–culture dualism was George Boas and Arthur O Lovejoy's study of 1935, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. Although Latour sees the divide as distinctly modern, Boas and Lovejoy's remarkable text exhaustively traces the frequent use of key concepts in antiquity, including the emergence of such seemingly modern ideas as the primitive and primitivism. This of course does not mean that the terms did not take on heightened and, at times, new significances with modernity.
- 15 Although this idea has been foundational to postcolonial theory, the first articulation of it that I am aware of is in Roy Harvey Pearce's often overlooked book *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1953. Pearce was a student of Lovejoy's and recognised how pertinent his teacher's ideas about the primitive and primitivism were to the colonial situation in North America.
- 16 The term new (or neo) materialism emerged in the mid-1990s in the writing of Donna Haraway and Rosa Braidotti and has since been used to encompass a diverse range of thought, including, as often happens, work that

preceded the term itself. Issues addressed range across science and technology studies, feminist and embodiment theory, biopolitics, environmental concerns and much more. Some key texts include: Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007; Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010; Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women and Contemporary Philosophy*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991; Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994; Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002; Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2004; Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, vol 14, no 3, autumn 1988, pp 575–599; Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Routledge, New York, 2015; Donna J Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York, 2015; Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Zone Books, New York, 1997; and Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard

University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, UK, 2009.

17 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Chapter Two, op cit

18 Hal Foster is particularly scathing in his remarks on Latour's post-critical turn in the chapter 'Post Critical?', in *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, Verso, London and New York, 2015, pp 115–124.

19 At the same time, Latour, and those working with his ideas, have also been criticised for failing to include Indigenous perspectives within the critique of the modern nature–culture divide. See Jessica L Horton and Janet Catherine Berlo, 'Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and New Materialisms in Contemporary Art', Special Issue: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology, *Third Text* 120, vol 27, issue 1, January 2013, pp 17–28; and Zoe Todd, 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: "Ontology" Is Just Another Word for Colonialism', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol 29, no 1, March 2016, pp 4–22.

20 Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization*, op cit, p 45

21 Ibid, pp 45–48 and pp 74–93

22 See for example: Robert F Berkhofer Jr, *The White Man's Indian: From Columbus to the Present*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978, p 138. John Locke's theory of property provided a justification for the removal of territory and resources from common possession through the

23 I am referring to Foucault's famous essay on René Magritte, Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, James Harkness, ed and trans, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1983.

24 See Londa Schiebinger's chapter-long discussion 'Linguistic Imperialism', in *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, pp 194–225, in which she unpacks the colonial politics of botanical nomenclature.

25 Quoted in Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, Polity, 1993, p 11. Original from A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture, Doubleday, London and New York, 1989

26 W G Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1955, p 145

27 Quoted in Daniels, *Fields of Vision*, op cit, p 103

28 Edward Young, 'The Centaur Not Fabulous: In Six Letters to a Friend on the Life in Vogue', Letter II, On Pleasure, in *The Complete Works Poetry and Prose of the Rev Edward Young, Volume II*, [1854], Series: Elibron Classics, Adamant Media Corporation, 2006, pp 446–447

29 Isaac Ware, *A Complete Body of Architecture*, T Osborne and J Shipton, London, 1756, p 637

- 30 I am playing on the well known line: '... there is a Third World in every First World, and vice versa', Trinh T Minh-ha, 'Other Peoples: Beyond the "Salvage Paradigm"', in Hal Foster, ed, *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Number One, Bay Press, Seattle, 1987, p 138.
- 31 For more on this process see Casid, 'Sowing Empire', op cit.
- 32 Maria Thereza Alves, 'Seeds of Change', in Simon Read, ed, *Plot: Confluents three*, Series: Confluents, Middlesex University Fine Art Publications, London, 2008, p 44. Her source for this is Sue Shephard, *Seeds of Fortune: A Gardening Dynasty*, Bloomsbury, New York, 2003.
- 33 From the commercial website of the custom iron work company 'Mr. Wrought Iron', Calgary, Alberta: <http://www.mrwroughtiron.ca/index.php/features/security/security-gallery>, accessed 11 May 2016. The quote is no longer available on the website.
- 34 Email from Maria Thereza Alves to the author, 1 June 2016
- 35 Ibid
- 36 See Heli Jutila, 'Seed Bank and Emergent Vascular Flora of Ballast Areas in Reposaari, Finland', *Annales Botanici Fennici*, vol 33, no 3, Finnish Zoological and Botanical Publishing Board, January 1996, pp 165–182, and Jutila, 'Seed Banks of Grazed and Ungrazed Baltic Seashore Meadows', *Journal of Vegetation Science*, vol 9, no 3, 1998, pp 395–408.
- 37 Alves, *Seeds of Change: Marseille*, video, op cit
- 38 Jean Fisher, 'Maria Thereza Alves: Migration's Silent Witness', in Read, *Plot*, op cit, p 36
- 39 Alves, *Seeds of Change*, video, op cit
- 40 Ibid
- 41 Ibid
- 42 Alves, 'Seeds of Change', in Read, *Plot*, op cit, p 39
- 43 Alves, *Seeds of Change*, video, op cit
- 44 Alves, 'Seeds of Change', in Read, *Plot*, op cit, p 45; and Alves, *Seeds of Change*, video, ibid
- 45 Ibid, pp 39–40
- 46 Ibid, p 40
- 47 Ibid, p 42
- 48 Ibid
- 49 Anonymous author(s), *Seeds of Change: A Floating Ballast Seed Garden, Summer–Autumn 2015*, University of Bristol Botanic Garden/Arncliffe/ Bristol City Council, Bristol, 2015, p 10, see http://michelrein.com/cspdocs/editions/files/mta_seeds_of_change.pdf, accessed 14 March 2018
- 50 Ibid, p 10
- 51 Ibid, p 22
- 52 Anonymous author, *Brazilian Artist Sees Her Maritime Creation Brought to Life*, press release, University of Bristol Botanic Garden, Bristol, 5 June 2016, unpaginated (4), see <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/botanic-garden/news/2015/ballast-barge-artist-visit.html>, accessed 14 March 2018
- 53 Ibid, unpaginated (4)
- 54 Fisher, 'The Importance of Words and Actions', op cit, p 9