

K H A D I J A
V O N Z I N N E N B U R G C A R R O L L

T H E A T R U M
B O T A N I C U M :
R E S T I T U T I O N S
T O
N A T U R E ' S
G H O S T S

Theatrum Botanicum is not Botanicum, it is the theater in which a ghost of botany enters. The species is theater, its genus is botany. The title *Theatrum Botanicum* is a binomial like the Linnaean Latin variety central to Uriel Orlow's critique.¹ *Theatrum Botanicum* is not botany as theater either, but a theater in which botany is among a cast of colonial protagonists, the powerful influence of which Orlow portrays. By "vegetalizing" corrupt and self-aggrandizing national diplomatic figures they are playfully undermined.² At the same time the insidious ubiquity of power relations that grip all aspects of even seemingly objective and detached scientific production echoes in a Latin that is nothing but an ironic pretention.³ Indeed, it was the Latin names for the plants in Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town that set *Theatrum Botanicum* in motion. In contrast, the sounds of spoken languages in *What the Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name*, in which Orlow gathered plants through a very complex system, are incommensurable—and intentionally left so.

Orlow returns to lost ghosts that haunt our pasts, that create the pains and fissures, the ruptures and statelessness, of the contemporary world. In *Echoes*, herbaria are haunted witnesses, dancing spectral shadows on Jurassic technologies, overhead projectors, screens, small vitrines. Haunted displays of haunted people, in haunted places that led haunted lives, that hunted other hauntings. This resonance makes the spirits of sites so thick and loud, so heavy—and yet like flowers so delicate, ephemeral, and potentially fertile. In their x-ray-like lightness, the solarized tree portraits in *The Memory of Trees* are what we might expect to see when speaking of the ghostly—some shifty resonance of the past in the present. But specters are not only captured directly on camera; beyond this, they are conjured in the voices and systems that are laid bare in *Theatrum Botanicum*.

These lingering, unresolved presences require voicing, and *What the Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name* produces an oral dictionary of names collected over years. Because the languages themselves are not rigorously distinct in Southern Africa (so as to adhere to the separation that different names imply) and bleed into each other across artificial borders, the names iterated in the sound installation are also not organized according to language or dialect. The standardization of species into singular names, to counter the splitting proliferation that naturally occurs through linguistic diversity around the globe, was one of the aims of Linnaean nomenclature. Throughout the nineteenth century the discipline of botany was highly focused on weeding out the numerous different names for species and gathering them into binomials. This naming process came at a cost for those many plural names that plants had in their indigenous languages, names that refer to their uses, histories, and relationships in their local habitats. Orlow's work is thus significant in affirming linguistic plurality and thereby potentially opening out plants to their multiple local, indigenous relations rather than their globalized commodity status. This is also drawn out through the use of pharmaceutical legal history in the Mafavuke films (*The Crown against Mafavuke* and *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke*),⁴

1 In Orlow's fabulation, the genus of theater has different species, such as theaters of war, botany, and so on, just as there are homo (genus) sapiens (species). When Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus invented the binomial system of classification, he created a hierarchical ranking into which organisms would be grouped (genus) and then sub-classified into species. See Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, *Art in the Time of Colony* (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2014), esp. chapter 3. [Eds.] On the complexities and problematics of this binomial grouping system, see Jason Irving, "Botanical Gardens, Colonial Histories, and Bioprospecting: Naming and Classifying the Plants of the World" in this volume, 73–80.

2 [Eds.] Regarding "flower diplomacy," see Melanie Boehi, "Multispecies Histories of South African Imperial Formations in the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden" in this volume, 81–87.

See also Clelia Coussonnet, "I Name it, I Own it: Memory and Violence in Nature's Exploitation," *Ocula*, December 2, 2016, <https://ocula.com/magazine/reports/i-name-it-i-own-it-memory-and-violence-in-nature's>.

3 [Eds.] See Jason Irving, "Decentering European Medicine: The Colonial Context of the Early History of Botany and Medicinal Plants" in this volume, 129–36.

4 [Eds.] For a discussion of the trial of Mafavuke Ngcobo, see Karen Flint, "Compounding Traditions: From 'Untraditional' Healers to Modern Bioprospectors of South Africa's Medicinal Plants" in this volume, 137–44.

5 For the history of economic botany see Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Useless and Confusing: Vegetable Philosophies and Performances in the Kew Economic Botany," and Caroline Cornish and Mark Nesbitt, "The Life Cycle of a Museum," both in *Botanical Drift: Protagonists of the Invasive Herbarium*, ed. Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 5-18 and 19-28.

6 A particular green ant was used a valuable decongestant in Australia, and a recipe was stolen by a pharmaceutical company from the Aboriginal people, a story depicted in Werner Herzog's 1984 film *Where the Green Ants Dream*.

7 See Laymert Garcia dos Santos, "High-tech Plundering, Biodiversity, and Cultural Erosion: The Case of Brazil," in *Another Knowledge Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (London: Verso, 2007), 151-81.

8 [Eds.] See Bochi, "Multispecies Histories of South African Imperial Formations."

and by pointing to the ways in which economic botany has reduced plants into subjects for mere extraction and breeding.⁵ The strategic exclusion of local indigenous agents in the process of global expansion is expressed in both the increasing control over environments and the ghostly silences that arise between names.

Biopiracy is the new colonial frontier in which indigenous knowledge is patented for profit. The Mafavuke Ngcobo trial in the 1940s and its inversion in contemporary forms of biopiracy highlight the potent admixture of fear and desire for the indigenous other that expresses itself as attempted control, appropriation, and destruction. It also expresses itself in legalese, with attempts to patent any and all forms of indigenous medicinal knowledge, in a direct reversal of the deep and lasting suspicion of the efficacy of African herbalism.⁶ On the other hand, Mafavuke Ngcobo was tried for using Western medical ingredients (without a pharmacist's license) within his *inyanga* (indigenous healing) practice. There are cases like this the world over, of knowledge entwined with the particular lives of those who practice it, then stolen and instrumentalized for capital gains.⁷

Orlow tells the history of the geranium (*Pelargonium*), a plant indigenous to South Africa and later transported to Europe, where it became a national symbol of the Alps, and thus the Switzerland he grew up in. The geranium's uncanny *Gemuetlichkeit* is an index for identity politics in the age of global mobility. Its subaltern kitsch garnishes every Swiss hut, as if there can be no alpine wooden house without the planter box of geraniums on the window. But *Geraniums Are Never Red* reveals that they in fact come from South Africa, and in this perverted proliferation into central European nationalist representation from a migrant state, these plants have essentially become stateless. Is this where the globally mobile contemporary artist's own identification with *Theatrum Botanicum* lies?

The investigation of "botanical nationalism" and "flower diplomacy" through the colonial archive and material caches that Orlow has uncovered, such as the court proceedings of Mafavuke Ngcobo, then forms the basis of his script.⁸ The voices of the trial remain close to the original, while the embodiment goes far beyond a simple re-enactment, as genders and ethnicities are switched to highlight the artifice of the situation —thereby rupturing any attempt at an authentic recreation. Working archivally demands this kind of transformation of evidential discourse back into material reality, through a process of giving bodies to the ghosts Orlow circumscribes in his stories. Archival histories are also gradually and powerfully brought to light in the camera that focuses on a plant so long that the uncanny complexities of its being, with resonances louder than the windblown limbs, stretches the atmosphere of haunted powerlessness and statelessness around it.

What underlies this association of plants with colonialism? Is it because they invade and cross-fertilize, travel, steal space, water and light? Or just because we can anthropomorphize and project onto them? Or is it that they have been here longer, are more ancient, and better adapted?

Plants' bodies move well beyond the human ability to identify; their corporeal histories are more obscure than referential, more resilient than mere by-product, more source than end. The flux of a plant leads to a sense of unstable material that is not simply repatriation (a return to land, re-patria) but will grow into a set of new relations. "All my work is about restitution," says Orlow, on repatriating memory to history.⁹ He shows that restitution is not merely a question of returning material; although the material mediates the process of repatriation, the object falls away in a political act that is about dedicating attention.

Restitution is not just a locus of twentieth-century post-war Europe, as Orlow pointed out when he made the *Benin Project* (2007-2008) about the British colonial pillage of artifacts from the ancient West African Kingdom of Benin.¹⁰ Restitution is not solely the transitional justice afforded to looted Holocaust materials (which have given birth to international restitution law) but extends to the epistemic violence that takes the *known* from the world.¹¹ The knowledge embodied in materials, plants, and their histories can be eradicated if undesirable. So-called weeds that creep in can thereby be said to justify their removal and extermination, while useful plants are interfered with genetically. The chaos of growth can be replaced with planting order, the logic of which justifies the removal of "native" (and sometimes "non-native") species. Racial science stems from evolutionary biology and the same arguments are made for the control of people, plants, and animals in the rationalization of murder.

Orlow's restitutions of intellectual property are enacted through gestures of searching and feeling out that knowledge—and then bringing it to light. Indeed, the archives used in *The Fairest Heritage* and the films celebrating the Kirstenbosch Garden's fiftieth anniversary come literally to light. In *Grey, Green, Gold*, the story of Mandela and his fellow prisoners—as told by Ahmed Kathrada and Laloo Chiba—is lit as white text on a black slide. It is a story in hollow light, in which a garden grows in a prison. There where political dissidents are captured and then slowly given seeds, a means to grow something that indexes their struggle. Can plants participate with their own "resistance credentials" in the South African discourse? *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke (Mafavuke's Tribunal)* ends with the question of land and the problems of its privatization—the lack of botanical access for indigenous communities and the disruption of human-plant relations. This is the politics of the land, not the dream where we might repatriate ourselves to nature.¹²

What has brought the prison and the garden historically and globally together has to do with the liberty of growth we attribute to the plant, and its relation to its surroundings and the sun—and perhaps also its limited capacity (as we perceive it) to escape its habitat.¹³ The seeming impossibility of self-uprooting and movement produces a kind of incredible survival in the limited confines of the plant body. In turn, the prison represents forced confines and enclosed non-growth, the opposite of the garden to the political prisoner, a curtailment of growth and a constraint

⁹ Uriel Orlow in discussion with the author, Skype, February 8, 2018.

¹⁰ See Uriel Orlow, *The Benin Project* (London: future perfect, 2008).

¹¹ On epistemic violence, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014). On repatriation see Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine: Three *Parerga* of a Feather Headdress," in *The In-Betweenness of Things: Materializing Mediation and Movement between Worlds*, ed. Paul Basu (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 25-45.

¹² [Eds.] On the politics of the land in South Africa, including the 1913 Land Act, see Nomusa Makhubu, "Strange and Bitter Crop: Visualizing Eco-racism in South Africa" in this volume, 277-84.

¹³ Donal P. McCracken, "Kirstenbosch: The Final Victory of Botanical Nationalism," *Contree* 38 (1995): 30-35.

14 This resonates with Edmund Clark's recent photographic project, which includes a lightbox of pressed flowers from the prison grounds, installed in the aperture of a cell inside Grendon Prison in the UK; see Edmund Clark, *My Shadow's Reflection* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2017).

15 Greatly expanding the vocabulary of conceptual, postcolonial practices as defined by Hélio Oiticica and Renée Green, Orlow's mix of political art also shifts the work from the typical botanical art. In its most extreme, this work consists of illustrations of plants for scientists, though there is also a rich history of the environmentally motivated plant artists, such as herman de vries. Zheng Bo's research into the political plant histories of China shares affinities with Orlow's strategies. The artists around the Paris Betonsalon (such as Otobong Nkanga) with whom Orlow has exhibited are perhaps also comparable, with works like Camille Henrot's *Is it possible to be a revolutionary and like flowers?* made for La Triennale Intense Proximity at Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2012. See Mélanie Bouteloup, Anna Colin, Françoise Vergès, Serge Volper, *Tropicomania: The Social Life of Plants*, <http://www.betonsalon.net/IMG/pdf/tropicomania-publication-web-2.pdf>.

16 Richard Drayton, "Rhodes Must Not Fall? Imperial Propaganda as Postcolonial 'Heritage,'" forthcoming in *Third Text*. Paper presented at *Exhibiting the Experience of Empire*, British Museum, London, March 9, 2018.

17 On the garden as a well-preserved index of colonial manifestations, see Raqs Media Collective, Natasha Eaton, Germaine Greer, Bergit Arends & Sunoj D., in *Botanical Drift: Protagonists of the Invasive Herbarium*, ed. Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018).

on the proliferation of ideas in the world. However utopian our attribution of freedom to plants is, in the practice of making a garden we hear Mandela and his fellow inmates find a small escape from the harsh realities of prison. For the otherness of plants can provide a sense of growth despite the control, restriction, and enclosure.¹⁴ Botanical proliferation and change is indeed surprising in the context of human control and the social destruction of environments, and the delicacy of botany in even the most punitive, carceral, and colonial environments can become a source of great hope for humans. As if we might aspire to the same resilience as plants, that small expressions of life can form cracks in concrete is a popular if sentimental cliché.

How then can botany be a subject for a political art practice, we might ask, especially considering the baggage of Romantic and religious associations relating to the landscape and to Eden?¹⁵ *Theatrum Botanicum* dispels these myths by showing that there is no outside to the garden anymore, there is no prelapsarian space to contrast with contemporary injustices on earth. Orlow's work evidences how even in "nature" we are not outside the world of neoliberal exploitation, but rather in a postlapsarian collapse of Eden into a colony. Plants are also in service of the global economic apparatus of extraction, accumulation, and acceleration—the quiet resistance that we sense from them as we become vegetalized by incarceration is also at least partly an illusion.

Theatrum Botanicum unearths ecological histories that are more indicative than studies of singular plants, yet also more ironic than fiction. For example, *Grey, Green, Gold* tells the story of Mandela's Gold, a new type of yellow (rather than orange) *Strelitzia Reginae* ("bird of paradise") flower renamed from Kirstenbosch Gold in Mandela's honor after his release from prison. The flower's head is wrapped in a cage to protect it from the predatory Anglo Eastern Grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*), as shown by Orlow in one of the photographs that is part of this installation. This invasive species was in turn imported by Cecil Rhodes, who embodies Anglo-Saxon Homo sapiens' invasion of South Africa.¹⁶ While Mandela was in prison for political work to undo that colonial legacy, in the Kirstenbosch botanical garden that Rhodes donated to the state, the flower and the squirrel bred in delicious opposition. And to this day, Mandela and Rhodes, flower and squirrel, continue to eat away at each other's social and political legacies. The Rhodes sculpture that lorded over Kirstenbosch from the heights of Table Mountain has meanwhile been stored in a secret location to protect it from the Rhodes Must Fall protests, but in the garden plants with their Latin names still blossom. The garden is presumed to be above politics, just as botanical art is considered a safe haven for conservative illustration.¹⁷ European explorer botanists are deeply implicated in the process of colonization, and their ghosts haunt Orlow's videos. Their veneer of delicate expertise was Orlow's way into creating the critical theater of botany, a miniature world inside a world that is often too large, universalizing, or seemingly complete to have analytical detail. Orlow's choice of plants

as the material with which to present historical hauntings allows him to assemble a complex cast that overwhelms the control he might have otherwise had as an auteur. At a moment when cultural appropriation is inflammatory, he deliberately articulates networks of responsibility that go beyond his immediate and historical involvement. If thinking materially delineates a field, a vast *Theatrum Botanicum*, the artist is careful not to impose his own structure. For if the history homogenizing global difference into Enlightenment classification is to be countered, then other languages must instead be used. Hence Orlow's use of "latent archives" that are embedded in landscapes or plants, rather than the archives of state institutions.

Theatrum Botanicum looks obliquely, rather than directly, for politics can be scorching and debilitating. On the edges where the plants still grow, there a contour is given to shadows. With delicate pointedness, the plants are shaped by those who tend them. On their stems are tags like slaves. Names they did not give themselves. Their growth is indifferent. There is a sense that they were here first and some will outlive even the most vicious state corruption.¹⁸ The whole colonial project in Southern Africa started with The Dutch East India Company's Gardens in Cape Town, established to supply vessels on voyages that expanded the colonial empires. Thus gardens are not even such an oblique view on political life—they are the territory, the ground, the fertile land on which the settler colonies feed.

¹⁸ On the beginning of plant life in cyanobacteria, see Mihnea Mircan, "Figure 1," and Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, "Living Paint, Even after the Death of the Colony," in *Allegory of the Cave Painting, Painting*, ed. Mihnea Mircan (Milan: Mousse Press, 2015), 12–89. On corruption, of course, there are countless cases of species that have been and will be made extinct through the mismanagement of nature.

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