


Sensing Bodies

Being, Feeling, and, Breathing with Plants



A wide-angle photograph of a dirt road that stretches from the foreground into the distance, flanked by rows of young palm trees. The sky is bright blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene suggests a plantation or agricultural landscape.

Each of the plants presented in this installation are entangled with histories of violence, dispossession, and slavery that took place on plantations in the state of Georgia. They reflect a system of extraction that established modern economic structures and unequal power dynamics that continue to exploit both humans and non-humans and create unequal effects locally and globally.



Exhibit 1 | Being with Plants

In this exhibit, the indigo plants invite participants to approach and come into close physical proximity. The physical closeness calls attention to the plant and its long and complex history of cultivation for its alluring blue dye that first led to the legalization of slavery in Georgia.

Indigo

Indigo is one of the oldest dyes in the world and was used in ancient China, India, Africa, and South America from up to 6000 years ago.

In the 18th century, indigo became a valuable cash crop in the US south, mainly as an export to the British textile industry. Indigo cultivation was labor-intensive and required significant expertise to grow and process. This was made possible through the labor and knowledge of enslaved people. Enslaved Black people were brought to Georgia, many from the West Indies, where indigo had been cultivated for centuries. They were forced to work in giant brick vats where the fermenting smell and stagnant water attracted flies and mosquitoes, and with them, the constant threat of cholera, yellow fever, and malaria.

“Although indigo would not have remained on the hands of the slaves who worked the indigo processing plants, the indigo was still poisonous. The chemical elements that seeped into the pores of the enslaved contributed to slaves’ deaths. More than metaphors, these indigo “scars” indexed forms and orders of violence exceeding both the capacity of the human eye as well as traditional ideations of slavery as labor.”

— Tiffany King in “The Labor of (Re)reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(ly)” on Julie Dash’s portrayal of indigo-stained hands in the film *Daughters of the Dust*.



Exhibit 2 | Feeling with Plants

In this exhibit, the tobacco plant invites participants to touch its soft, tender leaves. The embodied and reciprocal connection through physical touch probes an ambivalent multi-species intimacy that includes a reflection on its labor-intensive cultivation and harvest requiring extended and often uncomfortable physical contact, which largely relies on exploitative labor.

Tobacco

Before European colonization of the Americas, the tobacco plant was used as a medicinal plant by various indigenous peoples on the continent. By the 17th century, tobacco became a profitable commodity in the colonies as an export to Europe, but its production relied on the plantation system and its brutal forced labor to benefit white planters. It was on the backs of enslaved Black people that American agriculture grew. Tobacco is an extremely labor-intensive crop. Its demand spurred plantation slavery in America.

Today, the tobacco industry is still largely run by companies in Europe and the USA that have been accused of exploiting cheap labor in low-income countries. They also stand accused of employing racially predatory marketing that disproportionately target Black Americans.

“To unpack the different levels of racialized environment we need to go back the long sixteenth century, the era of Western “discoveries,” of the first colonial empires, of genocides, of the slave trade and slavery, the modern world mobilized the work of commodified human beings and uncommodified extra-human nature in order to advance labor productivity within commodity production. Racialized chattel were the capital that made capitalism. Africa was forced to share its social product—human beings—with the Atlantic slave system.”

— Françoise Vergès in “Racial Capitalocene”



Exhibit 3 | Breathing with Plants

In the third exhibit, Breathing with Plants, rice plants invite participants to breathe in its scent and its embodied histories. The material exchange of breath blurs bodily boundaries and foregrounds the co-constitutive nature of people and plants, bodies and environments, reminding us of different ways of relating to more-than-humans that existed before colonial, capitalist forms of being.

Rice

Rice was introduced to Georgia in the late 17th century by enslaved Africans who brought with them knowledge of cultivating and processing rice from the West African coast. Rice cultivation was among the most punishing and demanding, but also most technical, of any agricultural production. The physical hazards of growing rice included the threat of drowning and contracting malaria from the flooded fields, while the skills required of the rice workers involved a highly developed knowledge of water management, irrigation techniques, and the intricacies of planting and harvesting the crop.

“Many slaves advanced a theoretical and practical framework that guided human interaction with the nonhuman world toward fostering multispecies well-being. Its approach recognized social and ecological difference, how they were intimately intertwined and also mediated by various forms of social, ecological, and spiritual power.”

—Janae Davis et al. in “Anthropocene , Capitalocene , ... Plantationocene ? : A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises”

“...the plantation became key to transforming the lands of no one into the lands of someone, with black forced labor propelling an economic structure that would underpin town and industry development in the Americas.”

- Katherine McKittrick in *Plantation Futures*

“The extreme violence dealt to Black bodies is recorded on the earth. To live in the afterlife of slavery is to be a time traveler, so long as one knows that the soil holds memory.”

- R.L. Martens in *How the Soil Remembers Plantation Slavery*

Suggested Readings

Davis, J., Moulton, A. A., Sant, L. Van, & Williams, B. (2019). Anthropocene , Capitalocene , ... Plantationocene ? : A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises. *Geography Compass*, 13 (November 2018), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438>

Hartman, S. (1997) *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in 19th Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press

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Vergès, F. (2017). Racial Capitalocene. In G. T. Johnson, & A. Lubin (Eds.), *Futures of Black Radicalism* (pp. 72–82). London; New York: Verso.

Wynter, S. (1971). Novel and history, plot and plantation. *Savacou*, 5, 95–102.

About the Project

Sensing Bodies is an art installation consisting of a series of interactive exhibits that foreground relationships between people and plants through biodata displays. The exhibits highlight our embodied encounters as co-constructed and reciprocal, inviting reflection on our connection to more-than-human communities while drawing attention to deeper landscape histories and sociopolitical entanglements that shape these relationships.

For more information, visit
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