The Plant at the End of the World: Precious Okoyomon's Invasive Art

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Two summers ago, the cavernous last room of the sprawling main site of the Venice Biennale was given over to an installation by the artist Precious Okoyomon (fig. 1). Entering through a small antechamber that marked off the area from the rest of the exhibition with a heavy, black drape, the visitor was suddenly engulfed by the warm and humid environment of the hangar-like space. An indoor garden composed largely of a notorious invasive plant, kudzu, whose sale and cultivation are now prohibited in many areas of the United States, the installation also contained soil, sugarcane, flowing water, sculptures, and a host of creatures such as beetles and butterflies. Kudzu was here, as in past works by Okoyomon—a Nigerian American multimedia artist, poet, and chef born in London and raised in Ohio—the star of the show. Indeed, the Biennale installation incorporated and expanded elements of a previous kudzu installation, *Earthseed* (2020), shown at the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt during the pandemic. The artist's choice of a plant invader as the living backbone of these installations is informed by both kudzu's fascinating biology and its winding cultural history. A valued plant with a long tradition of medicinal and economic uses in its native China, Korea, and Japan, kudzu traveled to the United States in the late nineteenth century and subsequently acquired additional layers of significance in its host country. From ornamental exotic to promising forage crop, kudzu morphed in the early twentieth century into a government-sponsored

The author would like to thank Peter R. Crane, Thomas B. F. Cummins, William (Ned) Friedman, Lucas Mertehikian, and Diana Sorensen for many vital conversations about plants and people—and the editors of *Critical Inquiry* for their generous feedback as this essay took shape.

Critical Inquiry, volume 50, number 4, Summer 2024.
 https://doi.org/10.1086/730350

FIGURE 1. Precious Okoyomon, installation view of *To See the Earth before the End of the World* (2022), at the fifty-ninth International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, "The Milk of Dreams" (2022). Photo by Clelia Cadamuro. Courtesy of the artist.

panacea for the rampant soil erosion brought on by cotton plantations in the American South. The vine quickly outstripped humans to take over large swaths of the landscape, smothering other vegetation and interfering with biodiversity and land productivity. In this protean vine, Okoyomon has found a potent vehicle for exploring legacies of capitalism and colonialism and their human and environmental toll. Not only does the artist's use of kudzu illuminate the nexus of race, migration, and ecological harm in the American South, but it also speaks to broader nature-human relations in the Anthropocene while putting a spotlight on plants as an emerging focus of critical inquiry and aesthetic practice.

This is a plant moment. In the last decade or so, critical theory has taken inspiration from ecofeminism, animal studies, and critiques of the Anthropocene to broaden our ethical engagement with more-than-human beings

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and reclaim them as historical actants.[1] Among the biological and geological entities that populate this broader field of inquiry, from mosquitoes to volcanoes, plants occupy an increasingly important spot. Often relegated to the background, their current salience is powered by the urgency of accelerating extinctions alongside the slow violence of climate change and the spread of invasive species that render plants crucial indices of change, collapse, and resilience. Their critical significance is also fueled by the ongoing historical reassessment of the legacies of European colonialism, related practices of extractive capitalism, and their environmental and human impact.[2] Beginning in the early modern period, the influx of global specimens into European collections, the networks of botanical gardens as laboratories for transplantation, the vast archives they engendered, and the plantation system that grew out of these developments triggered vast voluntary and forced migrations. Ostensibly sessile, plants travel constantly through their adaptations for nourishment and reproduction. In the modern period, this movement occurred in tandem with the massive displacement of people. The history of these plant transfers has grown over the past fifty years beyond the Columbian Exchange to acknowledge the botanical contributions of enslaved people of the African Diaspora and the erased or appropriated knowledge of indigenous communities.[3] As energy producers bridging the

1. On the *actant* as description of the action of nonhuman beings and things without the attribution of anthropomorphic agency or intention, see Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C., 2010). Classic statements of ecofeminism include Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, 1990); Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991); and Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York, 1993). On more-than-human, multispecies ethics, see Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159–65; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, 2013); and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, N.J., 2015). Environmental historians have made major contributions to this shift; see, for example, J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914* (New York, 2010).

2. See Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven, Conn., 2000); Lucile H. Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* (New Haven, Conn., 2002); *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*, ed. Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan (Philadelphia, 2005); and Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

3. See Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn., 1972); Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley, 2009); and Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, Calif., 2017).

inorganic and living worlds, plants are crucial to the planet's life systems and the complex multispecies relationships within what Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour have called "natureculture"—the intermingling of human activity and nonhuman actors and processes in the Anthropocene.[4] And lest we assume that the porosity between nature and culture is novel and exceptional, renewed attention to indigenous knowledge systems has relocated plants within long-standing relationships of kinship and reciprocity that exceed anthropocentric models of cognition and ethics.[5]

In the humanities, the new emphasis on plants has taken the form of reclaiming them as legitimate objects of critical inquiry against a long tradition of theoretical neglect.[6] The scientific emphasis on taxonomic control of the plant world and philosophical assumptions about lack of sentience and agency have combined to relegate plants to the margins of critical discourse. Plant thinkers such as Michael Marder and Jeffrey Nealon have emphasized "the strange and consistent elision of plants" in philosophical thought (*PTB*, p. 11). A long tradition of Western metaphysics demotes them to the bottom of the scale of being due to their lack of a face, their seeming immobility, or their semblance of ineluctable captivity by their environment.[7] If, according to Matthew Hall, critical plant studies owe much to animal studies, Nealon finds an "amount of outright hostility toward thinking about vegetable life . . . within animal studies itself" and suggests that the "plant, rather than the animal, functions as that form of life forgotten and abjected within a dominant regime of humanist biopower" (*PTB*, pp. xi, x). In this abjection, which underpins the extreme commodification of plants as food or biofuel, Marder locates "the ideological roots of both the deepening environmental crisis and the exploitation of plants" (*PTP*, p. 6).

A different line of inquiry has eschewed a universalist approach to plant ontology as subaltern critique of Western metaphysics in favor of plant

4. See Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago, 2003) and *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, N.C., 2016), and Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Porter (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

5. See Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, 2013), and Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (New York, 2000).

6. On the ontological devaluation of plants, see Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York, 2013), hereafter abbreviated *PTP*; Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany, N.Y., 2011); and Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (Stanford, Calif., 2016), hereafter abbreviated *PTB*.

7. On perceptual challenges to our understanding of plants, see James H. Wandersee and Elizabeth E. Schussler, "Preventing Plant Blindness," *American Biology Teacher* 61 (Feb. 1999): 82, 84, 86; and Francis Hallé, *In Praise of Plants*, trans. David Lee (Portland, Ore., 2002).

biographies that double as important cultural and environmental histories.[8] By focusing on nutmeg, for instance, Amitav Ghosh recently tied together early modern practices of settler colonialism—the exploitation or extermination of indigenous populations, abetted by "terraforming" or the transformation of local landscapes and ecologies—to a vision of the "world-as-resource" whose limitless extractive logic leads directly to our current environmental predicament. Ghosh's parable links the micro to the macro through an analogy of nutmeg as a "planet . . . [that] can never be seen in its entirety at one time."[9] Attention to what Michael Pollan has called "the botany of desire"—the commingled relationships of plants and people both in place and on the move—allows Ghosh to trace how plant itineraries illuminate trajectories of imperialism and the movement of capital.[10] And because the lives of humans and nonhumans are so thoroughly entangled, the current historical trend of decentering the human as historical actor is also framed as a planetary ethical imperative: "the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans . . . a task that is at once aesthetic and political."[11]

Artists like Okoyomon are responding to this call for a new aesthetics by engaging with live plant materials as art. By bringing growing plants into the gallery, they also interrogate a long tradition of botanical representation that figures plants as inert, fully knowable objects of inquiry. Paradoxically, by focusing on a plant that is hypervisible alongside roads and embankments as it envelops, conceals, and smothers other vegetation, Okoyomon questions the fantasy of access that, according to Michel Foucault, underpins the classical system of representation whose visual manifestation is the herbarium specimen or botanical illustration while its discursive expression is Linnaean binomial classification.[12] For Foucault, as for Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, botany was the paradigmatic science of the early modern "truth-to-nature" regime of visibility that assumed nature was an object amenable to representation and control.[13] The fact that plant specimens

8. These cultural histories of plants draw on the concepts of "the social life" and "cultural biography"; see Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York, 1986). See also the recent exhibitions *Botanical Drift* at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (2014) and *Tropicomania: The Social Life of Plants* at Bétonsalon (2012); see *Botanical Drift: Protagonists of the Invasive Herbarium*, ed. Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll (London, 2017).

9. Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago, 2021), pp. 76, 11.

10. See Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York, 2001).

11. Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, p. 204.

12. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. pub. (New York, 1994).

13. See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2010).

could be more easily preserved and rendered portable than animals, in tandem with conventions of botanical representation that collapsed seasonality into a gathering of stem, leaf, flower, and seed in one frame, contributed to this assumption of plants as fully visible and knowable. Not only does kudzu resist the construction of the plant as "a pure and transparent object for thought as tabulation," but the vine's cultural history reveals the limited nature of our scientific knowledge of plants and their ecosystems, while its invasiveness undoes illusions of human control.[14] Among the contemporary artists working with living plants, Okoyomon's practice is particularly compelling in choosing to work with a reviled invasive.[15] Moreover, Okoyomon actively brings that invasive plant into the gallery, a space traditionally banned to living organisms other than humans. In natural history collections, plants are in a state of suspended animation, organized behind a vitrine or in drawers according to taxonomic principles that uphold the distance between viewer and objectified nature. Okoyomon's immersive installations unfold instead in dialogue with a growing plant known for its elision of human control—moreover, a plant whose dual character as soil remedy and ecological menace render it an ambiguous and disruptive presence. The kudzu installations thus offer a provocative complement to contemporary theoretical investigations of plants while also being incredibly generative for current thinking about natureculture relationships. Rob Nixon has recently accounted for the surge in public interest in plants as an antidote to the dominant neoliberal ideology of self-interested individualism in the wake of new research on tree communication and cooperation.[16] While Okoyomon's art also enfolds a critique of colonialism and individualism, the artist's choice of kudzu is a less feel-good example and perhaps for that reason an even more suggestive entry point into plant-human relations and the role of art in the Anthropocene.

Invading the Gallery: *Earthseed* (2020)

What does it mean for an artist to bring live plant matter into the gallery? Okoyomon is not alone in engaging with the aesthetic, environmental, and ethical significance of plants.[17] Indeed, contemporary artistic practice runs

14. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 277.

15. See *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene*, ed. Tsing et al. (Stanford, Calif. 2020), feralatlas.org/

16. See Rob Nixon, "The Less Selfish Gene: Forest Altruism, Neoliberalism, and the Tree of Life," *Environmental Humanities* 13 (Nov. 2021): 348–71.

17. On plants in contemporary art, see Giovanni Aloi, *Why Look at Plants? The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*, ed. Aloi (Boston, 2019); Yota Batsaki, "The Apocalyptic Herbarium: Mourning and Transformation in Anselm Kiefer's *Secret of the Ferns*," *Environmental*

the gamut of aliveness, from Anselm Kiefer's desiccated ferns presented as herbarium specimens in *Secret of the Ferns* (2007) and his carbonized sunflowers in *Ages of the World* (2014) to Mark Dion's charismatic corpse of a hemlock tree hooked up to a life-support system in *Neukom Vivarium* (2006). It ranges from Kapwani Kiwanga's decaying flower installations replicating diplomatic arrangements in *Flowers for Africa* (2014–) to Otobong Nkanga's use of potted jasmine plants carried by human performers in *Diaspore* (2020). Okoyomon magnifies this aliveness and movement of the plant, its vibrant materiality, in the unchecked proliferation of the invasive that escapes the artist's control in the gallery. Kudzu has been reviled for overtaking and smothering other plants in the wild and is thus a sinister foil to the "ontic exuberance and uncontrollable efflorescence of vegetal life" (*PTP*, p. 12). While plant theorists like Marder posit a vegetal ontology of embeddedness within an economy of expenditure and reciprocity, Okoyomon's installations acknowledge the plant's uncanniness and out of placedness, its ability to carpet and conceal, overcome and smother.[18] Unwanted, seen as a menace to the native flora, kudzu exemplifies the dark side of the landscape—especially, as we shall see, in its association with the ghostly displaced and disappeared bodies of the plantation system.[19] Running contrary to the celebration of entanglement in current critical discourse about plants, kudzu is deeply disturbing and disruptive. This uncanny power makes it a powerful *portal*—Okoyomon's term—to new ecologies and sensibilities called forth by our damaged planet.

No instance of plant mobility provokes more resistance than the spread of invasives. Our response to them is mired in paradox. Invasive species are carried around the globe and often thrive in landscapes disrupted by humans, yet they escape and challenge our putative mastery over nature. They interfere not only with capitalist productivity but even with seemingly benign, but deeply economistic, notions of sustainability and "ecosystem services." Invasives are therefore marked out among all plant categories for the

Humanities 13 (Nov. 2021): 391–413; and Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh, "The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions," *Third Text* 32, nos. 2–3 (2018): 163–75.

18. On the cultural and environmental history of kudzu in the American South, see Derek H. Alderman, "Channing Cope and the Making of a Miracle Vine," *Geographical Review* 94 (Apr. 2004): 157–77 and "When an Exotic Becomes Native: Taming, Naming, and Kudzu as Regional Symbolic Capital," *Southeastern Geographer* 55 (Spring 2015): 32–56. I am grateful to Timur Hammond for bringing Alderman's work to my attention. See also J. Winberry and David M. Jones, "Rise and Decline of the 'Miracle Vine': Kudzu in the Southern Landscape," *Southeastern Geographer* 13 (Nov. 1973): 61–70.

19. I borrow the term "dark side of the landscape" from John Barrell's study of the rural poor in eighteenth-century visual culture in the wake of the enclosure movement and the extinction of common rights; see John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840* (New York, 1980).

most negative forms of personification. The language we use to describe them is that of aliens and intruders, ecological villains that invite militaristic discourses of eradication.[20] Because their triumph is both abetted by humans and oblivious to human ends, invasives offer a unique lens on the accelerated exploitation of nature in the modern period. Ironically, as Alfred Crosby was one of the first to argue, foreign weeds were the constant companions of European arrivals in the Americas, their success intimately tied to the exploitative practices of white settler colonialism.[21] More recently, Anna Tsing has proposed that the feral proliferation of invasives and pests is the other side of plantation monoculture, whose modular simplification of complex ecosystems paves the way for opportunistic intruders.[22] The scandalous mobility of invasives unsettles us because it exposes the worst excesses of the Anthropocene.

Okoyomon has chosen to work with the most notorious of invasives in the United States. Kudzu has been lovingly described and illustrated as a useful resource its native East Asian context, where it has been valued for millennia as a medicinal plant, a resource against famines, and raw material for textile production.[23] Yet kudzu has assumed the opposite character of a pest in its adopted territory as "the vine that ate the South."[24] So iconic is its presence in the Southern landscape that kudzu has become an integral element of Southern Gothic, appearing on R.E.M.'s *Murmur* (1983) album cover and, consistently, in the haunting images of William Christenberry (1936–2016), a

20. On the negative personification of invasives, see Richard Mabey, *Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plants* (New York, 2010); Banu Subramaniam, "The Aliens Have Landed! Reflections on the Rhetoric of Biological Invasions," *Meridians* 2, no. 1 (2001): 26–40; and, in relation to theories of eugenics and blood-and-soil German nationalism, Gert Gröning and Joachim Wolshke-Bulmahn, "The Native Plant Enthusiasm: Ecological Panacea or Xenophobia?" *Arnoldia* 62, no. 4 (2004): 20–28. On the militaristic discourse of invasion biology, see Brendon M. H. Larson, "The War of the Roses: Demilitarizing Invasion Biology," *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 3 (Nov. 2005): 495–500.

21. See Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (New York, 2004).

22. See Tsing, Andrew S. Mathews, and Nils Bubandt, "Patchy Anthropocene: Landscape Structure, Multispecies History, and the Retooling of Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 60, no. S20 (2019): S186–197.

23. See Nagatsune Ōkura, *Seikatsu roku* (Kyoto, 1828), an early nineteenth-century Japanese treatise on agricultural improvement entirely dedicated to kudzu. The plant has been part of the *materia medica* of China, Korea, and Japan for millennia. Kudzu's first appearance in the US, in the Japanese pavilion of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition, was as an ornamental vine. See Batsaki and Philip Gant, "The Secret Life of Kudzu," *Scientific American*, 1 Aug. 2019, blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/the-secret-life-of-kudzu/

24. See "Kudzu: The Invasive Vine that Ate the South," The Nature Conservancy, 9 Aug. 2019, www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/indiana/stories-in-indiana/kudzu-invasive-species/

FIGURE 2. William Christenberry, *High Kudzu, near Akron, Alabama, 1978*. Copyright William Christenberry.

pioneer of color photography whose family roots were in Hale County, Alabama (fig. 2).[25]

It is not a coincidence that kudzu's highest concentrations are found in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, the former Cotton Belt. Okoyomon frequently alludes to kudzu's role in the American South as the successor of cotton. The invasive's unwanted presence, its hypervisiblity and simultaneous opacity, compel the artist to unearth past histories of violence, displacement, and attempts at remediation written into the landscape of former cotton plantations. An earlier installation, *A Drop of Sun Under the Earth* (2019), featured winged stuffed animals reminiscent of angels that hung ominously from trees planted in piles of dirt—lynching trees—while cotton and cottonseed rained down from the ceiling. Okoyomon's landscapes of kudzu embody what Anna Arabindan-Kesson has described, with reference to cotton, as "history hidden in plain sight."[26] The vine's proliferation

25. See, for example, Hall Crowther, *Cathedrals of Kudzu: A Personal Landscape of the South* (Baton Rouge, La., 2000).

26. Anna Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World* (Durham, N.C., 2021), p. 3.

FIGURE 3. Precious Okoyomon, *Earthseed* (2020). Zollamt, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. Photo by Axel Schneider. Courtesy of the artist.

maps an area scarred by cotton monoculture, ravaged by the plantation economy, buffeted by ignorance about its ecology, and reshaped by government intervention.

Okoyomon's first large-scale use of kudzu was an installation at the Zollamt MMK in Frankfurt between 22 August and 1 November 2020 (fig. 3). The exhibition featured a massive planting of kudzu in the gallery space that was named *Resistance Is an Atmospheric Condition.* The exhibition's overall title, *Earthseed*, was taken from a fictional religion in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), which teaches that Earth's seed can be transplanted anywhere and will adapt and survive. Butler is a pioneer of the Afrofuturist school; her tales of conquest, racial conflict, hybridity, and miscegenation are allegories of the colonial and settler histories that still shape the American present.[27] These dystopian narratives—often located in a postapocalyptic landscape of nuclear, pandemic, and/or environmental catastrophe—are rendered even more disturbing and complex by the recurrent theme of forced commingling of species. In Butler's short story "Amnesty," humans are both forced into and derive comfort from being "enfolded" (engulfed) in the swarmy, plant-like Communities, assemblages of codependent individual alien entities that are dismissed by

27. See Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (Urbana, Ill., 2016), p. 2.

hostile humans as "weeds."[28] These invaders are both powerful (they send back, undetonated, half the nuclear weapons directed at them in a global attack while reserving the other half as collateral) and apparently stranded, doomed to make a home in Earth's deserts. Despite a violent and cruel beginning of abduction and experimentation practiced by the new arrivals, the narrator (herself a human abductee) insists that the future is one of necessary coexistence. In keeping with Butler's values of "mutation, flux, and motion," the invasive species in Okoyomon's installation is not maligned as a noxious weed but celebrated as an alien transplant that survives and thrives in its new environment.[29]

Okoyomon's choice of exhibition name makes explicit a deep affinity between Butler's key tropes and the vine's Southern trajectory. Kudzu's invasive behavior combines traits of Butler's protagonists, bent upon survival at all odds, and her aggressive and resilient aliens. The vine's ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen and use it for its purposes—with the help of symbiotic bacteria inside its roots—allows it to colonize inhospitable sites where other plants find it hard to grow. Its extraordinarily rapid growth under favorable conditions along with its capacity for rapid leaf movements to maximize solar exposure test the ontological assumption that plants are immobile, non-predatory organisms. Kudzu also resembles Butler's science fiction in its extraordinarily versatile and adaptable reproduction strategies. The vine grows beautiful and fragrant violet flowers when able to climb upward—indeed, it is this ornamental character that first brought it to the attention of landholders in the American South. However, absent a supporting structure, kudzu eschews the costly investment in woody infrastructure to creep close to the ground and proliferate clonally, its stem sprouting roots at regular intervals when touching the soil. When it does climb, kudzu resembles those parasitic aliens that envelop and smother their hosts. Dystopian scenarios of climate change only appear to favor kudzu, whose range in the US may be expanding due to global warming while its growth is enhanced by rising carbon dioxide levels.

Kudzu's current status in this country as a noxious weed partly accounts for *Earthseed*'s location in Germany, as the vine could not be legally grown in the US. Okoyomon describes kudzu as an "outlaw" in America, its cultivation an act of "ecoterrorism."[30] For the Frankfurt exhibition, seed had to

28. Octavia E. Butler, "Amnesty," in *Kindred, Fledgling, Collected Stories*, ed. Canavan and Nisi Shawl (New York, 2020), pp. 670, 676.

29. "Precious Okoyomon," Museum für Moderne Kunst, mmk.art/en/whats-on/precious-okoyomon

30. Precious Okoyomon, interview with author, 16 Jan. 2021.

be imported from India through a lengthy and laborious process, with an additional group of starter plants brought in from Poland. A local farmer was enlisted to grow kudzu from seed. Great attention had to be paid to the quality of the soil that was brought into the gallery. Kudzu's invasiveness might suggest that it takes off unaided but—as we will see with its planting in the American South—it had to be carefully coaxed into the early stages of growth. The exhibition's complicated displacement of the "vine that ate the South" to a foreign location is ironic given the vine's rampant proliferation in its host territory, where it has become—knotty foreign name and all—the paradigmatic instance of the stranger at the heart of home.

Even when reduced to the anthropomorphic stereotype of the alien intruder, plants leave a residue in discourse: a grudging acknowledgment of their otherness that opens a space of desire and kinship. James Dickey's poem "Kudzu," published in the *New Yorker* in 1963, is replete with the military metaphors that have come to characterize invasion biology.[31] Dickey, author of the novel *Deliverance* (1970), served with the US Army Air Forces during the Second World War and the Korean War. His poem opens with kudzu as the stealthy enemy from the East: "Japan invades." It continues with the vines running down the banks they were "Supposed to keep from eroding" and up telephone poles silently shrieking as they are smothered by "Green, mindless, unkillable ghosts." Simultaneously alien, zombie, and specter, the plant becomes a synecdoche for Southern Gothic: "In Georgia, the legend says / That you must close your windows / At night to keep it out of the house." The alien menace tapping at the window has overtaken the landscape of home: "The night the kudzu has / Your pasture, you sleep like the dead / Silence has grown Oriental."[32]

In Dickey's poem, kudzu is associated with snakes as kindred chthonic elements united by "the huge circumstance of concealment" and threatening the farmer's productive use of the land. Eventually hogs are brought in to kill the snakes and the farmer is instructed to wait for the frost "When, at the merest touch / Of cold, the kudzu turns / Black, withers inward, and dies." Yet even as the vine retreats from Gothic terror to dead branches, there is an intimation of regret for its absent vitality. The narrator recalls that "energy also flowed / To you from the knee-high meadow," and the militaristic metaphors give way to nostalgic symbiosis, a fusion reminiscent of science fiction's interspecies hybrids: "It was as though you had / A green sword twined among / The veins of your growing right arm," conferring "Such strength as you would not believe / If you stood alone in a proper / Shaved

31. See James Dickey, "Kudzu," *New Yorker*, 18 May 1963, p. 44.
32. Ibid.

field among your safe cows."[33] Even at its most reactionary, replete with orientalist and racist metaphors, the poem inadvertently slips into a vision of entanglement with the nonhuman and grudging admiration for its strength and vitality. The energy flowing from this mingling of species would be otherwise unavailable to the farmer as lord of creation, surrounded by a domesticated nature that exists to be disciplined, pruned ("shaved") and rendered safe for his domination and exploitation.[34]

The exhibition reversed the trajectory of Dickey's poem, with the vine taking over while humans retreated. *Earthseed* was scheduled to open in March 2020 but, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was postponed by six months during which the kudzu grew luxuriously in the empty space, encircling the radiators and climbing out of the windows. Its growth was assisted by the warm and humid internal environment and the plentiful light that came in through the windows. The vine, in turn, supported an emerging ecosystem that included snail eggs, earthworms, and spider webs. By the end of the exhibition, kudzu was escaping the confines of the gallery. This resistance to containment was also an expression of resilience welcomed by the artist who factored the vine's growth into the installation, reinforced by the unpredictable delay caused by the pandemic. As a result of those additional six months, the vine had to be pruned back a few times so as not to overwhelm prematurely the other key element of the exhibition.

Spread out among the plantings, *Earthseed* also featured six figures which presided over the space as "guardians of the kudzu."[35] Collectively, they were entitled *Open Circle Lived Relation*. Inspired by the dolls that the artist's grandmother used to make, their worn, matted texture and brown color recall a teddy bear (used in other works by Okoyomon), generating an affect that is both uncanny and comforting. Made of raw wool, yarn, dirt, and blood, the sculptures are present yet ghostly. With few distinctive, individual features—an extended arm here, bands of red or yellow fabric there—the figures are unmistakably human in their contours yet rise from mounds of soil that root them to the spot. Their color recalls the bodies that labored on the plantations, but their gestures are not those of toil: they stand or step gracefully forward, seem to bow pensively, or appear to sink back into the tangle of vine and earth. Okoyomon's installation restored the human presence to the kudzu landscape but under erasure, destined to be overtaken by the vine's rampant growth (fig. 4). As the kudzu grew, it enveloped the figures.

33. Ibid.

34. See Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis, 2016), pp. 5–90.

35. Precious Okoyomon, interview with author.

FIGURE 4. Precious Okoyomon, *Earthseed* (2020). Detail. Zollamt, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. Photo by Axel Schneider. Courtesy of the artist.

The intermingling of plant and figure alludes to their kinship as migrant forms in place: voluntary or involuntary arrivals, they are now an inextricable element of the fabric of home.[36] The hybrid forms of the installation, always in process or transition as the plants grow and the figures appear to sink into the ground, articulate an aesthetic of dislocated and reconstituted belonging called forth by our precarious and unjust present. Okoyomon offers a reading of kudzu as an allegory for Black life in America, with its history of forced migration and exploitation, the projection upon it of unchecked and menacing proliferation, its criminalization and regulation: "It grows wild, so you criminalize it, and yet it has resilience. Endless always already resilience, always entangled." The dislocations inherent to plant and figure double as situated histories that are both human and more than human. Okoyomon's association of the foreign vine and the brown bodies in the landscape is an unsettling reminder that "people don't even see [Black life] as part of our land."[37] Yet these are foundational dislocations—they hold together the damaged social and ecological fabric of the land: "To this day, kudzu remains a foundational substructure of the American South, which—if the plant were removed—would return to a state of erosion."[38]

36. On the concept of "migrant form," see *Crossings: Migrant Knowledge, Migrant Forms*, ed. Natalya Din-Kariuki, Subha Mukherji, and Rowan Williams (forthcoming).

37. Precious Okoyomon, interview with author.

38. "Precious Okoyomon: *Earthseed*," Museum für Moderne Kunst, mmk.art/en/whats-on/precious-okoyomon

A Cultural History of Kudzu in the American South

Kudzu's invasion of the American South was preceded by other forced migrations and violent transplantations that laid the path for its dominance in the wake of cotton. Those past migrations left their devastating marks on the landscape and uprooted native communities. When the first Europeans arrived in what is today Alabama in the early sixteenth century, they found a region of thick forests and central prairies where deer and elk grazed, inhabited by the Choctaw and Chickasaw. The arrival of the Spanish was followed by French and British colonists. The latter prevailed in the early 1700s. In 1802 the first cotton gin was constructed in Alabama; white settlers began pouring in, ignoring treaties and displacing the native populations. Following the Creek War of 1813 the Choctaw took their case to the Supreme Court, which upheld their cause; but President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce the decision. The Great Removal of 1838 initiated the mass deportation of indigenous populations to Oklahoma, opening the way for the dominance of cotton. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Alabama was the center of the Cotton Belt.

By then, many of the original white settlers were also driven out by the influx of capital: large plantations supported by the toil of Black enslaved people. Their coerced labor had, by the 1850s, made the planters some of the richest in America, but they were brought low by the Civil War and Confederate defeat, followed by the ravages of soil erosion and the invasion of the boll weevil, a pest that decimated the South's cotton economy. The plantation owners turned to poor whites to supplement the flight of their formerly enslaved laborers, leading to new forms of exploitation of both Black and white workers through sharecropping and tenant farming. By the early twentieth century, the United States was losing ground as an exporter of cotton, and its cultivation became less and less competitive. The final blow to the region's rural workers was dealt by the introduction of mechanization in the 1950s.[39] The waves of forced departures and displaced arrivals that scarred the Southern landscape are memorialized in the ghostly figures of Okoyomon's installations.

The human toll of cotton cultivation was accompanied by environmental devastation. Monoculture depletes soil nutrients and groundwater resources and accelerates erosion: the denuded soil is easily washed away by strong wind or rain. This effect was intensified in the terrain of the Cotton Belt States which had only a modest layer of nutrient-poor topsoil and were therefore particularly vulnerable to intensive cultivation. The first visible scars

39. See Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, *And Their Children after Them: The Legacy of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men": James Agee, Walker Evans, and the Rise and Fall of Cotton in the South* (New York, 2008).

on the landscape in the form of gullies appeared before the Civil War.[40] Yet the cheap availability of land discouraged conservation practices—farmers simply moved on when the soil became exhausted. Throughout the nineteenth century, the dense settlement of the Virginia piedmont and the expansion of tobacco and cotton to the south and west vastly accelerated soil erosion.[41] Both coercive labor practices and the mechanization that followed them privileged uniform, modular, and scaled up exploitation of the land rather than adaptation to local ecosystems and management practices. Industrial farming on exhausted soil required heavy machinery and pesticide use that led to further erosion.[42]

Soil erosion due to deforestation and agriculture was not new to the twentieth century. In fact, human-induced erosion has been suggested as a geological marker for dating the effects of the Anthropocene thousands of years earlier than the modern period.[43] Created through the accretion of geological and climatic processes over millions of years, soil is the interface between the inorganic and organic worlds, a vital resource not easily renewable in human—as opposed to geological—time. Under the influence of humans, soil is also a bridge between nature and culture and an archive of their interactions.[44] To capture the nature of soils as records of past processes and interventions, pedologists, the scientists of soils, have proposed the concept of "soil memory."[45] Soil is thus conceived as an information system that stores data of past geological and climatic conditions unfolding in deep time as well as the more recent effects of anthropogenic interventions. John McNeill has argued that soil has been one of the most neglected categories in environmental history.[46] Now that humans have become geological

40. See J. Power and R. Follett, "Monoculture," *Scientific American* 256 (Mar. 1987): 82–83, and Paul S. Sutter, "What Gullies Mean: Georgia's 'Little Grand Canyon' and Southern Environmental History," *Journal of Southern History* 76 (Aug. 2010): 579–616.

41. For an interesting countercase (bright-leaf tobacco) to the narrative of inexorable Southern agricultural decline, see Drew A. Swanson, *A Golden Weed: Tobacco and Environment in the Piedmont South* (New Haven, Conn., 2014), p. 11.

42. See Sutter, "What Gullies Mean," p. 599, and Swanson, *A Golden Weed*, p. 7.

43. On the different logics of dating the Anthropocene back to the geologically visible effects of humans on the planet's life systems, see Jill S. Schneiderman, "Naming the Anthropocene," *Philosophia* 5 (Summer 2015): 179–201.

44. See David R. Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (Berkeley, 2007), p. 23.

45. See V. O. Targulian and M. A. Bronnikova, "Soil Memory: Theoretical Basics of the Concept, Its Current State, and Prospects for Development," *Eurasian Soil Science* 52, no. 3 (2019): 229–43.

46. See *Soils and Societies: Perspectives from Environmental History*, ed. J. R. McNeill and Verena Winiwarter (Isle of Harris, 2006), pp. 3, 4. See also Jo Handelsman and Kayla Cohen, *A World without Soil: The Past, Present, and Precarious Future of the Earth Beneath Our Feet* (New Haven, Conn., 2021).

agents, moving around more soil than all natural forces combined, environmental historians, scientists, and artists are "animating imaginaries of soils" to retrieve their cultural and natural histories.[47]

Okoyomon, concerned with the vanishing soil as a present ecological threat, also participates in these "animating imaginaries." An early video work in collaboration with artist Hannah Black, *So It's Like a Really Long Geological Process* (2018), featured a modestly sized ball of dirt with bits of scrap paper pasted all over it. (The scraps were shredded copies of Black's book, *The Situation*.) As with other contemporary artists who bring soil into the gallery, this was dirt with provenance and a story. A video of a talking mouth was projected onto the ball, narrating its origins in a piece of land on Staten Island: Earth Farm. If the shredded paper suggested a lost or damaged archive, the video filled in the blanks by explaining that the region of the soil's provenance in New York State is alluvial till left behind by a glacier on its way to Bermuda. While the work's title pointed to the long geological processes that yield soil, a finite and precious resource, the narrative also alluded to the questions of ecological harm and human abandonment that reappear in the kudzu installations. The region's earth is mixed with darker organic matter whose lower layers are contaminated by heavy metals, mostly lead. As the video unfolded, the dirt's precise location was revealed to be former farmland turned into rowhouses that fell vacant during the white flight of the 1960s. Fresh Farm was born from the empty lots that remained when the houses were burned down to collect insurance after land values collapsed.

The animated ball of soil in this early installation is a harbinger of Okoyomon's later landscapes of kudzu and indicates how far the artist's practice has come in creating novel environments. For if the didactic impetus of *So It's Like a Really Long Geological Process* is conveyed somewhat awkwardly through the small scale, artificial shape, and superimposed video projection on a ball of dirt, Okoyomon's more recent installations work by activating the vibrant materiality of soil and the beings it brings forth to create powerful immersive experiences. The installations are also animated by the catalytic presence of kudzu, spelled out in the exhibition notes to *Earthseed*: "Its specific history as a failed remedy for the monumental toll that slavery took on the ecological system of the American South has been largely forgotten. The story of kudzu is written in the same language that objectifies both human beings and nature, and produces violence, oppression and

47. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, "Re-Animating Soils: Transforming Human–Soil Affections through Science, Culture and Community," *Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (2019): 392.

individuation."[48] Kudzu as protagonist of the 2020 installation was given the name *Resistance Is an Atmospheric Condition*—and returned under the same name, though incarnated in different living plants, in the Venice Biennale's *To See the Earth before the End of the World*.[49] Okoyomon's reference to kudzu as a "failed remedy" alludes to its history as a government-sponsored antidote to the ravages of settler colonialism, while the notion of the plant's resistance speaks to the complicated history of its subsequent proliferation and Okoyomon's critique of the extractive and exploitative systems that objectify humans and nature.

Kudzu's deployment in the early twentieth-century American South occurred at a time when erosion was becoming an environmental problem of global proportions, as expressed in scientific journals, farming periodicals, and landmark publications such as Graham Jacks and Robert Whyte's 1939 *The Rape of the Earth*.[50] Jacks and Whyte described erosion as one of the "most vicious and destructive forces . . . released by man," more destructive than war or revolution. Erosion was a disease of empire "threatening the security of the white man and the well-being of the coloured man" due to the misapplication of European agricultural practices in tropical and subtropical environments.[51] Later authors adopted their ideas, casting "man as a disease of soils" and blaming erosion on colonists' ignorance of their environment.[52] Yet colonial authorities eschewed any acknowledgement of the legacy of slavery and settler colonialism, attributing instead the loss of soil productivity to the poor agricultural practices of indigenous populations.[53] The conclusion was that unchecked soil erosion would bring national extinction and colonial failure. If gullies were the most visible and violent manifestation of the soil's deterioration, kudzu, in *The Rape of the Earth*, was singled out as "perhaps the most promising" plant due to its "phenomenal growth."[54]

In the US, alarm about erosion reached its climax when clouds of dirt from the devastated Great Plains darkened Washington D.C. just as the "'Father

48. "Precious Okoyomon," mmk.art/en/whats-on/precious-okoyomon

49. The *Earthseed* plants were incinerated and rained down on viewers in another of Okoyomon's installations, *Fragmented Body Perceptions as Higher Vibration Frequencies to God* (2021) in the Keith Haring Theater in New York.

50. See David Anderson, "Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s," *African Affairs* 83 (July 1984): 321–43.

51. G. V. Jacks and R. O. Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth; A World Survey of Soil Erosion* (London, 1939), pp. 19, 20. For a recent warning, see Handelsman and Cohen, *A World Without Soil*.

52. Edward Hyams, *Soil and Civilization* (New York, 1952), p. 90.

53. See Anderson, "Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought," pp. 323–24.

54. Jacks and Whyte, *Rape of the Earth*, p. 142.

of Soil Conservation,'"[55] Hugh Hammond Bennett, was asking Congress for funding to combat this "national menace."[56] President Franklin Delano Roosevelt interpreted the dust storms as "a warning to the whole nation of what will happen if we waste our heritage of soil fertility, the ultimate source of our wealth and of life itself."[57] Large-scale antierosion policies became an integral part of Roosevelt's New Deal and were implemented by the Soil Conservation Service under Bennett's leadership. The ambitious vision of Bennett and his agency required the mobilization of a substantial labor force that was provided by the Civilian Conservation Corps, another New Deal initiative that secured repeated funding by Congress between 1933 and 1942 and employed approximately three million men. The corps replanted more than one trillion square yards of gullied terrain and six hundred thousand acres of sheet-eroded fields between 1933 and 1942, using a variety of plants: trees and shrubs such as willow and tamarisk; legumes and vines including kudzu and Virginia creeper; and grasses, especially sod. Kudzu was also used in strip-cropping in cotton-producing areas.[58] As the corps' first director, Robert Fechner, explained in 1939, the corps "altered the landscape of the United States."[59]

The story of kudzu's spread in the South is a chapter in this dramatic alteration of the landscape. Adopted by government planners as a conservation panacea due to its rapid growth and tolerance for nutrient-poor soils, it was deployed according to the same enduring logic of plantation monoculture whose consequences it was intended to alleviate. Seedlings were grown in the regional nurseries of the Soil Conservation Service.[60] They were subsequently planted by corps volunteers, while farmers were given financial incentives to use kudzu in strip cropping and for gully control. So damaged was the soil that the young vines required care to thrive: "Most areas planted to kudzu . . . are so poor and so severely eroded that it pays to apply phosphate in order to stimulate growth and obtain complete ground cover quickly for protection against erosion."[61] The service gave as many as eighty-five million kudzu seedlings to Southern landowners for land revitalization and soil retention. In addition to plantings by the corps, farmers were offered as much as eight dollars per acre to plant their land with kudzu. It is

55. "Hugh Hammond Bennett Biography," National Resource Conservation Service, www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/history/brief-history-nrcs/hugh-hammond-bennett-biography

56. See H. H. Bennett, "Soil Erosion—A National Menace," *Scientific Monthly* 39 (Nov. 1934): 385–404.

57. Quoted in Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York, 2008), p. 57.

58. See ibid., p. 64.

59. Quoted in ibid., p. 4.

60. R. Y. Bailey, *Kudzu for Erosion Control in the Southeast* (Washington, D.C., 1939), pp. 17–18.

61. Ibid., p. 20.

estimated that about three million acres had been planted with kudzu by 1946.[62] This history of attempted remediation informs Okoyomon's imagining of kudzu as part of the "foundational substructure of the American South." At the same time, and through its unintended consequences, the example of kudzu fuels the artist's critique of the arrogant and misguided treatment of living organisms as commodities amenable to economies of scale.[63]

The massive bioinfrastructure project was, according to Bennett, "based on the best information in the possession of scientific agriculturists," and early warnings about kudzu's rapid proliferation and potential invasiveness were dismissed.[64] Although Bennett enumerated the many scientific disciplines that informed the conservation plan—from the agronomist and economist to the engineer and geographer—the plant's behavior and landscape management practices in its native areas were not part of the picture, despite kudzu's long history in China, Korea, and Japan.[65] Although some of that traditional knowledge was enshrined in print, it failed to travel with the plant. Londa Schiebinger employed the term "agnotology" to describe the loss, neglect, or active erasure of local knowledge that was part of the Western project of transplanting and exploiting the world's floras.[66] Sometimes this failure of knowledge transfer opens up new opportunities for experimentation and innovation in hybrid spaces and communities.[67] More frequently it demonstrates, in hindsight, the situated and partial character of scientific knowledge when instrumentalized for economic and political purposes.

The misguided confidence in kudzu's pliability is an expression of what Gayatri Spivak has called epistemic violence. Instead of interrogating the plantation practices that created the problem, the remedy was sought in another form of monoculture, pursued according to the same logic of economies of scale and couched in metaphors of national defense.[68] The regular rows of the plantation are the plant equivalent of the cartographic projects

62. See John W. Everest et al., "Kudzu in Alabama: History, Uses, and Control," *Alabama Cooperative: Extension System* (1999), p. 2, www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/ja/ja_everest001.pdf

63. For similarly misguided contemporary tree-planting projects, see Rosetta S. Elkin, *Plant Life: The Entangled Politics of Afforestation* (Minneapolis, 2022).

64. Bennett, "Soil Erosion," p. 400.

65. Batsaki and Gant, "The Secret Life of Kudzu."

66. Quoted in Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, p. 3.

67. See Michael R. Dove, "Hybrid Histories and Indigenous Knowledge among Asian Rubber Smallholders," *International Social Science Journal* 54, no. 173 (2002): 349–59.

68. On epistemic violence, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Williams and Chrisman (New York, 1994), pp. 66–111. On the capitalist/colonialist logic of scalability, see Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

that underpinned the imperial production of space as territory amenable to political and economic sovereignty.[69] Due to its familiarity, the American strategy prompted interest by other colonial governments that faced heavy topsoil depletion in their colonies. The British considered kudzu as a soil conservation remedy but found that it preferred temperate over tropical climates. Other plants tried in America were judged to offer better possibilities for colonial needs.[70] Were kudzu to speak, what ironic remarks would it offer up? For current attempts at its eradication through aerial spraying of pesticides are motivated not only by the potential threat to biodiversity but also by its detrimental impact on the new face of monoculture: timber plantations.[71] The vine's refractory rendering of landscapes opaque and unproductive is the direct opposite of what Arabindan-Kesson has described as the "speculative vision" spun around cotton, which rendered equivalent soil, bodies, and plants as mere elements in the pursuit of future profits.[72] In its takeover of the damaged land, kudzu is exemplary of more-than-human resistance to the world as resource.

The spread of invasives is emblematic of the massive dislocations of the Anthropocene. Charles Elton's *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants* helped launch the field of invasion ecology. Published in 1958, Elton's book described a watershed when "the mingling of thousands of kinds of organisms from different parts of the world is setting up terrific dislocations in nature" and causing "one of the great historical convulsions in the world's fauna and flora."[73] Since Elton, invasion ecologists have warned against the spread and economic cost of invasives and the ecological threat they pose to coevolutionary relationships developed over millennia within local ecosystems.[74] Their critics, in debates played out in *Conservation Biology* and *Biological Invasions*, argue for a distinction between invasive *species* and

69. See Sarah Besky and Jonathan Padwe, "Placing Plants in Territory," *Environment and Society* 7 (2016): 9–28.

70. See "Kudzu and Soil Erosion—A Warning Note," *Agricultural Journal* 17, no. 1 (1946): 30.

71. See Paulina Harron et al., "Predicting Kudzu (*Pueraria Montana*) Spread and Its Economic Impacts in Timber Industry: A Case Study from Oklahoma," *PloS One*, 16 Mar. 2020, journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0229835, and Donald L. Grebner et al., "Kudzu Control and Impact on Monetary Returns to Non-Industrial Private Forest Landowners in Mississippi," *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 30, no. 3 (2011): 204–23.

72. Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies, White Gold*, p. 8.

73. Charles S. Elton, *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants* (London, 1958), pp. 18, 31.

74. See, for example, Anthony Ricciardi and Rachael Ryan, "Invasive Species Denialism Revisited: Response to Sagoff," *Biological Invasions* 20 (May 2018): 2731–738; Mark Sagoff, "Fact and Value in Invasion Biology," *Conservation Biology* 34 (June 2020): 581–88; and Paul Downey and David Richardson, "Alien Plant Invasions and Native Plant Extinctions: A Six-Threshold Framework," *AoB Plants* 8 (2016): doi.org/10.1093/aobpla/plu072

invasive *predators*. They also point to the paucity of data, question the assumption that "natural" ecosystems are healthier, and situate the concept of "native" plants within troubling ideologies of racial and cultural purity.[75] Despite kudzu's hypervisibility on road sides and embankments, reports of its massive and unchecked spread may be exaggerated, as suggested by a recent sampling by the US Forest Service.[76] Even scientific articles that approach kudzu as a major ecosystem threat conclude that "there is surprisingly little quantitative knowledge of the effects of kudzu on native biodiversity and ecosystem function."[77]

As a migrant form that resists spatial and discursive attempts at containment, kudzu both grounds and undoes the recent theoretical reclamation of plants as the abject other of Western metaphysics. On the one hand, the vine seems exemplary of the exuberance and abundance of all plant life as "an incessant, wild proliferation," "a seemingly limitless extension in every conceivable direction" (*PTP*, p. 37). Likewise, the vine's ability to thrive in what Tsing has called the "blasted landscapes" of capitalist simplification and alienation speaks to the irrepressible vitality of photosynthetic life,[78] "its astonishing tenacity, its capacity for survival" (*PTP*, p. 19). On the other hand, kudzu is a poster child for the bad infinity of the proliferating thing without telos, "a thing that has overstepped the confines of thinghood" (*PTP*, pp. 23–24). In its invasive character kudzu seems emblematic of vegetal growth with "no entelechy" (*PTB*, p. 32). In harming local ecosystems by lowering biodiversity while disturbing the economic productivity of the territory, kudzu creates a specious abundance that masks "uncontrolled, cancerous growth and indifference" (*PTB*, p. 61). One might attempt to substitute for this putative lack of entelechy the biological and evolutionary effort to produce the flower, control pollination, develop the seed or fruit. But kudzu bypasses these avenues to metaphysical legitimacy by eschewing efflorescence in favor of rhizomatic reproduction. And then casts doubt on the rhizome itself as radical alternative through the habit of clonal reproduction that eschews connectivity or reciprocity in favor of a logic of infinite

75. Elton noted the arbitrary definition of *invasive* given the slow but constant shift of the planet's land masses. For example, at the beginning of the Cretaceous, 145 million years ago, the world's flora and fauna were more cosmopolitan as the continents were more connected. The problem of invasive species is therefore defined by human and historical time, rather than the time of plants or geological time.

76. See Bill Finch, "The True Story of Kudzu, the Vine that Never Truly Ate the South," *Smithsonian Magazine*, Sept. 2015, www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/true-story-kudzu-vine-ate-south-180956325/

77. Irwin N. Forseth, Jr. and Anne F. Innis, "Kudzu (*Pueraria montana*): History, Physiology, and Ecology Combine to Make a Major Ecosystem Threat," *Critical Reviews in Plant Sciences* 23, no. 5 (2004): 410.

78. See Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World.*

self-reproduction. While current scientific insights and ecological ethics validate entanglement, kudzu perverts it through its throttling of other vegetation, its take-no-prisoners approach. In its resistance to plant thinking, kudzu becomes the "transcendental contraband" that Nealon, via Jacques Derrida, intimates in plant being (quoted in *PTB*, p. 70). The theoretical effort to produce the plant as a generalized concept bumps against the contingencies of its natural history in time and place, its ontological slipperiness, its ethical ambiguity.

Beyond the Apocalypse: *To See the Earth before the End of the World* (2022)

Okoyomon's installation at the 2022 Venice Biennale was allocated a significant spot at the end of the sprawling Central Pavilion: a large area dedicated to the artist's worldmaking that doubled as a capstone experience for the visitor. The installation placed the significance of living plant materials in contemporary art squarely within Cecilia Alemani's overall exhibition *The Milk of Dreams*, spun around metamorphosis, hybridity, and the urgency of rethinking human and nonhuman relationships.[79] Larger than any of Okoyomon's kudzu installations to date, *To See the Earth before the End of the World* was an immersive experience that expanded in time and space as the visitor meandered around the paths and glimpsed the vegetation and sculptures from different vantage points. The title referred to a poem by Ed Roberson, "To See the Earth before the End of the World," which brought the work into dialogue with planetary questions of ecological destruction and extinction. Another source of inspiration was Edouard Glissant's play *Monsieur Toussaint* (1981), alluding to the Haitian leader Toussaint Louverture and the legacies of colonialism and the plantation system in the Caribbean. Plant migrations suture together these local histories of violent exploitation of humans and nature and the slow violence of globalized climate change and species loss. The use of sugarcane, whose association with the ravages of the plantation is more legible for an international audience than kudzu's, may also have been a gesture of cultural translation.

The plants' invasion of internal architecture and the weathered look of cement and metal suggested an abandoned human edifice now long overgrown: a natureculture where more-than-human actants had taken over and proliferated undisturbed. The return of the figures made of brown wool, as in *Earthseed*, introduced a haunting human-like presence. The visitor had the uncanny sense, cultivated by other installations that address ecological

79. Cecilia Alemani, "The Milk of Dreams," www.ceciliaalemani.com/projects/the-milk-of-dreams

disaster in the Anthropocene, of experiencing a landscape of the future peopled with ghosts of the past. Yet the environment created by Okoyomon resisted the apocalyptic pull that can morph into yet another form of self-indulgent consumption and that is evoked ironically in the opening lines of Roberson's poem: "People are grabbing at the chance to see / the earth before the end of the world."[80] Instead, the sensory experience of the installation was vibrant with life, substituting the vitality of more-than-human beings for the imagined future absence of humans and thus undoing the exceptionalist pathos of the "end of the world."

The invasive species paradoxically fuels the installation's resistance to narratives of catastrophe: rather than a threat to be contained, it is a reclaiming of the abjected. It is precisely because plants have been primary targets for alienation—natural resources to be extracted, classified, and scaled for profit—that they lend themselves so well to "the restaging of things as lively."[81] This project is both aesthetic and ethical: a step toward extending the boundaries of care to encompass the human and nonhuman. The artist's use of plant materials restores animation as well as agency to the nonhuman, for through its expanding tendrils the vine is coproducer and coperformer of the installation's meanings. Kudzu's encircling of the brown figures in the landscape is both erasure and embrace, a memorialization sans monument, and a poignant form of witnessing.

The invasive plant resists the alienation of not only the living organism but also of the nonnative and the migrant. Held together by kudzu, Okoyomon's work imagines new forms of belonging. The beings brought together in *To See the Earth before the End of the World*—kudzu, sugarcane, black swallowtail butterflies, human visitors, and sundry soil inhabitants—are not elements of a native ecosystem. They are part and parcel of the migrations and dislocations that have shaped the Anthropocene, coming together in an aesthetic assemblage that is also an experience and a community, with all its impurities and contradictions. Such gatherings are open-ended: "They allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them."[82] A foil to notions of ecological purity, the invasive garden makes of mingling a counter-offering. This natureculture space of human disturbance and plant migration is also the space of the plant humanities, as a method of thinking together the plant as ontological concept and historical actant. The transposition of

80. Ed Roberson, "To See the Earth before the End of the World," Verse, verse.press/poem/to-see-the-earth-before-the-end-of-the-world-6296856620761491880

81. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis, 2017), p. 32.

82. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 23.

the landscape scarred by humans into the gallery confronts the viewer with a troubling aesthetic of exuberance and grief, fragility and resilience.

Okoyomon's work resonates with the call for an art of the Anthropocene that celebrates the "'ruderal ecologies' of disturbed or abandoned landscapes and potentiate[s] new life in the rubble and ruins of waste lands."[83] Okoyomon references the *end of the world* but with an urgent injunction *to see the Earth* that doesn't soar above but rather immerses the viewer in the botanical drift so that we can be moved—or transported—through the artist's portal. Recent critiques of the Anthropocene have questioned its apocalyptic drive—the arrogant assumption of a universal humanity faced for the first time with the existential threat of planetary catastrophe. Indigenous scholars remind us that for many peoples displaced by settler colonialism the twin catastrophes of cultural and ecological end times have already happened. The apocalyptic imagination can devolve into a version of white settler anxiety instead of generating creative ecologies that grapple with past traumas and lingering injustices.[84]

The aesthetics of the Anthropocene often rely on visual strategies that produce new fantasies of distance and control.[85] The immersion fostered by Okoyomon's installation, coupled with the exuberance of plant growth, moves the viewer in the opposite direction. By giving a plant invasive free reign in the gallery, institutionalizing its growth where it doesn't belong, Okoyomon instantiates a new aesthetic that takes shape around uncontrolled abundance, troubles notions of home and belonging, and generates new landscapes that may or may not be hospitable to human presence—imagining new potentialities and coexistences.

83. Natasha Myers, "From Edenic Apocalypse to Gardens against Eden: Plants and People in and after the Anthropocene," in *Infrastructure, Environment, and Life in the Anthropocene*, ed. Kregg Hetherington (Durham, N.C., 2019), p. 124. See also Bettina Stoetzer, *Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration, Race, and Urban Nature in Berlin* (Durham, N.C., 2022).

84. T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (London, 2017), p. 18. See also Zoe Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London, 2015), pp. 243–44.

85. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene," *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 213–32.