**Feb 17: Isabel Hofmeyr**

**Plant Lives: Framings from Southern Africa**

To launch this seminar series, this paper draws together the southern African humanities scholarship on plant lives, placing it in conversation with debates from elsewhere. Through a literary and cultural studies lens, the paper offers a range of analytical possibilities, methodological directions and detailed explorations of specific texts. The paper flags some of the key concerns of the series and the debates that might unfold.

**Feb 24: Banu Subramaniam**

**Queering Global Flora:**

**Plant Worlds and the Afterlives of Empire**

How have histories of colonialism and their foundational language of gender, race, sexuality, and nation shaped the language, terminology, and theories of the modern plant sciences? How and why do botanical theories remain grounded in the violence of their colonial pasts? In wrestling with these difficult origins, I develop the concept of *migrant ecologies* to retheorize plant migration and reproductive biology. I explore new biological frameworks that harness the power of feminist thought in order to reimagine and reinvigorate our love of plants.

**March 3: Molemo Moiloa and Nare Mokgotho**

**Return and Recovery in the Land Practices of Bakoni, a Soundscape**

*Mafolofolo*: *a place of recovery (2022)*is a sound installation that emerges from five years of our research in Bokoni, Mpumalanga. Our research has sought to understand the multiple cycles of loss and subsequent cycles of return related to the land. We are concerned with the deep and enduring relationships with the land that remain, despite the longue durée of South Africa’s history of land dispossession and displacement. What we take from the particular history of this place is the potential to seek intimacy, ‘spiritual security’, and interdependence with the land and more-than-human life. *Mafolofolo*is a narrative that traces a history of violence, racism, extraction, and ongoing dispossession with very real contemporary urgencies. It is also an encounter with how we might repair ourselves and the lands from which we find sustenance.

**March 10: Yota Batsaki**

**The Plant at the End of the World: Invasive Species in the Anthropocene**

Plants are edging closer to the center of critical inquiry in the Anthropocene because they are intimately tied to legacies of settler colonialism, forced migration, related practices of extractive capitalism, and their environmental and human harm. Ostensibly sessile, plants travel constantly through their adaptations to ensure their survival and reproduction. In the modern period, this movement was taken to unprecedented scale by humans, triggering massive displacement of people and disruption to ecosystems. Among the many instances of plant movement, the scandalous mobility of invasives unsettles us because it exposes the worst excesses of the Anthropocene. This essay focuses on the practice of multimedia artist Precious Okoyomon, whose installations feature prominently kudzu, the most notorious weed in the US. The highest concentrations of kudzu are found in the former Cotton Belt—Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi—making it cotton’s unlikely successor. The essay analyzes how Okoyomon’s kudzu installations explore the dark side of the landscape, peeling off layers of human and environmental harm while acknowledging the resilience of more-than-human life. But a focus on invasive species also challenges plant theory’s celebration of entanglement, showing how 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.

**March 17: Ruth Sacks**

**Behind Johannesburg: Plants and Possible Futures**

This seminar is centered on a chapter from the book *Planetary Hinterlands: Extraction, Abandonment and Care* which explores two ubiquitous edible plants of the city of Johannesburg and its hinterland (the most industrialized Africa). How maize (a staple crop) and blackjack (an invasive species) are cultivated, from wholescale maize production to the informal farming initiatives in the inner city, point to toxic apartheid and colonial legacies of inequality that attach stigmas to different categories of plants and ways of growing. Thinking with the idea of hinterland, and its ancient role of providing food for the city, maize and blackjack provide a way into considering possible plant food futures in the face of ecological devastation aided and abetted by large-scale industry.

**March 24: Helene Strauss**

**Breathing with Trees**

This paper will speak to aspects of an ongoing book project titled *Phytospheric Justice.* The book follows the symbiotic atmospheric pathways that connect plant and human breath to develop forms of cultural theorizing accountable to an increasingly climate-deranged world. By expanding the concept of the phytosphere to include the atmospheric terrain where plant chemistry and other elemental life-forces intersect, the project aims to develop methods for reading regenerative phytochemical relationships that exceed carbon capitalism’s proprietary and destructive relationship with air. Alongside a groundswell of critical cultural theory associated with the so-called vegetal and atmospheric turns, it takes care to situate recent insight into the social lives of plants within older Indigenous, African and decolonial relational knowledge ecologies long attuned to racial capitalism’s inequitable distribution of dangerous air. Taking guidance from old and emergent imaginative archives and eco-feminist activisms in contexts with overlapping histories of colonial land theft, botanicide, and air pollution, the project will explore ways of thinking, breathing, and smelling with plants that bring the material and spiritual interdependencies required to build post-smog futures anew into focus.

**April 7: Haripriya Rangan**

**Recombinant Landscapes and Biogeographical Knowledges**

This paper will reflect on how indigenous knowledge is presented in the dominant ways of talking about landscape and vegetation change. The term ‘recombinant’ in this context refers to new plant and animal associations which have evolved due to direct, inadvertent, or indirect human moulding and manipulation of landscapes (Meurk, 2010). When indigenous ways of knowing and talking about landscapes is translated into the dominant language of science, policy, or politics, two things happen. First, these are abstracted as ‘timeless knowledge’ or knowledge from the past, which either serves as a minor acknowledgement or point of departure for the knowledge produced by the dominant culture. Second, the descriptions of ‘indigenous knowledge’ in the dominant language obscures the fundamental relations between language and knowledge production about landscapes. Consequently, there is little interest among policy makers and environmental managers in knowing how ‘indigenous knowledge’ about recombinant landscapes shaped by the dominant culture and language is being translated and understood by indigenous groups in their own terms. The paper will focus on the recombinant landscapes of the Kimberley region of northwest Australia which have been produced through enormous biophysical and economic transformation over the past six decades. It will centre on how changes in landscape vegetation, particularly in relation to plants officially categorised as environmental weeds, have been interpreted by indigenous elders of the Miriwoong community and government agencies in eastern Kimberley. It will highlight the different ways in which these two groups draw together narratives of history and agency to signify the biogeographies of these plants in their landscape.

Meurk, C.D. (2010) Recombinant ecology of urban areas: Characterisation, context, and creativity, in Douglas, I., Goode, D., & Houck, M. (Eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Urban Ecology*, pp. 198-220.

**April 14: Stephané Conradie**

**Transferred Matter: Reflections on Articulage in Ecoprinting Practices**

Ecoprinting is a process that involves extracting plant matter’s tannins and pigments through steam, pressure and mordants. During these processes, plant matter is transferred onto a paper or fabric substrate. In this seminar, I discuss how this printing process is used in my artistic practice in conjunction with the notion of ‘articulage’, coined by Masa Lemu. Articulage draws on Stuart Hall’s writing on articulation and the tinkering practice of bricolage. Ecoprinting and articulage are praxis-driven methodologies which I use to create assemblages from plant materials and objects, which have been divested through death, displacement or migration. Like collecting divested objects, I collect plants for their latent pigment potential. Their pigments are revealed through alchemic processes that transform how their matter was previously perceived. I apply articulage then to reflect on how these storied objects (organic and inorganic) combine to form and reveal new material possibilities through ‘pressure cooker’ environments.

**May 5: Sumana Roy**

**The Quest for the Plant Script**

Why have our writers, artists, thinkers and scholars been compelled to turn their attention towards the ‘plant script’ in the last one hundred years? Beginning from Jagadish Chandra Bose’s ‘torulipi’ – literally the plant script, through which he hoped plants would write their autobiography – and moving through Rabindranath Tagore’s songs about the ‘language of flowers’ to poets writing about the syntax of the falling of leaves to artists trying to coax a vocabulary out of plants or creating a ‘tree alphabet’, I shall speak about the quest for the plant script, its codes, its compulsions, and its intimate histories.

**May 12: Luvuyo Wotshela**

**Existing with the Multi-purpose Plant: A Social History of Prickly Pear in Contemporary Eastern Cape**

Prickly Pear - a common English name for several cactus species, with Mexican and Central American origin, has had an influence on much of the semi-arid Cape Karoo region of South Africa for about three centuries. Perhaps, it was not foreseen it would grow expansively in that and some adjacent areas when its common species were first introduced in the present Graaff-Reinet area from the mid-1770s. Its presence had by the 1900s influenced varied South African communities, whilst it also traversed environmental, social and political topics. Even after systematic eradication that reduced its prevalence by the second half of the 1900s, the constant use of elements of this plant and fruits even in isolated areas of the Eastern Cape became crucial going forward. It has retained presence amidst lasting ambivalence - mainly between those who saw it as weed, or even scourge that had to be obliterated, and those who have purposely used it in many valuable ways. This paper highlights the sustained use of prickly pear as a multi-purpose plant, and its centrality in aspects of social lives in this region since the second half of the twentieth century. It contends, despite the prickly pear’s vacillated views, its connections with several aspects of humankind, especially African communities of this region has also shaped key social history of this plant.

**May 19: Riley Snorton**

**The Capitaloscene and the Resurgence of Pioneer Species**

As racial capitalism and the exploitation of natural and human resources sustain and perpetuate our current ecological condition, this talk asks what if the “answer” to climate catastrophe is decolonization and abolition? In close readings of two films, *Uyra: The Rising Forest*(Dir. Curi, 2022), set in the Amazon forest, and *Neptune Frost*(Dirs. Uzeyman and Williams, 2022), set in the hilltops of Burundi, Snorton traces a mycorrhizal network among pioneer species plant life and people that make evident that “the seeds of a different world are already alive in the everyday practices of ordinary Black and Indigenous people” (J.T. Roane, et. al. 2022). This talk is drawn from a larger project, tentatively entitled, *Mud: Ecologies of Racial Meaning,*which is a transdisciplinary, mixed-methodological study of the social significance of the development, disappearance, and transformation of swamps in the hemispheric Americas.

**May 26: Nox Makunga**

**Plants for Health – from Past to Present and into the Future**

Plants as medicines have been integral to human civilisations for millennia and for a large portion of the South African population, they continue to play a critical role in indigenous knowledge systems, providing a resource used in primary health care. Because South Africa has such a wonderful and prized floral heritage, this has led to the development of a diverse range of ethnocultural uses for plants. A historical overview of how this unique ethnopharmacology developed will be provided. The contributions of South African plants, particularly those from the Greater Cape Floristic Region, to the establishment of past and current research initiatives and the bioeconomy will be emphasised. Finally, the science behind the health-benefitting effects of selected medicinal plants will be discussed.

**June 2: Luciano Concheiro San Vicente**

**Among Ahuehuetes, Dwarf Japan Cypress, and Hey: Chapultepec as seen through the Critical Plant Humanities**

Chapultepec (Nahuatl for “grasshopper hill”) is a territory shaped not only by the conjunction of different temporal strata, but also by the intertwining of multiple relationships between the non-human and the human. Located in the heart of Mexico City, it is known as one of the largest and most visited urban parks in Latin America. However, its history goes back several centuries, to pre-colonial times. From the sixteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, the springs at the foot of Chapultepec Hill supplied drinking water to the capital of the Mexica Empire, Tenochtitlán, and later to colonial and modern Mexico City. For the Mexica, Chapultepec had a sacred status and was used by their rulers as a space for ritual hunting ceremonies. After the Spanish colonization, it was used as a hunting ground, a place for recreation and celebration by the viceregal nobility.  In 1841, in independent Mexico, the Military College was installed on top of Chapultepec Hill. A few decades later, Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg installed his imperial palace there and the use of Chapultepec as a residence of power continued during the 20th century. Following hygienist discourses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chapultepec was reterritorialized as a European-inspired urban park (plants imported from New York and Europe were planted, electric lighting was installed, an artificial lake and a zoo were built). In this paper, the complexity of Chapultepec will be explored by thinking about some of the plants that have inhabited the territory over time, including the ancient ahuehuete (Taxodium mucronatum) known as “El sargento” or “Montezuma's Tree”; the Obtusa nana (Dwarf Japan Cypress) and the hay (Tillandsia usneoides) that grew in the trees of Chapultepec in the 1930s. We will seek to understand what new perspectives plant life opens to understand the complexity of Chapultepec as a palimpsest space in which multiple times and species have cohabited.