



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Edwards, Caroline (2023) xyloid sexuality: dismantling the human in Wangechi Mutu's arboreal collages. *Cultural Politics* 20 (1), ISSN 1743-2197. (In Press)

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/52706/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

xyloid sexuality

dismantling the human in Wangechi Mutu's arboreal collages

Caroline Edwards

This is an Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version of this article, which is published in the journal *Cultural Politics*. The article has been peer reviewed.

The article should be cited from its final published version. For more information see the publisher website: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/cultural-politics/issue>.

This AAM version of the article is for reference use only, in accordance with the publisher copyright policies for green open access and self-archiving. For more information, see: <https://www.sherpa.ac.uk/id/publication/21782>.

This AAM version is the copyright of Dr Caroline Edwards, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature & Culture, Birkbeck, University of London.
caroline.edwards@bbk.ac.uk

The Kenyan-born, U.S.-based artist Wangechi Mutu is fascinated by the human body and its nonhuman possibilities. In Mutu's collaged works, human forms are repeatedly ripped apart and reassembled within fantasy landscapes that speak of death and decomposition but also of regenerative regrowth. Mutu's use of the Black female body to explore freakish materialities that elide clear distinctions between animal, vegetal, mycelial, and human have often been read within the context of Afrofuturism.¹ Critics celebrate her use of collage to splice together grotesque juxtapositions that defy race, gender, and species; juxtapositions that draw on her early fascination with anatomical illustrations in biological textbooks and the diseased bodies dissected in works of

¹ See, for example, Sean Gordon, "Wangechi Mutu Explores Afrofuturism and The New Humanism with *Ndoro Na Miti*," *Paste Magazine*, 12 February 2017: <https://www.pastemagazine.com/visual-arts/wangechi-mutu/wangechi-mutu-the-new-humanism/> (Last accessed 2 September 2021). Scholarship on Wangechi Mutu to date includes Nicole R. Smith, "Wangechi Mutu: Feminist Collage and the Cyborg," PhD Thesis, Georgia State University, 2009. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57709/1234428>; Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013); Sarah Jane Cervenak, "Like Blood or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu's Resistant Harvests," *Feminist Studies*, 42(2) (2016): 392-425; Chelsea M. Frazier, "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 2(1) (2016): 40-72; Leticia Alvarado, "Flora and Fauna Otherwise: Black and Brown Aesthetics of Relation in Firelei Báez and Wangechi Mutu," *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, 1(3) (2019): 8-24; and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's chapter on dematerialisation in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), which examines Mutu's work alongside the writings of Audre Lorde.

pathology.² In this article I will explore an aspect of Mutu’s oeuvre that has thus far been overlooked by critics: the significance of trees to Mutu’s project of dismantling the human. Drawing on critical plant studies, forest ecology, cultural anthropology, and the mycological turn, I will explore what I call *xyloid sexuality* in Mutu’s collaged artworks. Xyloid sexuality blurs ontological distinctions between the human and the arboreal through a weirding of human eroticism and reproduction that pushes desire, procreation, and sexual fulfilment beyond species boundaries altogether.

In recent years, plant studies has incorporated important philosophical and moral discussions of personhood, sentience, rights, and ontology,³ but more work needs to be done exploring the vital political contribution that artworks make to shifting perceptions of human-plant interrelations. Art and aesthetics are “essential components of revolution,” as Herbert Marcuse writes in *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Not only because they mine the imagined realms of subjective experience, with its confusion of temporalities, ideological biases, emotional conflicts, and unconscious cultural influences, but, crucially, because they have the power to reconstitute subjectivity. In conjuring a new realm of experience, art can foment the kind of reality-shattering models of selfhood required to recalibrate material reality and articulate utopian political demands. Wangechi Mutu’s xyloid artworks are an intriguing example of the power of the aesthetic dimension to revive what Marcuse calls “rebellious subjectivity.”⁴ These works forcefully reclaim the nonhuman as a site of Black expressive culture. As I will argue, the aesthetic power of xyloid sexuality in Mutu’s collages and mixed media paintings can be understood as a radical utopian gesture to supplant the violence of the colonial gaze with a powerfully *more-than-human* Black gaze.

The more-than-human Black gaze

If white worldmaking defines itself through its discrimination of, and superiority from, the Black body, which is made to bear the execrable weight of otherness, vulgarity, immorality, sexuality, and criminality,⁵ then the Black gaze must assert its own vantage point as one that “celebrates and embraces the audacity of Black folks to create beauty in the face of centuries of negation.”⁶ As Tina M. Campt writes in *A Black Gaze* (2021), this emergent Black aesthetic “produces radical forms of witnessing that reject traditional ways of seeing blackness – ways of seeing that historically depict blackness only in a subordinate relation to whiteness.”⁷ The effort to think Black pleasure into

² “Courtney J. Martin in Conversation with Wangechi Mutu” in *Wangechi Mutu*, ed. Adrienne Edwards, Courtney J. Martin, Kellie Jones and Chika Okeke-Agulu (London: Phaidon, 2022), pp. 9-49 (p. 10).

³ See Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), Prudence Gibson and Baylee Brits (eds), *Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an Anthropocentric World* (Goleta, CA: punctum books, 2018), and John C. Ryan, Patrícia Vieira, and Monica Gagliano (eds), *The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence* (Santa Fe, NM: Synergetic Press, 2021).

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* [1977], trans. Herbert Marcuse and Erica Sherover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 7.

⁵ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. xxx.

⁶ Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021), p. 99.

⁷ Campt, *A Black Gaze*, p. 17.

being – in the wake, as Christina Sharpe writes, of the “unfinished project of [Black] emancipation”⁸ – requires a particular kind of affective labour that can think contradictory things together. As Camppt puts it, the Black gaze “demands the affective labor of juxtaposition.”⁹ I will consider how Mutu’s dismantling of the human subject via erotic arboreal interaction is formally enacted through the technique of collage; itself a medium of juxtaposing disparate materials into conjugation. Since her first exhibition as a BFA student at Cooper Union in New York (1996), Mutu has worked with collage. Mutu’s early mixed media works incorporate images of models from porn magazines such as *Black Tail* and *Player’s Girl Pictorial*, as well as Playboy centrefolds with cut-outs from *National Geographic* magazine, to expose the “disturbing fiction” of the hyper-sexualised Black female subject in Western media and popular culture.¹⁰ Using collage to suture bodies out of the anatomical parts and physiognomies of different women (sometimes even women of different ethnicities), spliced with pieces of machinery, and assemblages of animals, tree roots, mud, and glitter, Mutu thoroughly, terrifyingly, and joyfully dismantles the human. As Michael E. Veal writes, Mutu’s more-than-female figures:

appear at times conjured from a fantastical realm of nocturnal toadstool reveries and at other times, fabricated from the rotting remains of open sewers, garbage heaps or toxic waste. Alternately engaging in mutual frolic or ecstatic disfiguration, their glorified orifices bestow life-giving fluids and anoint the land with toxic elixirs.¹¹

This is an explicitly political and utopian project to construct a Black gaze that refracts and remediates centuries of colonial framing, as well as its systemic anti-Black legacy. Collage is an appropriate aesthetic form for this utopian project of juxtaposing violence and trauma alongside joy, pleasure, and erotic satisfaction. As the curator and writer Justin Smith argues, collage is an inherently Black aesthetic. When creating a collage, he writes, “the cut of a photo or frame is an act of the flow state. Blackness exists in a collaged form, stacking upon multiple layers of the Black vernacular tradition and iconography.”¹² Through their violent, unnerving juxtapositions of human, animal, vegetal, and mycelial forms, these collage and multimedia artworks offer a striking example of what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson calls “a contrapuntal potential in black thought and expressive cultures with regard to the human-animal distinction.”¹³

If we extend Jackson’s focus on human-animal distinctions to incorporate *arboreal dehumanisation*, Mutu’s artworks reveal the contrapuntal potential of trees. No matter how liberatory the rebellious subjectivity of Mutu’s sexualised human-arboreal figures, xyloid sexuality still operates within and against “a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim

⁸ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 5.

⁹ Camppt, *A Black Gaze*, p. 102.

¹⁰ “Wangechi Mutu: This You Call Civilization,” short film displayed on the Art Gallery of Ontario website: <https://ago.ca/exhibitions/wangechi-mutu> (Last accessed 21 February 2023).

¹¹ Michael E. Veal, “Enter Cautiously” in *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise* (Bologna: Damiani, 2008), pp. 9-10 (p. 10).

¹² Justin Smith, “The Rhythmic Continuum of Black Collage: Havin’ the knack, in the cut, cuttin’ up & getting’ down” in *Black Collagists: The Book*, ed. Teri Henderson (Yakima, WA: Kanyer Publishing, 2021), pp. ix-x (p. ix).

¹³ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), p. 4.

to full human status and which humans cannot.”¹⁴ The intellectual and artistic work of destabilising human-nonhuman binaries does not “intrinsically len[d] itself to projects of environmental justice,” as Sria Chatterjee notes, and can easily be co-opted into political projects that perpetuate violence and inequality.¹⁵ Plant sentience and nonhuman world-making must always be understood “within the context of colonial and extractive histories.”¹⁶ In what follows, I will consider how arboreal dehumanisation in Wangechi Mutu’s sexualised xyloid artworks dances on this precarious human-nonhuman threshold and, in the process, contains a powerful utopian rejoinder to the racial politics that continue to underpin species distinctions. As Alexander Weheliye writes in *Habeas Viscus* (2014), “racializing assemblages of subjection can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds.”¹⁷ Xyloid sexuality, I will argue, does the transformative work of shifting how we think of ourselves as human, helping us to “recognize elements of ourselves in the form of vegetal being.”¹⁸ The possibilities of other worlds and their otherworldly sexual and reproductive politics shall be my focus in the following analyses.

Arboreal inhumanism, or, thinking with trees

Looking at Mutu’s early artworks, we can trace a long-standing connection between trees and the female form dating back to sketchbook drawings from the 1990s onwards. An early pen and ink drawing from 1998 published as part of her “Line Drawings” series (1995-2001) in *A Shady Promise* (2008) (Fig. 1) reveals this persistent fascination with dehumanising female bodies via arboreal structures. In this sketch, a sinuous trunk with knotted wood patterning splits at the apex to become a woman’s crotch, branching into two attenuated twiggy legs. The weird eroticism of the drawing pulls our attention to the woman’s sex organ at the centre of the arboreal figure. Here, the reproductive capacity of the tree is human rather than arboreal (which would be signified by flowering buds, fruit, seeds, or cones).¹⁹ By contrast, a later drawing from 2009-2010 (Fig. 2) similarly retains a woman’s sex organs in the naked buttocks and partially clothed legs and feet (wearing heeled boots that reference Mutu’s trademark obsession with stilettos). From the waist upwards, however, *she is all tree* – bushy palm fronds bursting across the page in glorious arboreal profusion.

¹⁴ Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Vicus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 3.

¹⁵ Chatterjee, “Political Plants,” p. 88. Chatterjee considers the example of Hindu nationalism absorbing anti-Western ideas of plant sentience into its own power struggle against Indian religious philosophies such as Buddhism and Jainism.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Vicus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 2.

¹⁸ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Fei Ren, Dong-Hui Yan, and Wei Dong, “Microbiome of reproductive organs of trees” in *Forest Microbiology, Volume 1: Tree Microbiome: Phyllosphere, Endosphere and Rhizosphere*, ed. Fred O. Asiegbu and Andriy Kovalchuk (London: Academic Press, 2021), pp. 145-158.



Fig. 1. Sketchbook drawing, 1998, ink pen on paper.



Fig. 2. Sketchbook drawing, 2009-2010, pencil on paper.

Xyloid, woody structures in these drawings lend sexual potency to the erotically charged power of her collages, revealing the importance of tree trunks and branches to Mutu's ligneous dismembering of the female form. Sometimes, as in *Pin-Up* (2001) (Fig. 3), the human figure remains relatively intact with respect to her arboreal setting. Similarly, the woman in *Preying Mantra* (2006) (Fig. 4) reclines against a tree in an arboreal reworking of the classical nude lying on a chaise longue. The space between foreground and background is flattened into a chaos of queasy geometric patterns that resemble traditionally woven Kuba cloth, as the chaise becomes the tree; folded unnaturally like the jointed legs of an insect, the woman's nonhuman legs match her grotesque physiognomy. More often, Mutu's exaggerated, sexualized women are composed out of collaged composites of numerous anatomical parts, as in her "Hybrid" series (2003-2006). Leaning against the bark of tree trunks (*People in Glass Towers Should Not Imagine Us*, 2003), these hybrid women frolic, and flicker into avian and vegetal forms sprouting fluid tendrils (*Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head*, 2005, *How To Stab Oneself In the Back*, 2004); peck at each other in what might be aggressive foreplay or predatory kill; writhe and explode in unnatural congress (*Sleeping Sickness Saved Me*, 2005, *She's Egungun Again*, 2005). In some of Mutu's works, the reassembled female form draws strength from contact with the earth, her limbs splaying into mycelium as complex root systems penetrate and emanate from her (*Sprout*, 2010).

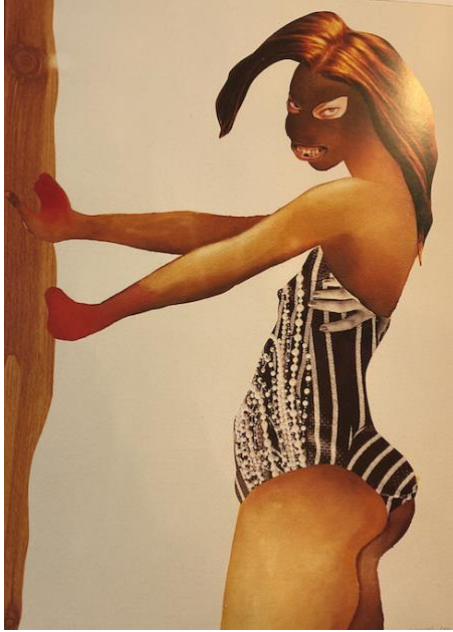


Fig 3. *Pin-Up*, 2001, water colour collage on paper.

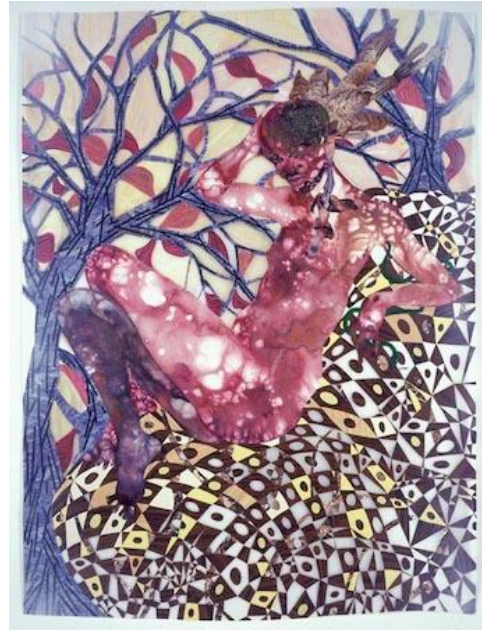


Fig 4. *Preying Mantra*, 2006, mixed media on Mylar.

Mutu's long-standing interest in human-tree hybrids can be read in the context of a paradigm shift in forest ecology, cultural anthropology, and the mycological turn. Research into fungal networks has unequivocally proved that trees act as sentient agents, working co-operatively within the forest ecology through their subterranean fungal partners (known as mycorrhizae) to communicate and share resources in a network popularised as the "wood wide web." As Peter Wohlleben writes in *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016) trees use their mycorrhizal networks to send chemical compounds and facilitate the exchange of nutrients with other trees, enacting social gestures such as cooperation and altruism. Anthropologists have built on this important shift in forest ecology, incorporating perspectives from the critical posthumanities that reconsider human subjectivity as part of a network of human and nonhuman relationships. Reconceived as lively, agential "vibrant matter,"²⁰ we can start to understand how nonhuman actors such as trees and fungi survive and thrive through "continual acts of perception and interpretation" that reveal their role as world-makers, "shap[ing] our planet in largely unrecognized ways."²¹ In *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (2013), the anthropologist Eduardo Kuhn demonstrates that ways of seeing and knowing are not exclusively human activities. Years of fieldwork informs this landmark study, which illustrates what Kuhn calls "thinking with forests." In the indigenous communities of Ecuador's Upper Amazon region, Kuhn discovers how the Ávila people learn from their nonhuman neighbours, venerating the sentience of trees, the decision-making of insect colonies, copying the prowling jaguar, and interacting among all the interspecies communication between flora and fauna in the rainforest's rich biodiversity.

²⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

²¹ Michael J. Hathaway, *What a Mushroom Lives For: Matsutake and the Worlds They Make* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), pp. 73, xiii.

Understanding how forests think requires reframing our anthropomorphic gaze; for Kuhn, myths of the indigenous Ávila reveal a multi-perspectival aesthetic attuned to the relationality of the forest's agential selves all living in their own particular timescale, passing information to their kin across generational linkages of biology, geology, and evolution. Kuhn's method of "thinking with forests" can help us break centuries of tradition in landscape painting, in which trees are used to contextualise human protagonists, signify geographical location, or reveal human-constructed sites of cultivation (gardens) set against originary sylvan Arcadia (wilderness).

Mutu's aesthetic project of arboreal dehumanisation is enacted through her use of *xyloid sexuality*. In what follows, I analyse how xyloid sexuality functions in selected examples of Mutu's collage and multimedia artworks to dismantle the human. I explore this odd eroticism, asking: how do Mutu's multimedia collages, paintings, and sculptures help us think beyond species distinctions between humans and trees, as well as the fungal and microbial worlds within which they are entangled? Can these artworks help us adapt at a time of rapidly escalating climate emergency? If we can move beyond a human point of view to start *thinking with trees*, what might be gained from the speculative exercise of imagining *fucking (with) trees*? Might this grotesque post-species encounter help us construct, as Chelsea M. Frazier puts it, "new ecologies 'rich with utopian possibilities' that reflect and audaciously critique the racial, spatial, and gendered ordering of our present world"?²²

Palm tree planets: building a new world

At first glance, we hardly notice the trees in the right-hand panel of Mutu's diptych *Yo Mama* (2003) (Fig. 5). It is the figure of Eve, on the left-hand panel, that commands our attention. Slouching suggestively, legs splayed in an eroticized manner, she perches in veldtgrass. Her mottled skin might be patterned fur: the piebald markings of an African wild dog or spotted Hyena, or the black and tan camouflage of a leopard in a tree.²³ Her left hand and shoulder support the weight of a phallically elongated snake; its decapitated head is held in place by her six-inch stiletto boot. Decorated with African raffia grass, the boot skewers the snake's bloody neck. The postlapsarian symbolism of Eve and the snake leaving the Garden of Eden is complicated by the fact that Eve uses the snake's dead body to lasso a globular, jellyfish-like planet on the right-hand panel, which is colonised by small palm trees with blackened trunks and blue leaves. With their biblical significance (of peace, eternal life, victory), the palm trees complete the surreal religious scene.

Let's consider the religious significance of the palm trees in this diptych first, before deciphering how Mutu's repurposing of Eve and the snake can help us understand the importance of xyloid sexuality in *Yo Mama*.

²² Chelsea M. Frazier, "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 2(1) (2016): 40-72 (p. 60).

²³ Wangechi Mutu has discussed her fascination with leopard print and the connection with leopards hiding in trees. See Deborah Willis, "Oral History Project: Wangechi Mutu," *Bomb Magazine*, 28 February 2014: <https://bombmagazine.org/> (Last accessed 21 February 2023).



Fig. 5. *Yo Mama*, 2003, ink, mica flakes, acrylic, pressure-sensitive film, cut-and-pasted printed paper, and painted paper on paper.

Christianity, Islam, and Judaism privilege the palm tree as possessing life-giving properties that sustain human existence, adapting older source materials in classical antiquity. As Suleiman A. Mourad notes, the palm tree story shared by the Qur'an and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (which relates the apocryphal story of Mary's life) originates in Greek source texts.²⁴ In Greek mythology, a sacred palm stood by Apollo's temple on the island of Delos, leading to the association of the palm with worship of Apollo. The story of Mary's labour in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew syncretises this Hellenistic source with Mary's flight to Egypt with Joseph and Jesus to escape the Massacre of the Innocents. Staggering during labour pains, Mary rests against the trunk of a palm tree and the voice of Jesus calls out: "Shake toward you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you ripe dates. Eat and drink and be satisfied."²⁵ Later, as Mary and Joseph traverse the desert landscape, they come to rest beneath the shade of a palm tree. Desperate for water, Jesus commands the tree to bend towards his mother and refresh her with its ripe fruit: "Raise yourself, O palm, and be strong and be the companion of my trees which are in the paradise of my Father; and open from your roots a vein of water which is hidden in the earth and let the waters flow, so that we may quench our thirst" (Pseudo-Matthew 20.1-2).²⁶ Mourad notes the similarity of Mary's encounter with the miraculous palm tree with

²⁴ The myth of Leto birthing her son Apollo can be found in Hellenistic art and literature, including Homer's *Odyssey*, Cicero's *Laws*, and Pliny's *Natural History*. Suleiman A. Mourad, "From Hellenism to Christianity and Islam: The Origin of the Palm Tree Story Concerning Mary and Jesus in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Qur'an," *Oriens Christianus*, 86 (2002): 206-216 (pp. 206, 210).

²⁵ Mourad, "The Origin," p. 208.

²⁶ Mourad, "The Origin," p. 208.

the birth story of Buddha, born beneath a sāl tree (*Shorea robusta*), a sacred tree in India. Like the palm tree story in Pseudo-Matthew, the sāl also bends its branches down to Maha Maya, the labouring woman; as soon as she touches its leaves Buddha is born.²⁷ *Yo Mama* inverts these religious versions of the palm tree story. Rather than her husband (Joseph) or her son (Jesus) commanding the palm to offer succour to Mary due her labour, as in the Christian or Buddhist sources, in Mutu's version the maternal figure herself commands total control.

Read within the context of the palm tree's religious connotations, we can see that the presence of the blue palms in Mutu's diptych hints at the centrality of reproduction to this artwork. But what order of reproduction? We are given some clues by the viscous pink void that constitutes the image's background. The depthlessness is elementally ambiguous – are we floating in the air? Underwater? In space? The diptych is riven with movement, populated by oversized fungal spores and wobbly eddies that suggest spermatozoa. This weirdly astral wombworld signifies fecundity ex utero, aerosolized dispersal rather than painful parturition. Reproduction is taking place in this image, but not in a human or mammalian sense. If we consider the palm tree's religious connotations *Yo Mama* becomes an alien *birth scene*. Read as such, Mutu's Eve proclaims her xyloid sexuality in the multispecies assemblage that is part woman, part snake, part alien palm planet. Like the Afrofuturist jazz pioneer Sun Ra, who famously claimed he was “not a human” having come to Earth “from somewhere else, where I was part of something that is so wonderful that there are no words to express it,”²⁸ she is extra-terrestrial as well as extra-human. In this fungal sporescape, Eve has stitched herself into relation with the arboreal, mycelial, and animal kingdoms and is building a better new world.

Species-defying progeny

There is an explicit utopianism to Mutu's palm tree motif. In his work on the Black Fantastic, the British writer and art curator Ekow Eshun suggests that “[a]lthough in the popular imaginary the palm tree stands for something idyllic, tropical, and exotic, the historical journey of arriving at this apparent idyll is a charged journey.”²⁹ Mutu explores the palm's “charged journey” in *Le Noble Savage* (2006) (Fig. 6), appropriating the tree as a signifier of indigeneity subjected to the colonial gaze. In the artwork, a composite Black woman kneels in tall raffia grass, one hand on hip, the other thrusting a palm tree towards the sky.

²⁷ Mourad, “The Origin,” p. 213.

²⁸ Sun Ra qtd in John F. Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), pp. 5-6.

²⁹ Ekow Eshun qtd in Caroline Edwards, “Reflecting on the Black Fantastic: An Interview with Ekow Eshun,” *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, 52(2) (2023): 64-79 (p. 77).

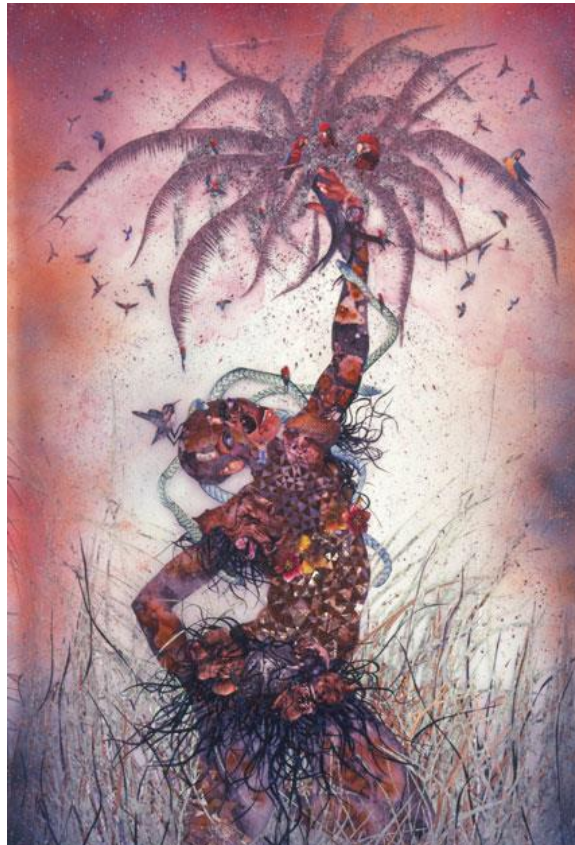


Fig. 6. *Le Noble Savage*, 2006, ink and collage on Mylar.

Gracefully cupped like a bouquet of flowers, the pale purple palm is discordantly under-sized, its trunk and roots reduced to a phallically small scale compared with the distended palm fronds. The fronds spring open with vigorous kineticism: almost three dozen parrots disperse from them like a cloud of gnats. The woman is athletic, her fine musculature woven out of brown geometric patterning, blossoming flowers, and animal body parts (a lion's face is just visible on her right shoulder. A snake coils around her arm, its head pushing up into the tree. As we have already seen in *Yo Mama*, in this collaged work we are confronted with another Eve, another snake, and another savage meditation upon what knowledge might cost us. The artwork's title *Le Noble Savage* recalls European colonial "visions of savage paradise," as Rebecca Parker Brienen terms them.³⁰ Refracted through the gaze of Portuguese and Dutch settlers, Black figures from colonies in Brazil and the Central Americas appeared as exotic Arcadians in an emerging visual tradition of ethnographic portraiture. In a series of eight life-sized oil paintings produced in 1641, for example, the Dutch still life artist Albert Eckhout documented the local flora, fauna, and people of the short-lived Dutch colony in northern Brazil. As Brienen writes, Eckhout's painting of a warrior from the Gold Coast, *African Man with Weapons, Brazil* (Fig. 7), features a large palm tree to signify the African man's sexuality: "the black man's strength and virility are emphasised by his muscular appearance and the phallic form of the palm tree on his left."³¹ In Eckhout's painting, the sexual prowess and virility conferred upon the man

³⁰ Rebecca Parker Brienen, *Visions of Savage Paradise: Albert Eckhout, Court Painter in Colonial Dutch Brazil* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

³¹ Brienen, *Visions of Savage Paradise*, p. 134.

by proximity to the palm, which is undeniably phallic in shape, is reinforced by his near-nakedness, the broken elephant tusk at his left foot, and his Akan decorative sword. *African Man* is complemented by another of Eckhout's lie-sized portraits, *African Woman and Child*. As critics have noted, these two portraits were designed to be hung side by side: each features a prominent tree that locates the subjects (the palm and elephant tusk locate the African man on the Gold Coast, whilst the papaya tree locates the African woman and her child on the Brazilian coast).³²



Fig. 7. Albert Eckhout, *African Woman and Child*, 1641, oil on canvas.

Fig. 8. Albert Eckhout, *African Man with Weapons, Brazil*, 1641, oil on canvas.

If we consider Mutu's *Le Noble Savage* alongside *African Woman and Child* and *African Man* (Figs. 7 and 8), we can read the artwork as a contemporary reworking of *African Woman and Child*. Where Eckhout's use of visual rhetoric confers fecundity upon the woman in *African Woman and Child* through her bared breasts, basket of

³² Rebecca Brienen, "Albert Eckhout's African Woman and Child (1641): Ethnographic Portraiture, Slavery, and the New World Subject" in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 229-256 (p. 246).

ripe fruit, suggestively short skirt, and her young son, Mutu's Black woman suggests fecundity of a different kind. Rather than a child, she engenders an avian multitude that arcs into the stratosphere. There is an ejaculative sense in which the parrots issue directly from the tree; spurting upwards and outwards, the tropical birds are the species-defying progeny of a human-xyloid sexual encounter. As Odili Donald Odita notes, the three larger parrots nestled on the palm's trunk invoke the Holy Trinity, connecting this "jungle priestess" with a Mother Mary as well as a Mother Nature whose collaged form contains water buffalo, lions, tigers, leopards, and hummingbirds.³³ Mutu's use of Mylar, a semi-transparent film used in architectural drawings, is significant here. As we have seen in *Yo Mama*, the translucent Mylar background establishes a vacuum; decontextualised, a mottled ochre and violet tabula rasa upon which the female savage charts her own course, builds her own future. The effect is celestial. Like the lurid nebulae in which new stars are formed, the Mylar backdrop constructs a de-sacralised heaven that borrows its mottled texture from NASA space telescopes. Mutu's use of Mylar with ink and paper reclaims "the tools of those who charted the project of empire centuries earlier: 'geologists, archaeologists, surveyors and mapmakers'," as Kelly Jones has observed.³⁴ Like the palm planet in *Yo Mama*, which suggested extraterrestrial new worlds, the palm tree raised by *Le Noble Savage* reaches into a celestial miasma of worldbuilding and map-making, upending colonial cartographies.

The woman's xyloid sexuality offers a powerful reworking of centuries of epistemological violence waged upon the female bodies of indigenous, non-European women through colonial encounter. As Jennifer L. Morgan writes, the "enormous symbolic burden" projected onto indigenous women in Africa and the Americas in written travel accounts by settlers such as Richard Ligon, Walter Raleigh, and Edward Long produced the female African body as "both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black."³⁵ Seventeenth-century travel accounts such as the *True and Exact History of Barbadoes*, published by the planter Richard Ligon who had arrived in the new colony in 1647, established the bestialized trope of Black women, with their breasts "hang[ing] down below their Navels, so that when they stoop at their common work of weeding, they hang almost to the ground, that at a distance you would think they had six legs."³⁶ The monstrous image of the six-legged Negro woman labouring on the plantation racialized and bestialized Black femininity in order to articulate a European identity that was "religiously, culturally, and phenotypically superior to the black or brown persons they sought to define."³⁷ As Morgan notes, Amerigo Vespucci wrote home about "the sexualized danger inherent in the man-slaying woman," constructing monstrous female figures that he credited with "biting off the penises of their sexual partners, thus linking cannibalism – an absolute indicator of savagery and distance from European norms – to female sexual insatiability."³⁸

³³ Odili Donald Odita, "Savage Beauty: The Work of Wangechi Mutu" in *Wangechi Mutu, This You Call Civilization?*, ed. David Moos (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010), pp. 28-33 (pp. 28, 30).

³⁴ Kellie Jones, "Survey" in *Wangechi Mutu* (pp. 51-102), p. 69.

³⁵ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 15-16.

³⁶ Richard Ligon qtd in Morgan, *Laboring Women*, p. 14. Mutu incorporates the colonial trope of African women's breasts hanging down so long they could sling them over their shoulders to feed their children carried on their backs in *Sketchbook Drawing* (1996), replacing the suckling infant with the woman breastfeeding herself.

³⁷ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, p. 14.

³⁸ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, p. 19.

Forest escapes from the plantation economy

In reclaiming the nonhuman through her arboreal works, Mutu reminds us of the racist process of dehumanization through which European humanism constructed whiteness by bestializing Blackness within the category of the “animal.” As Joseph R. Winters writes, modernity’s historical dialectic was founded on the idea of teleological progress from the primitive towards the civilized: “according to Hegel, Spirit [*Geist*] ‘skips over’ Africa, meaning that Africa does not participate in the development of reason, truth, and freedom. [...] Hegel’s thought [thus] demonstrates how the logic of progress operates to establish and justify racial hierarchies.”³⁹ *Le Noble Savage* responds to this colonial signification of the indigenous woman-as-savage by occupying the racist image. As one reviewer of the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum where *Le Noble Savage* was displayed in 2013-2014 writes, Mutu’s so-called savage “obviously refers to colonialist dreams of docile natives and exploitable resources. But she’s also dangerous: an Eve on steroids, fused with the tree of knowledge...”⁴⁰ Mutu’s artwork confronts the colonial gaze with what Tina Campt calls “a Black gaze,” which shifts “the optics of ‘looking at’ to a politics of *looking with, through, and alongside another*.”⁴¹ In looking with and alongside the Black female protagonist in Mutu’s artwork we can trace how her trans-species fecundity has propelled her from the reproductive labour of bearing more children to become plantation workers into xyloid sexuality, as a sphere of liberation in which reproduction between species can imagine new worlds. Released from human sexual reproduction, the woman’s xyloid sexuality reminds us of what lies beyond the plantation economy from which she has emerged. As Alex Zamalin writes, runaway slave colonies in the United States, such as the all-Black town of Mound Bayou in the Mississippi Delta (which was founded by ex-slaves in 1887), express an explicit “utopian strain of hope.”⁴² Trees provided essential protection to runaway slaves (Maroons) escaping plantations and gold mines in Dutch and French colonies, sheltering escaped slaves in the eastern Amazon of Brazil, Suriname, and Guyana. The 1770s Maroon rebellion in the Dutch colony of Surinam was forged in settlements in the forest; this utopian connection between revolutionary uprising and arboreal sanctuary is hinted at in William Blake’s engravings of the rebellion (which accompanied the Dutch army officer John Stedman’s *Narrative of a five years expedition against the revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796)), in which tall, spindly palms and distant forested mountains contextualise the Maroon uprising.⁴³ Arboreal qualities are frequently used to describe these Maroon communities as

³⁹ Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 9-10.

⁴⁰ Budick, “Wangechi Mutu,” n. pag.

⁴¹ Tina Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021), p. 8 [italics in original].

⁴² Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 7.

⁴³ John Stedman, “Narrative of a five years expedition against the revolted Negroes of Surinam,” with engravings by William Blake, “Restoration and 18th Century Collection,” *The British Library*. Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/john-stedmans-narrative-of-a-five-years-expedition-against-the-revolted-negroes-of-surinam-with-engravings-by-william-blake> (Last accessed 2 March 2023).

rooting themselves into the tropical landscape, which derive from the refuge that forests and wooded bush afforded them.⁴⁴

Read in the context of their importance to anti-colonial rebellions and the utopian formation of all-Black communities of freed slaves, trees can be identified as central to Mutu's Black gaze in works such as *Yo Mama* and *Le Noble Savage*. Thinking *alongside*, as Campit would put it, the violent experiences of surviving the plantation economy, Mutu's Black gaze helps viewers of her work reflect upon the ways in which this genocidal legacy underpins every present moment within systemic anti-Black racism in Mutu's home of the United States. Another way of understanding how xyloid sexuality functions within Mutu's distinctive Black gaze is to examine the arboreal reproductive and kinship structures of trees themselves. The work of Canadian forest ecologist Suzanne Simard has been instrumental in a recent paradigm shift in how we think about trees. One of Simard's contributions has been to highlight the essential role that "Mother trees" play in the evolution of this mycorrhizal network.⁴⁵ Mother trees are old-growth arboreal hubs that share their resources and can communicate with trees around them in the forest using the subterranean mycelial infrastructure of their fungal partners. Simard describes these veteran trees as "the majestic hubs at the center of forest communication, protection, and sentience"; trees that are "mothering their children."⁴⁶

Simard's gendering of sentient arboreal agents as "mothers" offers an interesting human-arboreal perspective from which to consider xyloid sexuality in Mutu's works. The queerness and grotesquerie of xyloid sexuality in these artworks performs the radical political work of undoing heteronormative constructions of motherhood and reminds us of the racialised way in which motherhood continues to function in the contemporary United States. If Mutu's entangled subjects are trans-species mothers, they encourage us to ask: who is allowed to perform the work of mothering? As Cynthia Dewi Oka reminds us, "[w]omen of color have been violently punished and stigmatized for mothering."⁴⁷ The system of plantation capitalism that produced the modern American state entrenched a legacy of genocidal attacks on non-white mothering, from the forcible removal of enslaved women's children, the mass sterilization of indigenous women, and removal of their children into residential schools and white foster homes, to the ongoing injustice of women of colour leaving their own children to provide childcare for affluent white families, and the incarceration of their children as they mature into a system of poverty-fuelled violence and criminalization. Under these circumstances, Black mothering is a radical act. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes, "[t]hose of us who nurture the lives of children who are not supposed to exist, who are not supposed to grow up, who are revolutionary in their very beings are doing some of the most subversive work in the world."⁴⁸

The inter- and trans-species mothering taking place in Mutu's works adds a critical dimension to Simard's ecological concept of Mother Trees. This weird arboreal

⁴⁴ Miguel Pinedo-Vasquez, Susanna Hecht and Christine Padoch, "Amazonia" in *Traditional Forest-Related Knowledge: Sustaining Communities, Ecosystems and Biocultural Diversity*, ed. John A. Parrotta and Ronald L. Trosper (New York: Springer, 2012), pp. 119-156 (p. 131).

⁴⁵ Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

⁴⁶ Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Cynthia Dewi Oka, "Mothering as Revolutionary Praxis" in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, ed. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), pp. 51-57 (p. 52).

⁴⁸ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "m/other ourselves: a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering" in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, ed. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), pp. 19-31 (p. 20).

mothering reminds us of the importance of embedding the revolutionary praxis of Black and indigenous social justice movements in environmental thinking. Like Simard's Mother Trees, it stretches arboreal species into messier, mycelial clusters. Many of Mutu's collages have a mycelial quality to them. If we look at *Royal Blue Arachnid Curse* (2005) (Fig. 9), for example, we can see the artwork's title is somewhat misleading. The black ink tendrils whipping out from the blue woman's head, hands, feet, and pubic hair are better understood as mycorrhizal hyphae (the branching filaments in fungi's subterranean network), rather than as arachnids. Whilst there is a spidery texture to them, these tendrils are rhizomatic, seemingly convulsing at speed into ever more elaborate clusters that intersect and seek out new territory as they stretch towards the edge of the paper. If we read this image in terms of its *arboreal qualities* we begin to understand the ways in which Mutu's more-than-human female figure gestures towards a biodiverse network of actors and agents. Each component of this network has lively intelligence; like Simard's ancient Mother Trees, the grotesque, fecund female figure in *Royal Blue Arachnid Curse* is a hub within this broader ecological web, both penetrating and penetrable as she pulses energy and nutrients through and around her. In *Eleven Secrets* (2015) (Fig. 10) Mutu literalises this arachnid-arboreal cross-speciation. A large arachnid form dominates the piece, hovering above the earth. The fine sensory spider hairs of its legs have morphed into rose thorns whilst its claws tunnel into the soil, splaying into various hybridised collage forms (leaves, carved objects, snakes, and human figures). As with all of Mutu's work, *nonhuman reproduction* is overtly configured in both of these collage paintings.



Fig. 9. *Royal Blue Arachnid Curse*, 2005, ink, acrylic, collage and contact paper on Mylar.

Let's pause for a moment to consider how Mutu's collage technique achieves this perspectival shift from the human to the arboreal. As Mutu has described in an early interview, collage "allowed me to create narrative work but with a non-realistic element to it. I was messing around with perspective. I'd seen a few works by Picasso and I loved the way he looked at things from different angles and they still ended up in one picture plane."⁴⁹



Fig. 10. *Eleven Secrets*, 2015, collage on vinyl.

Despite the Picasso-inspired multiperspectivalism of Mutu's drawings, what is striking in *Royal Blue Arachnid Curse* and *Eleven Secrets* is the narrative coherence of each human-arboreal figure. Unlike the discordant fragmentation we find in the Cubist paintings of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, which splinter the human self into multiple contradictory points of view, Mutu's collages present coherent, more-than-human, assemblages. Picasso and Braque use collage to achieve multiple simultaneous moments or temporalities, all of which share a *human point of view*. These works adopted a subjective Bergsonian *durée* that encompassed memory as well as futural

⁴⁹ Wangechi Mutu qtd in Robert Enright, "Resonant Surgeries: The Collaged World of Wangechi Mutu," *Border Crossings*, February 2008: <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/resonant-surgeries-the-collaged-world-of-wangechi-mutu> (Last accessed 21 February 2023).

anticipation.⁵⁰ Mutu, by contrast, uses collage to articulate the distinctly *nonhuman arboreal and mycorrhizal points of view* as forest ecologies intersect with the human form. Temporality in her artworks stretches across multiple evolutionary timescales.

Xyloid sexuality among queer trees

Let's consider the *queer ecological* implications of xyloid sexuality in one of Mutu's most influential works to date, *A Shady Promise* (2006) (Fig. 11). *A Shady Promise* is a large-format diptych featuring an arresting Black female figure in the right-hand panel. The skin on her legs, neck and bald skull is mottled Mylar, like the sporal blossoming of mould, whilst her abdominal trunk is formed out of xyloid patterning, echoed in the tree trunk against which she leans. The image is explicitly sexualized. Her back arched against a bending, river-like tree trunk, this woman masturbates the woody tendrils protruding from her groin. In characteristic style, Mutu has pasted an oversized pair of lips onto this face introducing an exaggeratedly sexualised element that has historically been used to signify Black femininity. As Chelsea M. Frazier notes, "black women are routinely positioned with their legs splayed or squatting on all fours. Often the images focus on their complacent faces, sexually explicit and inviting gestures..."⁵¹



Fig. 11. *A Shady Promise*, 2006, mixed media on Mylar.

This woman's sexuality both attracts and repels us. The pleasure she experiences connects her with a proliferant background of waving, whip-like grasses. The tree's spreading root-fingers are presented as anthropomorphised prostheses extending the

⁵⁰ Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, trans. Peter Read (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 2004), p. 135.

⁵¹ Frazier, "Troubling Ecology" p. 64.

woman's hands until she, too, manipulates pleasure deep into the soil. More extraordinary than all this, is the tree itself. Mutu's fantastical remediation of this arborescent structure is ouroboros-like. The tree curves into the ground at each end, its bending trunk failing to reach skywards and grow branches or leaves. The central theme of the artwork is non-reproductive sex, auto-erotic pleasure for its own sake. Neither the woman nor the tree are reproducing, yet the entire Mylar piece is bursting with erotic fulfilment; from the waving grassy tendrils, to the arboreal fingers spreading into the earth.

What should we make of the grotesque aesthetic in which this xyloid sexuality is framed? A queer ecological perspective helps us here. As Andil Gosine writes, homosexual and non-white sexuality have both been framed as dangerous, "queer acts":

Both are 'queer acts' in that they challenge the stated norms of collaborating colonial narratives of race, sex, and gender, through which modern formations of nature have been constituted. Both fail to meet and are threatening to the white nation-building projects engendered through the process of colonisation, and uncritically buttressed in historical and contemporary discourses of the environment and ecology.⁵²

In its representation of human-arboreal sexual pleasure, which is simultaneously alluring and repellent, *A Shady Promise* draws our attention to the naturalization of reproductive heteronormative sexuality via colonial constructions of race, gender, and nation. As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson point out, the emergence of "the homosexual" as a Victorian pathology signifying degeneracy and disease, coincides with post-Darwinian ideas of evolutionary sexual selection and reproductive fitness.⁵³ Explicitly presenting Black female sexual pleasure as a queer collaboration with nonhuman partners, Mutu's artwork powerfully asserts its right to articulate beauty, libidinal pleasure, and aesthetics on its own xyloid terms.

If we look closely, reproduction is in fact represented in the artwork in the tiny, collaged embrace of a naked mother and child perched on a bird that rests on the woman's head. This avowal of xyloid sexuality queers the arboreal mothering Simard ascribes to old-growth Mother Trees (discussed above). Understood as a transformative revolutionary praxis, rather than a biological function, *A Shady Promise* demonstrates that xyloid mothering is defiantly queer. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes:

'[M]othering' is a 'queer' thing. Not just when people who do not identify as heterosexual give birth or adopt children and parent them, but all day long and everywhere when we acknowledge the creative power of transforming ourselves and the ways we relate to each other. Because we were never meant to survive and here we are creating a world full of love.⁵⁴

⁵² Andil Gosine, "Non-white Reproduction and Same-Sex Eroticism: Queer Acts against Nature" in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 149-172 (p. 150).

⁵³ "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies" in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 1- 50 (p. 8).

⁵⁴ Gumbs, "m/other ourselves," p. 23.

The queerness of Black mothering is doubly potent. Not only were Black children not “meant to survive,” as Gumbs puts it, but their very survival depended on the disruption of motherhood’s biological function through community networks. When mothers are absent, the labour of mothering is shouldered by communities. Just as trees cannot be separated from their multispecies context aboveground and below, so that it is impossible to say “where the individual tree begins and where its environment ends,”⁵⁵ the work of Black mothering is similarly rooted.

Ligneous entanglement

In her recent sculptural works, Mutu has extended this queering of reproductive sexuality from the visual to the tactile, incorporating wood (often natal rhus, silver oak, paper pulp, and wood glue), as well as Kenyan soil, into her mixed media sculptures and collages (as in *Dark Portrait III* and *IV*, 2020, and *Prayer Beads II*, 2017). The *Sentinel* series (2018-19) and the stand-alone sculpture *Tree Woman* (2016) build on Mutu’s fascination with xyloid sexuality in her ink drawings, collages, and multimedia paintings. Where the earlier human-arboreal forms revelled in their grotesquerie and power to shock the viewer, from the monstrous hybridity of her sketchbook tree women to the mycorrhizal-arachnid networking of *Royal Blue Arachnid Curse* and *Eleven Secrets*, and the queer xyloid pleasure of masturbation in *A Shady Promise*, these sculptures offer an altogether more graceful entanglement of the human with the arboreal. Mutu’s careful alignment of tree branches with the human female form in *Tree Woman* radiates a joyous, powerful affect. Feet planted firmly apart, she strikes a powerful pose. Entwined with branches that support and enhance, rather than obscure, her athletic musculature, she looks every bit the fashion model or dancer; the tips of twigs at her feet have the appearance of stilettos and the gnarly branch protruding from the top of her head resembles a thick plait of African hair. Her posture suggests confidence, self-possession, and the wooded entanglement is perfectly calibrated to convey human-arboreal symbiosis. *Sentinel I* and *IV* (2018-19), which were displayed together at the Legion of Honor in the Fine Arts Museums, San Francisco, are similarly arresting ligneous figures. Built out of clay pulp, wood glue, concrete, and a variety of African wood sources (including mango, acacia, baobab, silver oak, teak, jacaranda, natal rhus, croton, ficus, fever tree, and magic guarri), they move fluidly between the human and the arboreal.

Where *Tree Woman* wears Mutu’s signature stiletto shoes (extended in a series of arborescent stilettos titled *Heeler 1-XIX*, 2016, which are made of Kenyan red soil, wood glue, paper pulp, rock, and wood), the Sentinels balance on branches that bifurcate into cloven hooves or support their weight like a crutch. Body parts are entirely branch or bough – one has no skull, whilst two others are armless, and the molten multiperspectival effect is to create a simultaneity of coexisting evolutionary timescales. They feel unfinished, fluid like phloem (trees’ living vascular, photosynthesising tissue) or bubbling epidermal growth. Combined, the human and ligneous tissue produce a sculptural excrescence, or abnormal growth. Looking up at these tall sculptures we can imagine that the gnarly burls, which commonly bulge out of tree trunks, have ripened into human appendages; that we ourselves have evolved out of originary sylvan environments. Sometimes burls on a tree’s bark grow in

⁵⁵ Dalia Nassar and Margaret Barbour, “Tree Stories: The Embodied History of Trees and Environmental Ethics,” *Cultural Politics*, 19(1) (2023): 128-147 (p. 141).

response to insect damage, at other times bud tissue appears to multiply into knotted excreting forms;⁵⁶ in Mutu's sculptures the burly joins where tree bud tissue blends into human skeletal and muscular form are almost invisible. This complete assimilation of woman and tree recalls what Tiffany King calls "Black fungibility" in her analysis of plantation landscapes. Rather than the image of the Black labouring body, which has dominated visual and conceptual representations of ideas of Blackness through the "spatial practices of conquest and settlement in the Americas," we might imagine a different spatial analytic for Black bodies. As King writes:

... theorizing Black bodies as *forms of flux or space in process* rather than as human producers, stewards and occupiers of space enables at least a momentary reflection upon the other kinds of (and often forgotten) relationships that Black bodies have to plants, objects, and non-human life forms.⁵⁷

Whilst Black fungibility can offer "a resource for Black freedom," King is careful to qualify that it has also emerged through the colonial visual rhetoric of representing Black bodies "imagined as plants, vegetation, and spatial potential" in works such as Richard Ligon's seventeenth-century travelogue (discussed above).⁵⁸ Continually growing, evolving, excreting, and expanding, Mutu's xyloid Black gaze devours everything in its path, pulling into contiguity a mycorrhizal network of the human and nonhuman. This is an example of utopian Black being that defies the racialization and bestialization through which Black life has been forced to exist under settler colonialism and contemporary anti-Black racism. Like Ekow Eshun's concept of *Black aliveness*, Mutu's xyloid fungibility gestures towards a more-than-human world in which we glimpse "what it feel[s] like, to live an unencumbered, unconstrained life outside the dominance and the terror of a white gaze..."⁵⁹

Conclusion: surviving in a treeless world

In dehumanising her Black female figures by exploring their arboreal connections, Wangechi Mutu reveals a powerful aesthetic strategy for articulating humane values that negate a historically contingent form of humanism. This, as we have seen, is the humanism propagated by European colonialism and its intellectual project of Enlightenment, powered by the capital accumulation of plantation capitalism. It is a humanism that treats nonhuman agents as raw materials waiting to be exploited; whether yet-to-be-mined rock replete with valuable fossil fuels, virgin forest waiting to be converted into lumber, undomesticated animals that can be hunted or farmed for profit, or the Black and indigenous bodies living in proximity to nonhuman agents, whose unpaid labour squeezes yet more profit into the carceral, colonial state. This kind of humanism has forgotten that "[w]hen we destroy trees, we destroy

⁵⁶ Michelle Grabowski and Rebecca Koetter, "Non-harmful Tree Conditions," *University of Minnesota Extension Project* (last updated in 2018). Available at: <https://extension.umn.edu/trees-and-shrubs/non-harmful-tree-conditions#:~:text=on%20silver%20maple-,Burls,has%20been%20no%20proven%20cause> (Last accessed 2 March 2023).

⁵⁷ Tiffany Lethabo King, "The Labor of (Re)reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(ly)," *Antipode*, 48(4) (2016): 1022-1039 (p. 1023) (my italics).

⁵⁸ King, "(Re)reading Plantation Landscapes," p. 1023.

⁵⁹ Ekow Eshu qtd in "In the Black Fantastic," n. pag.

ourselves,”⁶⁰ as Jakelin Troy writes. Troy, a specialist in Indigenous Research at the University of Sydney and a member of Ngyamitjimitung clan of the Ngarigu Indigenous Peoples of South-Eastern Australia, reminds us of our connectedness to arboreal environments and ecosystems. To this end, Troy urges us to bring indigenous names and knowledge systems for trees and plants back into everyday use. Relearning names such as the Aboriginal *gadi* (grass tree, after which the Gadigal clan named themselves), *damun* (Port Jackson fig tree, in the Dharug language), the Torwali *lo see thaam* (ancient deodar forests in northern Pakistan, being cut down by the Taliban to sell for timber), and the Mapuche *Pehuén* (sacred Araucaria forests of the southern Andes, being devastated by logging), connects these trees to the languages of the indigenous people who live alongside them.⁶¹

Between the Black female bodies that reclaim their bestial, mycelial, and arboreal connections in erogenous acts of redemption and the sprawling vegetal lives that conjugate, and copulate, promiscuously around them in Wangechi Mutu’s artworks, there is a powerful aesthetic dimension at play here. Returning to plant studies, we might ask whether there is also a danger of ascribing a Romantic status to trees-as-redeemers. Do we inadvertently humanize trees even as we look to their nonhuman agentive possibilities?⁶² What are the implications of this new arboreal humanism? One response to this critical problem is to recognise the non-sovereign status of trees themselves. As Dalia Nassar and Margaret Barbour write in a recent issue of *Cultural Politics*, trees “express *both* themselves *and* their world” since they “cannot be separated from their environments in any substantial way...”⁶³ Unlike animals, trees articulate their own reality in unavoidably relational, dialogic terms over the longue durée of arboreal developmental time. As we have seen in the above examples of human-arboreal masturbation or the building of new worlds on extraterrestrial palm-inhabited planets, trees confront us with desire as well as nostalgia. Perhaps their charismatic status within the plant kingdom can help draw attention to those less exciting shrubs, smaller plants that are overlooked, or hidden vegetal lives beyond our gaze, helping them to emerge from what Michael Marder calls “the zone of absolute obscurity” within Western philosophy.⁶⁴ Artworks such as Wangechi Mutu’s xyloid collages and mixed media paintings encourage viewers to reflect on our human connection to trees and their relational entanglement within the environments they help to build; as arresting figures of vegetal life, these sexualised trees confront centuries of ethical neglect. Like the Black women who writhe up against their trunks or sprout into arboreal and mycelial forms, Mutu’s trees refute silence and objectification.

At a time of escalating ecocatastrophe, as we enter the sixth mass extinction event, reigniting our social (and perhaps sexual) relationships with trees is an urgent matter of survival. Focussing on the arboreal qualities of Mutu’s prolific oeuvre helps

⁶⁰ Jakelin Troy, “Trees are at the heart of our country – we should learn their Indigenous names,” *The Guardian*, 1 April 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/01/trees-are-at-the-heart-of-our-country-we-should-learn-their-indigenous-names> (Last accessed 15 February 2023).

⁶¹ Troy, “Trees are at the heart of our country,” n. pag. Mutu has described her father’s obsession with indigenous trees in interview: “He would preach to us about learning their names, what they do, how they grow. He’d pull over the car, get us out, and make us look at a little shrub, and go, ‘This tree...da-da-da...’” As she reflects, “It gave us this love-hate feeling about what that meant, indigenous trees.” Wangechi Mutu qtd in Deborah Willis, “Oral History Project: Wangechi Mutu,” *Bomb Magazine*, 28 February 2014: <https://bombmagazine.org/> (Last accessed 21 February 2023).

⁶² I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer that posed these questions in feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

⁶³ Nassar and Barbour, “Tree Stories,” p. 140.

⁶⁴ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, p. 2.

us rethink human exceptionalism and discrete human subjectivity understood as divorced from “the natural.” As Mutu has said in interview, “[t]here’s something about the body that confines us, that disables us, and that prevents us from being immaterial, being invisible, being all of these things that maybe you want to be...”⁶⁵ As we can see in her most recent exhibition (at the time of writing) at the 500-acre open-air Storm King Art Center in New York’s Hudson Valley, this utopian ecological message is a vital preoccupation in Mutu’s work. One of eight large-scale bronze sculptures, *In Two Canoe* (2022) (Fig. 15) features two fluidly xyloid figures seated in a 15-foot-long canoe. Resembling mangrove trees, their heads are formed out of unfurling leaf buds that taper into points like alien African head wraps. Perhaps we might see them as emerging out of their wintry hibernation, slowly starting to crack into woody movement, sinking root-like fingers into the grass, their melting mycelial limbs stitching into relation with everything around them. The canoe acts as a water feature, and the gentle sound of trickling water confers upon this sculpture a profound sense of peacefulness.⁶⁶ Contemplating this bronze sculpture, even remotely via video recording, slows us into a calm reverie. The sculpture is so fluid and alive, yet perfectly still. Here, we arrive at a xyloid entanglement between tree-women and their environment that is free of the grotesquerie of Mutu’s earlier arboreal sketchbook drawings and multimedia collages, in which fucking trees became thinkable. Looking on, we are transported into a future in which humans might *think with trees*, imagining arboreal-human hybrids that usher in a gentler pace of life. Beyond species boundaries, this utopian gaze shows us how to celebrate beauty, hope, and pleasure by looking *with* and *alongside*, rather than looking *at* both Blackness and the arboreal, as sites of more-than-human possibility.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Wangechi Mutu who has kindly provided permission to reproduce the artworks analysed in this article. I would also like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers at *Cultural Politics*, whose reader reports were so helpful in revising an earlier draft of the article. Finally, my thanks to Mark Featherstone, Eva Giraud, Ryan Bishop and Areti Giannopoulou for their encouragement and support.

Works Cited:

Artworks by Wangechi Mutu (in chronological order):

- Sketchbook Drawing* (1996).
- Sketchbook Drawing* (1998).
- Pin-Up* (2001).
- People in Glass Towers Should Not Imagine Us* (2003).
- Yo Mama* (2003).
- How To Stab Oneself In the Back* (2004).
- Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head* (2005).

⁶⁵ Wangechi Mutu qtd in Deborah Willis, “Wangechi Mutu,” *Bomb Magazine*, 28 February 2014: <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/wangechi-mutu/> (Last accessed 16 February 2023).

⁶⁶ For a video of the sculpture in situ, see: Graham Mason, “Wangechi Mutu, *In Two Canoe*, 2022 -,” *Storm King Art Center Vimeo channel*, 31 August 2022: <https://vimeo.com/745247340> (Last accessed 10 March 2023).

She's Egungun Again (2005).
Sleeping Sickness Saved Me (2005).
Royal Blue Arachnid Curse (2005).
Preying Mantra (2006).
Le Noble Savage (2006).
A Shady Promise (2006).
Sprout (2010).
Eleven Secrets (2015).
Tree Woman (2016).
Prayer Beads II (2017).
Sentinel I, II, III and IV (2018-19).
Dark Portrait III and IV (2020).
In Two Canoe (2022).

References:

- Alvarado, Leticia. "Flora and Fauna Otherwise: Black and Brown Aesthetics of Relation in Firelei Báez and Wangechi Mutu." *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, 1(3) (2019): 8-24
- Anon. "In the Black Fantastic: Ekow Eshun in Conversation," *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, 52(1) (Spring 2023, forthcoming).
- Barr, Beth Alison. *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021).
- Budick, Ariella. "Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey, Brooklyn Museum, New York – Review." *Financial Times*, 26 November 2013:
<https://www.ft.com/content/9cd157e8-3a32-11e3-9243-00144feab7de> (Last accessed 16 February 2023).
- Brienen, Rebecca P. "Albert Eckhout's African Woman and Child (1641): Ethnographic Portraiture, Slavery, and the New World Subject" in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 229-256.
- *Visions of Savage Paradise: Albert Eckhout, Court Painter in Colonial Dutch Brazil* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
- Campt, Tina M. *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
- Cervenak, Sarah Jane. "Like Blood or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu's Resistant Harvests." *Feminist Studies*, 42(2) (2016): 392-425
- Chatterjee, Sria. "Political Plants: Art, Design, and Plant Sentience." *Cultural Politics*, 19(1) (2023): 86-106
- Edwards, Adrienne, Courtney J. Martin, Kellie Jones, and Chika Okeke-Agulu (eds). *Wangechi Mutu* (New York: Phaidon, 2022).
- Edwards, Caroline. "Reflecting on the Black Fantastic: An Interview with Ekow Eshun," *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, 52(2) (2023): 64-79
- Enright, Robert. "Resonant Surgeries: The Collaged World of Wangechi Mutu." *Border Crossings*, February 2008:
<https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/resonant-surgeries-the-collaged-world-of-wangechi-mutu> (Last accessed 21 February 2023).
- Eshun, Ekow. "The Black Fantastic: A Way of Seeing" in *In the Black Fantastic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2022), pp. 9-28.

- Farebrother, Rachel. *The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
- Frazier, Chelsea M. "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism." *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 2(1) (2016): 40-72
- Gaines, Malik and Alexandro Segade. "Tactical Collage" in Wangechi Mutu, *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise* (Bologna: Damiani, 2008).
- Gibson, Prudence and Baylee Brits (eds). *Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an Anthropocentric World* (Goleta, CA: punctum books, 2018).
- Gordon, Sean. "Wangechi Mutu Explores Afrofuturism and The New Humanism with *Ndoro Na Miti*," *Paste Magazine*, 12 February 2017: <https://www.pastemagazine.com/visual-arts/wangechi-mutu/wangechi-mutu-the-new-humanism/> (Last accessed 2 September 2021).
- Gosine, Andil. "Non-white Reproduction and Same-Sex Eroticism: Queer Acts against Nature" in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 149-172.
- Grabowski, Michelle and Rebecca Koetter. "Non-harmful Tree Conditions." *University of Minnesota Extension Project* (last updated in 2018). Available at: <https://extension.umn.edu/trees-and-shrubs/non-harmful-tree-conditions#:~:text=on%20silver%20maple-.Burls,has%20been%20no%20proven%20cause> (Last accessed 2 March 2023).
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. "m/other ourselves: a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering" in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, ed. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens and Mai'a Williams (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), pp. 19-31.
- Hall, Matthew. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011).
- Irigaray, Luce and Michael Marder. *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).
- Jones, Kellie. "Survey" in *Wangechi Mutu*, ed. Adrienne Edwards, Courtney J. Martin, Kellie Jones, and Chika Okeke-Agulu (New York: Phaidon, 2022), pp. 51-102.
- Keeling, Kara. *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
- King, Tiffany Lethabo. "The Labor of (Re)reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(ly)," *Antipode*, 48(4) (2016): 1022-1039.
- Kuhn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).
- Lavin, Maud. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).
- Lillis, Kristen. *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2017).
- Marcuse, Herbert. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* [1977], trans. Herbert Marcuse and Erica Sherover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).
- Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
- Margulis, Lynn. "Big Trouble in Biology: Physiological Autopoiesis versus Mechanistic neo-Darwinism" in *Slanted Truth: Essays on Gaia, Symbiosis, and Evolution*,

- Ed. Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1997), pp. 129-146.
- Mason, Graham. "Wangechi Mutu, In Two Canoe, 2022 -," *Storm King Art Center Vimeo channel*, 31 August 2022: <https://vimeo.com/745247340> (Last accessed 10 March 2023).
- Morgan, Jennifer L. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
- Mourad, Suleiman A. "From Hellenism to Christianity and Islam: The Origin of the Palm Tree Story Concerning Mary and Jesus in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Qur'an." *Oriens Christianus*, 86 (2002): 206- 216
- Mutu, Wangechi. *A Fantastic Journey*, ed. Trevor Schoonmaker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
- *A Shady Promise* (Bologna, Italy: Damiana, 2008).
- *I Am Speaking, Are You Listening?* (New York: Delmonico Books, 2021).
- *My Dirty Little Heaven* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010).
- *This You Call Civilization?*, ed. David Moos (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010).
- Nassar, Dalia and Margaret Barbour. "Tree Stories: The Embodied History of Trees and Environmental Ethics." *Cultural Politics*, 19(1) (2023): 128-147
- Odita, Odili Donald. "Savage Beauty: The Work of Wangechi Mutu" in Wangechi Mutu, *This You Call Civilization?*, ed. David Moos (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010), pp. 28-33.
- Pinedo-Vasquez, Miguel, Susanna Hecht and Christine Padoch. "Amazonia" in *Traditional Forest-Related Knowledge: Sustaining Communities, Ecosystems and Biocultural Diversity*, ed. John A. Parrotta and Ronald L. Trosper (New York: Springer, 2012), pp. 119-156.
- Raengo, Alessandra. *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013).
- Ren, Fei, Dong-Hui Yan, and Wei Dong. "Microbiome of reproductive organs of trees" in *Forest Microbiology, Volume 1: Tree Microbiome: Phyllosphere, Endosphere and Rhizosphere*, ed. Fred O. Asiegbu and Andriy Kovalchuk (London: Academic Press, 2021), pp. 145-158.
- Ryan, John C., Patrícia Vieira, and Monica Gagliano (eds). *The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence* (Santa Fe, NM: Synergetic Press, 2021).
- Sadler, Darlene J. *Brazil Imagined: 1500 to the Present* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008).
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- Simard, Suzanne. *Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).
- Smith, Justin. "The Rhythmic Continuum of Black Collage: Havin' the knack, in the cut, cuttin' up & getting' down" in *Black Collagists: The Book*, ed. Teri Henderson (Yakima, WA: Kanyer Publishing, 2021), pp. ix-x.
- Smith, Nicole R. "Wangechi Mutu: Feminist Collage and the Cyborg." PhD Thesis, Georgia State University, 2009. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57709/1234428>.
- Szwed, John F. *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998).
- Troy, Jakelin. "Trees are at the heart of our country – we should learn their Indigenous names." *The Guardian*, 1 April 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/01/trees-are-at-the-heart-of-our-country-we-should-learn-their-indigenous-names> (Last accessed 15 February 2023).

- Veal, Michael E. "Enter Cautiously" in *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise* (Bologna: Damiani, 2008), pp. 9-10.
- Willis, Deborah. "Oral History Project: Wangechi Mutu." *Bomb Magazine*, 28 February 2014: <https://bombmagazine.org/> (Last accessed 21 February 2023).
- Winters, Joseph R. *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- Wohlleben, Peter. "The Language of Trees" in *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*, trans. Jane Billinghurst (London: William Collins, 2016), pp. 6-13.
- Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).
- Zamalin, Alex. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).