Regenerating in Ruin: Garden Metaphors and Decolonial Ecological Thought in Precious Okoyomon's To See the Earth Before the End of the World (2022)

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1. Introduction

In the midst of accelerating climate change, mass species extinction, and environmental exhaustion, the garden has re-emerged as a critical political and aesthetic site in contemporary art. Once imagined as an emblem of innocence or control, the garden now marks the uneven legacies of colonial extraction and ecological degradation. From the plantation to the botanical archive, the garden has the ability to reveal the sedimented histories of dispossession, enclosure, and the violence of species classification. Yet, the garden also holds space for resistance, survival, and the imagination of multispecies futures. Against this backdrop, the garden appears not as a sealed sanctuary but as a porous, entangle terrain: a scene of ruination and renewal.

The intersection of environmental humanities, contemporary art, and decolonial politics has become increasingly prominent in art historical discourse, reflecting a growing awareness of the urgency and complexity of the ecological crises, as well as the need to shift our understanding and conception of our relationship with the natural world. By acknowledging the entanglement of art with the ecological, social, political and economic forces, scholars and artists alike have begun to develop new vocabularies interdisciplinary frameworks. T. J. Demos, a leading art historian, articulates a model of *political ecology* that foregrounds the inseparability of environmental and social justice. In the book *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, he argues that "political ecology recognizes that the ways we regard nature carry deep implications and often unacknowledged ramifications for how we organize society, assign responsibility for environmental change, and asses social impact." [1] Political ecology, as Demos frames it, demands an analysis of the representational and institutional structures that perpetuate extractivism and inequality. Within this context, contemporary art emerges not merely as a reflective medium, but as an active agent in deconstructing dominant power structures; particularly those that naturalize the subordination of the environment and of racialized, gendered, and economically marginalized communities. By generating new vocabularies, sensibilities, and forms of relation between disciplines, art contributes to a decolonial ecological imaginary capable of contesting the hegemonic narratives of capitalist modernity.

This thesis investigates how contemporary art engages with intersectional ecologies and decolonial politics through radical artistic practices. It focuses on works that challenge

[1] Demos, Decolonizing Nature, 8.

anthropocentric models of creation and exhibition by fostering interspecies alliances and imagining alternative, regenerative futures. At the core of this inquiry is *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022), an immersive, living installation by Precious Okoyomon, presented at the 59th Venice Biennale (Fig. 1). The installation operates as a self-contained ecosystem that defies the sterile neutrality of the gallery by introducing decay, growth, and life cycles intro the exhibition space. Visitors step into the Arsenal, layered in rich soil, overgrown kudzu vines and sugarcane, and animated swallowtail butterflies completing their life cycles in real time. Monumental sculptures made of wool, dirt, and blood punctuate the landscape, further unsettling conventional boundaries between life and art, nature and culture (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). The space is humid, scented, teeming with life and death – an environment that it at once generative and decomposing. The installation is a dynamic, alive, and decaying landscape that resists aesthetic containment. This work is particularly compelling in its capacity to address ecological and decolonial struggles through multispecies entanglements and speculative visions of ecological revolution.

Precious Okoyomon with their installation *To See the Earth before the End of the World (2022)* engage directly with the muted and ignored voices of those affected by colonisation and enslavement. Okoyomon, is an American-Nigerian born in London in 1993 and currently based in New York City. The artist's body of work encompasses a diverse array of expressive mediums, including poetry, visual art, spoken word, installation, and performance art, demonstrating a multifaceted approach to creative exploration and intellectual engagement. Environmental consciousness and decolonial critique are central themes in Okoyomon's practice, which positions art as a catalyst for social and ecological transformation. Their work offers a complex and affective exploration of interconnected crises of climate that consistently foregrounds the ongoing impacts of colonial violence on marginalized communities, with particular attention to how historical systems of oppression shape contemporary ecological and social conditions. As previously described, the installation is an immersive with elements that are steeped in histories of migration, colonization, and ecological adaptation. Okoyomon had previously worked with kudzu, but this was the first time incorporating sugarcane, referencing Édouard Glissant's *Monsieur Toussaint*, a poetic work exploring revolution, sugar economies, and the autonomy of enslaved subjects. Their work refuses dominant binaries, such as the native/foreign, the human/nature, the One/Other, whose roots lie in anthropocentric and colonial logic. These themes will be developed further in the chapters that follow.

Okoyomon's installation invites reflection on the entangled struggles of gender, environmental destruction, and colonial history. It enacts resistance by reimagining these contested terrains and proposing new, interwoven modes of relationality. Approached as a living ecosystem, the work fosters a shift away from anthropocentric paradigms in art, opening space for practices of ecological kinship. I read the installation as a radial critique of extractivist and colonial legacies – an art practice that does not represent nature but becomes metabolically entangled with it, digesting history and imagining futures beyond the logics of domination and containment. This thesis takes the installation as a point of departure to examine the intersections of nature, identity, and artistic materiality. The central research question guiding this study is: **How does Precious Okoyomon's *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022) operate as a garden metaphor, and in what ways do its regenerating and decaying materials engage with questions of decolonization, kinship, and post-apocalyptic ecological thought?**

To frame the formal analysis of the case study, this research has considered relevant set of theories in the fields of environmental studies, ecofeminism and decoloniality and other narratives that consider the shift from the Anthropos towards the Earth. Other prominent scholars in the field are Anna Tsing and her exploration of survival and coexistence in *capitalist ruins* that challenges linear, progress-driven ecological thought by foregrounding the entanglements of species and capitalist decay. [2] Donna Haraway's concept of multispecies kinship further complicates traditional boundaries between humans and nonhumans, advocating for collaborative modes of existence in damaged ecosystems. [3] Despite significant contributions from these and related voices, there remains a need for a focused art historical analysis that examines how materiality and metaphor in contemporary installations concretely enact there theoretical frameworks, particularly in relation to decolonization and the reconfiguration of kinship in post-apocalyptic ecologies. This thesis addresses this gap by analysing Precious Okoyomon's *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* as a site where these intersecting concerns are embodied and enacted though material and spatial practices.

This thesis is structured in three parts. The first chapter traces the historical and conceptual evolution of the garden and the landscape within art history, focusing on how

[2] For further reading check: *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), and *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), co-edited with Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, and Heather Anne Swanson.
[3] For further reading check: *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (2016)*

these metaphors have reflected shifting relations to nature across different cultural and political contexts. Through art historical analysis beginning in the seventeenth century, the chapter examines how artists – from the Baroque to contemporary periods – have used the garden and the landscape to express worldviews shaped by colonial expansion, Enlightenment rationalism, Romanticism, and ecological crisis. This genealogy provides the foundation for understanding how the garden, as both a site and a symbol, becomes a critical space for reimagining relations with the more-than-human world. The second chapter turns to Okoyomon's installation, analysing the work's elements, materials, and temporalities - such as the soil, the kudzu vine, the butterflies, the sugarcane, and the sculptures – through theories of decolonial ecology, multispecies kinship, and the aesthetics of ruination. Lastly, the third chapter brings these threads together by focusing on how Okoyomon's installation queers ecological norms and enacts new modes of kinship, collapse, and resistance, positioning the garden as a post-apocalyptic landscape that challenges both colonial memory and modern ecological paradigms. Together, these chapters argue for the garden as a generative and unstable metaphor, one that holds the tension between decay and renewal, containment and excess, history and speculation. While the thesis offers a focuses reading of a single installation, its scope is necessarily limited by time and size parameters in which this research is conducted. Future research could expand this analysis by examining the reception of the installation in different contexts, or by tracing comparative threads in other contemporary art practices that entangle ecology, Blackness, and ritual. Despite these limitations, the thesis opens up space for thinking with and through the garden as a site of ontological experimentation, where new worlds begin to take root in the compost of the old.

Chapter 1: The Garden in Art History — Metaphors of Nature, Power, and Relation

This chapter examines how the metaphor of the garden has evolved across artistic and philosophical contexts, establishing a conceptual foundation for analysing Precious Okoyomon's installation *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022). The installation stages a living, decaying, and regenerating garden within the institutional setting of La Biennale di Venezia, Okoyomon reworks the garden as a politically charged terrain. The installation's use of organic matter, invasive plants, and symbols of slavery and extraction confronts the entangled legacies of colonialism and ecological collapse. To understand the political and aesthetic force of this work, this chapter situates the garden as a historically layered construct; one shaped by enclosure, idealized visions of nature, and imperial violence. Through these lens, this chapter develops a theoretical vocabulary for interpreting the installation's material engagement with decolonial ecology, kin, and post apocalyptic narratives.

This chapter situates Okoyomon's work within a longer trajectory of landscape design and nature-based art, from early depictions of cultivated nature to twentieth-century land art. Drawing on publications such as *On the Necessity of Gardening: An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation* (2021) and *The Garden, End of Times, Beginning of Times (2017),* it explores the garden as a site of aesthetic inquiry and a shifting conceptual framework. The second section turns to contemporary theorists, such as Tsing, Haraway and Timothy Morton, whose theories reconceive the garden as an entangled, multispecies space rather than a static image of harmony. Their insights, further informed by Jane Bennett's work on material agency and Bruno Latour's relational networks, provide the framework for reading Okoyomon's installation as a porous landscape of decay, regeneration, and resistance – one that unsettles ecological binaries and colonial inheritances.

The concept(s) of the Garden – from Baroque to Modernism

Gardens have accompanied human life since the beginning of settled existence. As cultivated spaces carved out of the wild, they have served not only as sources of sustenance, but also as stages for aesthetics, spiritual, and philosophical expression. A garden is both a physical place – were plants grow, where food is harvested, where labour meets land – and a symbolic space, reflecting how societies imagine and relate to nature. In other words, the garden reflects how humans have been involved and keep involving nature. Across time, it has stood as a metaphor for paradise, power, order, resistance, and ruin. Unlike wilderness or forest, the

garden is a site of intentionality, shaped by human hands but always mediated by nonhuman agents. This double character, of a grounded materiality and an imaginative construct, is what makes the garden particularly powerful for artistic and political exploration. On top of that, a core aim of this research to explore how the garden as a physical space and metaphor can help us imagine possible methods of addressing the environmental and social problems of the current time. Precious Okoyomon's *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022) reactivates this long history by restaging the garden within an institutional space. Yet rather than portraying nature as tamed, beautiful, or productive, the installation presents a wild, invasive, decomposing landscape – with main agents the sugarcane, the kudzu vine, the soil, the butterflies, and the sculptures. In doing so, it destabilizes traditional aesthetic forms and reclaims the garden as a site of colonial memory, ecological interdependence, and Black life in the aftermath of enclosure and dispossession/displacement.

As landscape historian Erik A. de Jong argues, the garden is a space for making and experiencing the weaving relationship between the living nature and the human condition. [4] It is also a dynamic mirror of the creator and the user that is reflected simultaneously, making it an "an affective space, the garden transcends its own boundaries. As an experiential space, it represents a place in which the world can be known and understood." [5] The garden forms a landscape in which the human experience is rooted in the senses, an intimate interaction with the natural elements that manifest in different forms within different cultural and geopolitical contexts. De Jong notes that despite its many cultural variations, the garden has the potential to reveal how "cultural diversity can coincide with biodiversity." [6] In this sense the garden is not merely a decorative or domestic form. It is a medium through which relations to land, to history, and to the more-than-human world are made visible. By foregrounding the garden as a central conceptual thread, this chapter traces how its meanings have shifted across time and artistic practice. From Baroque representations of dominion, to Romantic visions of the sublime and modernist engagements with the environment, the garden has been repeatedly refigured in response to changing worldviews and dynamics. The following section maps these developments to understand how Okoyomon's reimagining of the garden participates in, but also disrupts, this historical lineage.

Art historian John Beardsley, in his book the *Gardens of Revelation* (1994), describes gardens as environments structured on representations of ideas, bounded to them through

[4] Forde et al., On the Necessity of Gardening, 11.
[5] Ibid 11.
[6] Ibid 12.

space. [7] He emphasizes their revelatory function: "What is represented in these gardens is implied by the other term: revelation. A revelation is both something revealed and the act of revealing; in the case of these environments, something revealed to the artists and something revealed by the artist to us." [8] This dual function suggests that gardens are not merely aesthetic landscapes but symbolic and spatial constructions that embody moral, ethical, philosophical, and spiritual visions. As such, they reflect the historical and cultural contexts in which they are created. The garden, then, becomes a vital site for understanding the shifting conceptualizations of nature, functioning as a microcosm of society; a mirror that reveals how we imagine and relate to the world.

One of the earliest and most influential symbolic gardens is the Garden of Eden. The biblical myth of the Fall of Man from heavenly harmony to consciousness, a loss of paradise that inaugurates the rupture between humans and the natural world. The myth signals the human fixation with an idealized nature, the paradise lost, and the end of the interconnected world, replaced by nature that is wild, untamed and resistant to human control. This medieval Christian myth however, frames nature as something to be feared or subdued, but also encodes gendered hierarchies. Liz Herbert McAvoy in her book *The Enclosed Garden and the Medieval Religious Imaginary (2021)* draws on Lacanian theory to argue that the medieval garden becomes an 'imaginary' space - the human response to the world through the image and the imagination, instead of the actual 'real' conditions of existence. [9] She argues that this imaginary is constructed under patriarchal, phallic and masculine expressions of nature through images of female sanctity, purity, and enclosure that are only comprehensible through patriarchal hegemonic systems of understanding. [10] This symbolic garden operates not through direct reflection of reality, but through the projection of desires, fears, and cultural fantasies. In this sense, the garden becomes an ideological space; one that reflects and reinforces patriarchal narratives, many of which continue to shape how nature, gender, and spirituality are imagined today.

To understand the garden as a metaphorical space of power and ideology, we must go back to the origins of the word paradise, which derives from the Persian term *pairidaeza* translating to 'walled garden' or 'enclosure'. [11] This etymological root links the notion of paradise not only to beauty and abundance, but also to separation, boundaries, and control.

[7] Beardsley, Gardens of Revelation, 9.
[8] Ibid 9.
[9] Herbert McAvoy, The Enclosed Garden and the Medieval Religious Imaginary, 2.
[10] Ibid 2.
[11] Ibid 9.

Sylvia Wynter, a Black feminist writer and theorist whose work intersects environmentalism, colonialism and critiques of Western epistemologies, argues that in order to grasp the structures of contemporary power, we need to look into the early stages of European expansion, when the idea of the garden took root within a larger colonial imagination. For Wynter the "rise of the West" follows by the "subjugation of the rest of us". [12] This epoch is not defined merely "by the discovery of the New World" but rather "by the rise of Europe as a globally hegemonic civilization." [13] This ascent was catalysed by colonial "discoveries" set in motion by those like Christopher Columbus, and according to Wynter it is a "root expansion of thought" that profoundly affected the world views and formed imperial goals of sovereignty over new lands and the Other, the so-called Enemies of Christianity. [14] It is argued, that around seventy years after these initial encounters, the "garden (noun) becomes to garden (verb)", which implies an act of drawing a line, demarcating a space, and to demarcate a place is to enclose it. [15] This enclosure is the mark of division, and enclosure according to Silvia Federici is never neutral, but rather "produces hierarchies and distinctions – as well as the force of violence required to impose them". [16] The garden then, becomes a material and symbolic site where the violence of division and the logic of possession are enacted and naturalized.

During the Enlightenment, the logic of enclosure and separation became embedded in Western scientific and philosophical traditions with theorists like Descartes and Kant elevating reason as the supreme source of knowledge, rejecting any form of superstition and religious dogma, which led to Secularism and Skepticism. This intellectual shift gave rise to dualistic frameworks that divided mind from body, subject from object, and culture from nature. German philosophy, especially in this period, wrestled with the tension between subjectivism – understood as partial, personal, and embodied knowledge – and objectivism, which privileged stability, universality, and detachment. "The objectivism was caused by the fact that post-medieval science had to put an end to the pre-modern concepts of nature, a motherly world-body, describing it instead as mechanical and dead – and hence capable of being geometrically formalised." [17] The impact of industrial revolution and technology on the nature-human relationship, lead to the idea of nature as a passive unlimited reservoir serving

[12] Wynter, Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom, 262.
[13] Forde et al., On the Necessity of Gardening, 24.
[14]Ibid 24
[15] Ibid 46
[16] Ibid 46
[17] Jones et al., The Garden, End of Times, Beginning of Times, 27.

the objective domains of culture, science and industry, at the same time, however, a parallel view emerged reflecting the subjective idea of nature as an object of aesthetic experience. [18] Nature becoming a source of aesthetic and emotional experience, something to be admired or romanticised, especially within the arts.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger later critiqued this shift by arguing that the modern individual distanced himself from the world and the world became an image, with its objective picture being the "world picture" and the subjective one the landscape. [19] As the world becomes a picture, nature consequently becomes something to be surveyed, objectified, and represented. In this framework, the landscape becomes the subjective expression of this detachment by transforming into a carefully framed image of nature. It is no longer simply a wild piece of land, but a scene designed by humans for contemplation, evoking emotions and meaning from a distance. This dualism builds on the idea of the landscape as a territory to be cultivated, tamed and regulated. The subjective dimension of landscape lies in its mediation through vision and aesthetics, but this subjective framing often goes hand in hand with attitudes of care through control that also extends to the species that were rooted in and inhabited the said landscapes, reinforcing hierarchies of human dominance over the nonhuman world.

This historical entanglement of landscape, control, and colonization directly informs my research question. [20] Tracing the roots of the garden as both a spatial and ideological construct helps uncover how its metaphoric function has long been entangled with imperial logics of domination, over land, people, and other species. One illuminating example comes from the writings of Francis Bacon, a prominent English philosopher, who used the word 'plantation' in his reflections on the colonial project. At his time the term plantation meant to 'plant in', or 'culture' people, suggesting that planting was in fact a social project. [21] In his usage of the word plantation, the literal act of planting crops or establishing settlements was also metaphorically expressing the cultivation or imposition of social and political order over colonized territories. To 'plant in' was thus to shape or 'culture' people. He develops his thoughts on colonial project with emphasis on the terms planting and dis-planting, that lead to the uprooting and displacement of indigenous/native plants, but also Black and Indigenous

[18] Ibid 28.
[19] Ibid 28.
[20] How does Precious Okoyomon's To See the Earth Before the End of the World (2022) operate as a garden metaphor, and in what ways do its regenerating and decaying materials engage with questions of decolonization, kinship, and post-apocalyptic ecological thought?
[21] Forde et al, On the Necessity of Gardening, p 24.

people. This multi-species project entailed taxonomical and classification thinking that brought forward the term ‘native’ used extensively in botany. According to postcolonial scholar Mahmood Mamdani, “Native does not designate a condition that is original and authentic. Rather…the native is the creation of the colonial state…pinned down, localized, thrown out of civilization as an outcast, confined to custom, and then defined as product.” [22] In relation to that, the term ‘invasive’ became also part of the colonial vocabulary, another element of binary thinking that arose from the colonial voyages and the dispersal of seeds, that, fast-forward to the recent past sprouted neo-colonial attitudes towards nature under fascist guises that call for the protection of ‘pristine’ environments through exclusion and displacement. [23]

After the Edenic radically secularised landscape, the Baroque movement emerged in the mid-1600s and up until the 1700s. Baroque gardens reflect a pivotal shift in the spatial organization and understanding of nature as something that can be controlled and structured according to Cartesian principles of mathematical order. Characterized by straight lines and a rigid grid layout, these gardens symbolize a transformed relationship between humans and nature, where the natural world is reshaped into a deliberate, human-made construct. This vision of control was not only aesthetic, but deeply philosophical, reflecting a broader epistemological transformation grounded in the rationalist tradition of early modern thought. René Descartes metaphysical framework, particularly his distinction between res cogitans and res extensa, referring to the thinking substance and the extended substance respectively, profoundly influenced the period’s view of nature. This dualistic ontology, perceived the human mind as a rational and reasoning entity, and nature, as inert, measurable, and subject to the human mind. This perspective laid the groundwork for the concept of 'the other', reinforcing a worldview based on dualistic thinking elevating the rational human subject as the organizing force of the world, a dynamic that reinforced binaries such as nature and culture, subject and object, and by extension, self and other. Such binary oppositions suggest that one concept derives meaning only in contrast to its counterpart, as seen in the nature/culture divide. As a result, Cartesian Dualism elevates the thinking subject above all else, granting it the authority to classify and define the world around it. [24] Within this

[22] Ibid 24

[23] E.g., Israel’s systemic destruction of the Palestinian people and land, like the olive groves that are ancient and communal symbols of heritage and subsistence exemplify a form of geo-cultural erasure. It is the uprooting and ethnic cleansing of a population to make way for settler infrastructure and militarization under the guise of security and development that reflects the neo colonial attitudes I am referring to.

[24] Rozenmond, Descartes's Dualism, 1-3.

framework, nature is relegated to the status of 'the other' - a passive entity subject to human intellect and stripped of agency. This dynamic establishes a power imbalance in which culture actively shapes and dominates nature. An excellent example of this mathematical – and authoritarian – attitude towards nature, is the park of Versailles (circa 1661-1686), created by Andre Le Notre, the garden manifested in geometrical forms of arranged knot gardens, parterres, labyrinths fountains and statues, based on symmetry, and most importantly, centered around the seemingly pivotal axis of the authority of the Sun King, Louis XIV. [25] This example showcases how the political and philosophical ideologies of the time shared an emphasis on hierarchical control and centralized power. In this sense, Versailles becomes more than a garden: it is a symbolic staging of anthropocentric rationalism, where the landscape in subdued, rationalized, and forced to conform to the geometries of human authority.

Following the Enlightenment and the insistence on rationality, in the 1800s, the Romantic era begun and the views on nature have shifted from the power of the man over nature, to the appreciation of/emphasis on untamed forces of nature and the subjectification of the man to its whims. Poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge described encounters with natural landscapes that transcended rational understanding, evoking feelings of awe, terror, and spiritual elevation. [26] This new perception of the landscape was primarily based on feelings, with fundamental sensation that of the sublime. This sublime view of nature was reflected in the style of a garden that shifted from the grid structure of French gardens (where the dominance of man over nature was prominent) to the English style gardens that were characterized by the more organic aesthetic. Winding paths, irregular groves, and asymmetrical water features evoked a curated version of wildness. In the book the *Mirrors of Infinity*, historian Allen S. Weiss elaborates on the concept of an English garden as an ambition to imitate nature in its untamed form, but still not in its raw and chaotic form, but as refracted through the ideals of Romantic beauty and melancholy. This created an aesthetic paradox: an attempt to shape the landscape into a garden that merely reflects the natural countryside, an artifice of naturalness. [27] This shift contributed to the emergence of ‘picturesque’ nature, as if it was depicted in a painting. The picturesque framed the landscape through the sensibilities of the observer, making nature and the landscape a kind of visual

[25] Jones et al., The Garden, End of Times, Beginning of Times, 25.
[26] See: Wordsworth, William, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Warwick Jack Burgogne Owen. *Lyrical Ballads*. London, 1967.
[27] Forde et al., On the Necessity of Gardening, 49.

spectacle arranged for contemplative pleasure. The Romantic gardens embodied the sensibility of the era, which prioritized contemplation, spirituality, and emotional engagement with nature; these natural landscapes were a product of fabricated wildness that was made to suit the human aesthetic and the emotional human needs. Lastly, in comparison to the French gardens, while they were not picturesque in the Romantic sense, they were still aesthetically refined. Emphasizing on symmetry and order, expressing power and rational mastery, the French gardens were lacking the Romantic irregularity, roughness, and nature's sublimity of the Romantic gardens. Both styles reflected their cultural and sociological paradigms, with the Romantic Garden signalling a shift from control to contemplation; from logic to feeling.

In the 20th century , the nature depicted in the new art waves of Modernism and Futurism mutates from the Romantic notions of the sublime and the picturesque to a merging dynamic of human-nature relationship, i.e. where nature is no longer observed and depicted from a distance. Jacob Wamberg in the book The Garden: End of Times, Beginning of Times, writes: Nature becomes a dynamic force that is no longer to be enclosed and separated from ourselves – "our bodies, our consciousness, our technology – have entered in such intimate interplay with that which could previously be separated out as 'surroundings' that we must make great effort to even present these surroundings as different form 'ourselves' – including to fence in and maintain a special domain that we call 'nature'." [28] This marks a move away from the Cartesian worldview in which nature is external to the self – something to be represented, managed, or preserved – towards a more ecological thought, where human and nonhuman agents are mutually implicated within complex systems. This reconceptualization of nature as active and co-constitutive with human life has had a profound impact on how landscape and the garden are imagined. From a backdrop for aesthetic contemplation or an object of orderly cultivation, the garden begins to emerge as a porous, dynamic, and hybrid space; one that reflects the breakdown of rigid boundaries between culture and nature. Rather than serving as a symbol of human mastery, it increasingly becomes a site of cohabitation, entanglement, and interdependence. This shift prepares the grounds for contemporary artistic practices that explore the garden and the landscape not as a site of enclosure or control, but as a living system; a multispecies assemblage in which questions of care, kinship, and resistance take root. It is finally is within this evolving framework that Okoyomon's installation must be understood: not as a return to nature in a nostalgic sense, but as a confrontation with the residues of colonial planting and the ecological ruins it has left behind.

[28] Jones et al., The Garden, End of Times, Beginning of Times, 32.

In the previous section, we explored how the symbolic weight of the garden as a physical reality and metaphysical concept has developed across history – from the sacred enclosure of Eden, to the controlled geometries of the Baroque, to the Romantic aesthetics of untamed nature. Across these historical moments, the garden emerged as a reflection of the shifting power structures, particularly those tied to patriarchal, colonial, and racial hierarchies. In line with feminist and postcolonial theories, the analysis aims to foreground how the garden has operated as a space of planting and dis-planting, placing and dis-placing. These mechanisms were central to colonial projects that imposed taxonomies of control onto both human and nonhuman life. The garden thus becomes the key site where binaries such as native and invasive, wild and domesticated were enacted and naturalized. Toward the later part of the 20th century, postmodern ecological thought began to destabilized the rigid dichotomy between nature and culture, proposing a more entangled, relational view on human and nonhuman agents. Thinkers like Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton challenge the idea of nature as a backdrop to human activities, suggesting instead that agency is distributed across ecological networks and assemblages including both humans and more than humans. This shift is crucial to the contemporary perception of the contemporary garden, of not being a symbol of mastery or retreat, but as a space where social, ecological, and affective entanglements take place.

Based on this theoretical foundation, four key threads emerge to guide the analysis of Okoyomon's To See the Earth Before the End of the World. First, the garden as a site of colonial memory, shaped by practices of classification, enclosure, separation, and aestheticization. Second, the gradual undoing of the Cartesian dualism, giving rise to more relational and interconnected views of the world. Third, the emergence of spiritual and affective engagements with nature, which gained momentum in the Romantic era through the emphasis on the subjective experience, emotional intensity, and the sublime. And finally, the unlearning of the picturesque – a critical shift away from the illusion of cultivated wilderness that Romanticism perpetuated. This last thread reframes the garden not as a static aesthetic object, but a dynamic assemblage shaped by unruly temporalities, multispecies entanglements, and ecological flux.

Contemporary reflections on nature

As we have explored in the previous section, these threads lay the groundwork for a broader understanding of how artistic practice has historically responded to our relationship with the natural world. While Romanticism foregrounded the sublime and unknowable aspects of

nature, the 20th century witnessed a more radical dismantling of nature/culture binaries through Avant-Garde and Modernist movements. In particular, Cubism and Surrealism played a pivotal role in transforming how nature and human subjects were represented. Cubism, though its fragmented, multi-perspective approach, challenged the notion of a coherent, separate subject and fractured the distinction between figure and environment as seen from artists like Paul Klee (1879-1940) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). For example, Klee's *White Blossom in the Garden (Weisse Blüte im Garten)* (1920) illustrates a garden as a fragmented space of geometric abstractions where multiple viewpoints can coexists due to its multiplicity and emotionally saturated image that imagines the garden as polyphonic space that one can enter (Fig. 4). Surrealism, by contrast, turned inward, merging dream, landscape, and unconscious desire to produce uncanny natural worlds in which boundaries between the human, nonhuman, and symbolic become pervious and unstable. Take as an example Max Ernst's *Zoomorphic Couple* (1933) with its disrupting visualization of a non-binary ontology that rejects dualisms of animal/human, female/male, nature/culture (Fig. 5). Together these movements destabilized Enlightenment ideals of reason and control, reimagining nature not as an external object but as something embedded in psychological, affetice, and symbolic experience.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of ecological and land art echoed and expanded the aesthetic and philosophical developments on the nature and culture relationship. Artists like Robert Smithson (1938-1973) with his project Spiral Jetty (1970), Agnes Denes (1931) with her Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill (1982), and, Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) with her Siluetas series (1973-80), began to engage directly with the landscape, site, and the natural processes and materials, emphasizing on temporality, entropy, and the inseparability of human and ecological systems. Fig. 8). Smithson's Spiral Jetty for instance (Fig. 6), apart from the fact that is believed to be the most significant representation of early land art, it was an ingenious resistance to the commodification and permanence of art, by succumbing of natural forces of erosion and submersion. Dene's Wheatfield (1982) photograph (Fig. 7.) stages a powerful ecological and political gesture: a golden field of wheat on a landfill in Manhattan, directly in front of the Twin Towers. The image of a man harvesting wheat in the financial capital of the world becomes a striking juxtaposition of agriculture and capitalism, of nature and industry. Mendieta's untitled work (1976) from the *Siluetas series* (Fig. 8.), shows the outline of a human form into the wet sand at the edge of the sea, filled with vivid red pigment. The stain, suggestive of blood, bleeds into the surrounding sand and dissolves as the tide creeps in. The work captures the fleeting moment

of ritual and erosion, where the body is both inscribed into and erased by nature. These works anticipate many of the conceptual and ethical concerns that will later be named through terms such as Anthropocene, more-than-human agency, and hyperobjects. It is this contemporary moment that a new vocabulary begins to emerge, one that attempts to articulate the entangled, co-constitutive relationship between humans and the more-than-human world. Concepts like the Anthropocene name the planetary scale of human impact, while theorists like Timothy Morton proposes frameworks such as 'hyperobjects' to describe phenomena that exceed human comprehension but are intimately entangled with everyday life. Alongside this, the language of more-than-human sociality, sympoiesis, and multispecies entanglement signals a fundamental reorientation of ecological thought. In this landscape, nature is no longer a fixed or exterior category, but a dynamic assemblage of relationships, agencies, and temporalities. This contemporary reimagining of nature, as a processual, relational, and materially entangled with human and non human life actor, offers a critical lens for analysing artistic practices like Okoyomon's, which engage with living materials, ecological histories, and postcolonial hauntings. The following paragraphs will explore these theoretical frameworks in greater depth, grounding them in specific theoretical developments that inform the installation To See the Earth Before the End of the World.

It is essential for this research to clarify the key terminologies used to analyse the case study and the entities present in Okoyomon's installation, while also situating these within contemporary understanding of nature. Central to this is the now-viral concept of the Anthropocene, a time that is marked by the industrial and technological developments, which according to Timothy Morton is dating back to the invention of the steam engine by James Watt and the 1945 atom bombs testing taking place in Trinity, New Mexico, later to be used as a nuclear weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[29] The "terraforming" of the Earth, is what Morton explains to be the decisive human power that lead to the destruction of the Earth through the modern means of extraction. [30] In his book *Hyperobjects – Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Morton encourages us to find ecology without nature, using the term *hyperobjects* to refer to all the systems, assemblages, collections of objects that exceed time and space, thus making them impossible to grasp with human centered thinking, thus suggesting an *object-oriented-ontology* (OOO) that transcends the physical reality. [31] In other words, hyperobjects are objects that envelop it all, affecting and affected by

[29] Morton, Hyperobjects, 4.
[30] Ibid 4-5.
[31] Ibid 2.

its environment, entities that affect each other, that are laying in the background, but once discussed become part of the foreground. It is a force that effects but also get affected, like for example, in relation to the case study, the audience comes in touch with the ecosystem of the garden, pressing the soil through gravity. The soil itself bears the deep time of the Anthropocene; along the microorganisms and non-human agents, it holds microplastics, residual pesticides, colonial agriculture, and climate shifts written into its chemistry. What first appears to be natural and local, is actually saturated with planetary scale processes. Thus, this "strange reinforcement of the gap that brings us into intimacy, into coexistence with strangers, which is ecological being-with." [32] This perspective that Morton adopts, manifests in its ability to helps us recognize hyperobjects, like the Anthropocene and Technology, with a constructive potential and valuable lenses that allow us to transition to an ecological age that accounts for entanglement and nonhuman agency.

In continuation to the ecological "being-with" notion Morton speculates on, Donna Haraway, an extremely prominent feminist scholar and cultural critic in the fields of science, technology, and climate activism, persists in developing the concept by highlighting the *sympoiesis* action, which translates to *making-with*, with the radical implication that "nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing." [33] This suggests a symbiosis with other species, forming a relationship paradigm that works as a metaphor for the abolition of the One and Individual, and the establishment of a new way of thinking that is based on 'polytemporal' and 'polyspatial' engagements, entanglements and assemblages. [34] This sympoietic, multiplayer, multispecies thinking and action functions as a powerful narrative for art, where artists, civilians, and nonhuman actors become entangled in each other's projects and lives, becoming interdependent and inter-actualized, being and making with each other new and provoking systems of political and ecological existence. She encourages "sowing worlds" with the companion species, beyond the persistent diversities and urgent troubles of the Anthropocene, suggesting an alternative term to that of the anthropocentric notion of the Anthropocene, the Chthulucene, which "must collect up the trash" and "chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures." [35] At last, Haraway invites us to stay with the trouble – on the terra – and develop interdisciplinary biologies and arts that bring together

[32] Morton, Hyperobjects, 194.
[33] Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, 58.
[34] Ibid 60.
[35] Ibid 57.

"human and nonhuman ecologies, evolution, development, history, affects, performances, technologies, and more." [36] Lastly, she stresses the importance of the stories we use to tell stories. Like Morton, she suggests, that these hyperobjects, including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus, allow us to fabulate speculatively on what matters, and reminds us that "we are all compost, not posthuman." [37]

As Haraway says, it matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts, which figures figure figures, and which systems systemize systems. [38] In line with that, Anna Tsing, an anthropologist, feminist, cultural theorist and storyteller, contemplates in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins (2015),* on the importance of how telling stories of landscapes "requires getting to know the inhabitants of the landscape, human and not human. [39] Tsing develops a revolutionary theoretical framework for understanding landscapes and their stories, which will be of great support for the analysis of our case study. She points out the term *unintentional design,* to refer to the coinciding power of humans and nonhumans in the generation of landscapes, a joint process that decentres the human and brings to the foreground the historical action of landscapes in themselves, making them an active agent in the formation and transformation of worlds. [40] In line with her theories, we are invited to consider the nonhuman species not as inanimate objects, but as knowing subjects that create an organism that can indeed take action. She refers to it as "polyphonic assemblages, gatherings of ways of being. Assemblages are performances of livability," and that if we are in any way interested in understanding "livability, impermanence, and emergence, we should be watching the action of landscape assemblages. Assemblages coalesce, change, and dissolve: this *is* the story." [41] She challenges us to look carefully and observe the stories and methods that are embodied in the landscape, in order to make possible a new way of precarious living with the other species, in the ruins of the Anthropocene.

In the following chapter, we are going to look at the stories and the metaphors that arise from the installation To See the Earth before the End of the World by Precious Okoyomon in relation to the histories, theories and concepts discussed above. Understanding the historical, philosophical, and ecological shifts in understanding of nature throughout

[36] Ibid 63.
[37] Ibid 101-102.
[38] Ibid 101.
[39] Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World, 159.
[40] Ibid 152.
[41] Ibid 158.

history and up to the contemporary era is placing an axis to time and allows us to see how history has unfolded, thus learning from it. The ultimate goal of the second chapter is to reveal insights about the representation of a landscape in the physical dimension of an art space, to look at the nonhuman agency and actions formed by the multispecies participating in the exhibition and their stories, ways of becoming with and making with, and how this reflects on the concept of the garden in the contemporary art context. To do so, the installation, functioning as *The Garden as a Post-Anthropocentric Landscape* deconstructed into five solid elements; the soil, the butterflies, the sugar cane, the kudzu vine, and, the sculptures. These are five formal elements I have chosen to base my analysis on, however, it is important to acknowledge that there are time and space limitations that define the research, meaning that there might be multiple other dimensions in the installation that won't be discussed in this paper but will be shortly mentioned by the end of the paper as suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two: Landscapes of Becoming — Decomposing the Installation

This chapter analyzes Precious Okoyomon's *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022) through a material and conceptual deconstruction into five core elements: soil, butterflies, sugarcane, statues, and the kudzu vine. Each of these components is examined as a theoretical node through which broader ecocritical, decolonial, and aesthetic questions unfold. I read these materials not as discrete sculptural elements but as part of a living, breathing polyphonic assemblage that exceeds the temporal and spatial boundaries of the exhibition space. The installation is treated as a garden — a ritual landscape and a post-apocalyptic ecology — where nonhuman and human agencies entangle in processes of world-making, mourning, resistance, and mythopoeia. This chapter draws on the theoretical scaffolding established in Chapter One: Timothy Morton's *hyperobjects*, Donna Haraway's *sympoiesis* and *making-with* , and Anna Tsing's *polyphonic assemblages*. These theories are used to unpack how Okoyomon's living installation not only stages a vision of entangled existence but also reimagines Blackness, queerness, and kinship in the ruins of the Anthropocene.

Subsection 1: Soil - Blackness and the Afterlives of Enclosure

In *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, Okoyomon employs soil not only as a passive substrate, but as a politically charged and ontologically rich art medium. Spread across the Arsenal floor, a mix of organic and inorganic matter forms the base layer of the exhibition physically reshaping the way visitors move through the space. As shown (Fig. 9), the mounds and uneven piles of soil are not merely bordered but loosely sprawled, forcing the audience to move around, through, and sometimes over it. The scale and arrangement of the soil transforms the gallery into an immersive landscape where one must carefully navigate through the scattered organic debris, with the scent of damp earth lingering in the air and occasional crunch of gravel underfoot. The sensory encounter disrupts the disembodied habits of viewing an installation, and instead situates the audience within the artwork; drawing attention to the porous boundaries between art, audience, and environment. The soil makes the metaphors not only visible but physically felt. It functions as both a material and a metaphor for the installation, evoking the ideas of the plantations, the commons, and the womb, as a site and ground of decay and rebirth. It embodies the history and speculates on the future simultaneously, creating a dynamic point of discussion for the audience; for understanding alternative conceptions of the relationship(s) we foster between humans and

non humans through art. The soil is one of the most permeated elements of the installation, it is the matter that grounds everything and nothing while refusing to be still and powerless in the sense that is alive with microbial life, chemical residue, and historical sediment. Okoyomon collaborates with the soil, allowing its texture, smell and vital agencies to participate in the meaning making of the work and ground speculative potential of life beyond the ruins. It is heavy, textured, damp, alive; a microcosm in itself, or as Morton would say, a hyperobject. It is not only a present force in the installation that allows the rest of the elements to come to life, but an analogy of time, memory, death, decay, and all the messy entanglements of multispecies and histories that cannot be separated.

It functions as a hyperobject in a way that its vastness and duration go beyond the limited individual perception of time and space, existing across deep time and dispersed geographies. It is not just dirt, but an archive that metabolizes the past and insists on presence, an assembly of minerals, living organisms, gas and water that are in a constant state of decomposition, making compost, its humus, which is the same root as human. Soil allows us to depart from anthropocentric thinking and provides us with a lens for being in the world in a conscious state that recognizes relations that aspire collectivism and collaboratory responses against individualism and anthropocentricism. As Haraway says, "we are humus, not Homo, not Anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman." [42] By imagining the soil of the exhibition and the way we are situated in it as a more-than-human world, we become able to compost the colonial attitude of human independence and control, compost these ideas, and engage with each other, become with each other, "in hot compost piles". [43] This way, the soil becomes a counter-epistemology that disrupts the binary frameworks of nature/culture, life/death, human/nonhuman, and reclaims a place in the garden/landscape that ruptures control and aesthetic order, and becomes a terrain of reworlding through decay and rot.

In an interview by Elvia Wilk, published in Topical Cream, Okoyomon talks about the concept of decay and rot in their installation as an experiment for unthinking the mass invisibility of decomposition, imagining a shift out of the Man and towards a new ontology and modality of being. [44] They converse about Okoyomon's methodology of composting in their installation, and they highlight:

[42] Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, 55.
[43] Ibid 4
[44] Topical Cream, "Decay is Everywhere: Precious Okoyomon in Conversation with Elvia Wilk"

> "Soft death rot song, everything is flowing in and out of each other. I'm trying to dream my way out of the human, I mean outside of this immense historical rupture that is whiteness and this concept of Man. I mean I want a new ontology … without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its over-representation outside the terms of the "natural organism." I'm like, Blackness is the nonmoving earth and the human has nothing left for us: the human can only reproduce the same thing it always already has. We need a new modality of being." [45]

To them it seems that to think through the soil is also to think with Blackness—not as an identity, but as an onto-epistemological condition shaped by survival, fugitivity, and transformation. In Okoyomon's hands, soil becomes a medium of myth and ritual, a political material, and an ontological provocation that evokes a reality that emerges from catastrophe. It is deep and creates a space of dissolution and possibility, resisting enclosure. It asks us to imagine a world otherwise, not clean, not closed, but porous, composted, and always becoming.

Subsection 2: The Butterflies – Queer Ecology and the Collapse of Binaries

As the soil charges the installation with material density and historical sediment, the swallowtail butterflies titled as an artwork in itself, *The Sky Is Always Black Fort Mose,* offer a counter movement due to their kinetic, ephemeral and speculative nature. Fort Mose was established by escaped slaves in 1738 near St. Augustine, Florida. The reference to those enslaved Black people links the butterflies' migration and fly to themes of Black freedom and resilience; demonstrating the entanglements of the social fabulation of race with human and nonhuman entities. The butterflies, alive and fluttering within the installation, set a different tempo; a tempo of constant flight, fragility, metamorphosis, multiplicity and the refusal to containment - drawing the audience's gaze upward and around, interrupting linear movement and demanding stillness and attention (Fig.10). In relation to Haraway's SF, a cluster of overlapping ideas refereeing among others, to the science fiction/speculative fabulation, SF is a feminist and posthumanistic practice of rethinking relations, and a creative tool for worlding and imagining alternative futures. [46] Their fleeting presence in the space is not only

[45] Topical Cream, "Decay is Everywhere: Precious Okoyomon in Conversation with Elvia Wilk"
[46] Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, 2-3.

a visual experience, but a ritual bound to time, a metaphor for a portal in which the life cycle becomes a form of storytelling. In a flux of continuous becoming, the swallowtailbutterfly enacts ecological poetics thar challenge the static and binary understandings of life, nature and identity.

The butterflies also serve as powerful figures of mythmaking within queer ecological frameworks that evoke radical transformation and metamorphosis. From caterpillar to chrysalis to winged adult, they become a metaphor for queer becoming, non-linear, shapeshifting and interdependent. Their radical vulnerability invites viewers to tune attune to the more-than-human rhythms, to coexist in care, and to pause to witness their fleeting beauty, that just like nature, can not be contained, controlled, or archived. In the installation they generate a mythic temporality, evoking precolonial ontologies in which the human-nonhuman divide was not yet fixed, unsettling Western binaries between subject and object. Tsing's articulation of *assemblage,* help us understand that making worlds is a polyphonic, multispecies act: the butterflies are not isolated elements, but part of a living symphony with the soil, kudzu, sugarcane, and sculptures. Their relational presence recalls Haraway's concept of *sympoiesis*, "making-with", as active agents within the installation, they co-author its meaning, blurring the line between representation and agency.

In addition to that, the butterflies resonate with Morton's theory of hyperobjects, through their strange but potent figures, they become entangled in the larger ecological systems the installation invokes. While they may not fit into the scale and viscosity of hyperobjects, their lives are deeply affected by climate change – their migratory routes, breeding cycles, and survival hinge on shifting conditions in the Anthropocene. As Morton argues, hyperobjects like climate change are phenomena that we can't see or touch, yet they shape life in profound ways – just as the butterflies' fragility indexes broader planetary stability. He suggests, that the ultimate scenario would be to drop the binary concepts of nature and culture and to swear alliance and coexistence with the nonhumans without a world. [47] Their presence becomes a gesture of warning, a delicate emblem of ecological precarity. In the installation, they serve a dual function: first, as mythic figures of storytelling, metamorphosis, and temporal becoming within more-than-human world; and second, as embodied agents of queer ecology, foregrounding fragility, relation, and interdependence.

[47] Morton, Hyperobjects, 100.

Subsection 3: The Sugarcane – Extraction, Sweetness and the Colonial Metabolism of the Landscape

In the aformentioned interview with Wilk, Okoyomon explains that its their first time working with sugarcane, inspired by Edouard Glissant's *Monsieur Toussain* play, where the autonomy of sugarcane is saturated with histories of resistance and revolt. Glissant, among other Black thinkers, writes extensively on the centrality of the plantation and sugarcane's role in sustaining colonial economies. In the installation, the sugarcane vertically cuts through the horizontal spread of the dark soil, fibrous, unevenly in clumps throughout the space, stretching towards the light above, creating a layered spatial depth (Fig. 11). It is not simply ornamental or agricultural, but a racialized, metabolic presence – remnant of systems that once demanded the extraction of labour, sweetness, and life from Black bodies. The choice of this plant is inseparable from the architecture of slavery and the Plantation. As Glissant argues in *Poetics of Relation,* the Plantation is a bounded and enclosed space, a landscape of control, much like Enlightenment gardens. Yet here, Okoyomon unsettles this enclosure. The sugarcane does not grow in orderly rows like in monocultural fields, but leans awkwardly, bending in different directions, and blends with the other elements.

What is interesting to look at, is how the sweetness of the cane in its processed and packaged form, commodified and universally consumed, is inseparable from the sour rot of domination and power hierarchies. It is a hyperobject, not just a plant. Its material intersection is highly ecological, economic and political, and highlights the persistence of plantation logic in the systems of the present. It reminds us, that the monoculture system of plantations is not gone, but dispersed and hidden into contemporary capitalism, global sugarcane economies, land dispossession, deforestation, and food politics. It's a relic of the hyperobject called Anthropocene, its vast and impossible to perceive, but materially felt and repeated daily. In contrast to the extractivist capitalistic commodification of sugarcane, Okoyomon's gesture of using this plant is challenging the metabolization of Black life into sweetness for European consumption. Instead, it becomes a *companion species* as Haraway would say, growing through a soil damp by colonial trauma, growing with us and against us. Due to its heavy memory and history of domination, mutation and survival, the sugarcane becomes a symbol of a larger entangled ecology, regenerating new forms of relating with the more-than-human world. In its untamed and wild form, the sugarcane becomes kin, sprouting from violent soil, reaching towards other ways of being and becoming with, though tension, struggle, and speculative renewal.

Subsection 4: The Kudzu Vine – Invasive Entanglements and the Rhizomatic Resistance of the Garden

If soil is the installation's grounding force, the kudzu vine is its creeping, climbing force; relentlessly enveloping and rebelling against the borders of the exhibitions space. Upon entering the installation, the viewer encounters the outgrown vines scaling the walls of the Arsenale, tangled with the sculptures and spilling over architectural boundaries (Fig. 12). Its green leaves weave across the surfaces and crawling across the gallery floor, blurring the line between artwork and invasive force. Its formal material presence is deeply entangled with ecological and colonial history. Native to East Asia, kudzu was introduced to the American South in late 19th century to combat soil erosion cause by plantation monocultures such as cotton and sugarcane. [48] Initially heralded as a miracle plant, by the 1980s it was rebranded as an" invasive species" echoing xenophobic language used against immigrant populations. [49] This shifting narrative reveals how ecological classification is deeply political; how plants, like people, can be racialized, criminalized, and othered within colonial epistemologies.

Okoyomon collaborates with this botanical fugitive, allowing it to overtake the gallery space in way that evokes decay and rebirth. Kudzu's unruliness becomes a challenge to Western taxonomies of order, cultivation, and species hierarchies. It quite literally overgrows Enlightenment ideals of containment, refusing binaries such as native/invasive or good/bad. Its aesthetic and ecological behaviour in the installation is sympoietic; not self-made, but composed through relation. It does not merely decorate the space, but transforms it by weaving new networks of meaning with the other elements of the installation. It persists and resists to historical narratives projected onto Blackness - exploited, deprived of its essence and place, marginalized - serving as a metaphor for the essential yet precarious position of the Black life in America. Just as Blackness has long been narrated through a fear-based rhetoric, controlling discourse, so too is kudzu cast as a threat. In this context, the vine becomes an emblem of Black queer ecology: promiscuous in its attachments, transgressive in its growth, sensual in its movements.

Rather than obeying Western scientific ideals of separation, purity, and control, kudzu enacts an erotic, entangled world-making that refuses singularity. It is feral, polyphonic, and excessive, qualities that resonate with Black queer theories of fugitivity and survival. It

[48] Inkstick, "Precious Okoyomon's Politics of Ecological Revolution: 'Everything is one big great poem. Why pretend otherwise?'"
[49] Anthropocene Curriculum, "Re-patterning with Kudzu: Reckoning in Search of Regeneration"

refuses exclusion, much like those historically displaced and re-rooted, who find life in hostile conditions. Kudzu, like Blackness in the aftermath of enclosure and enslavement, grows where it is not supposed, challenging systems of control, not by restoring a precolonial past but by imagining new futures from within the ruins. Its overgrowth and entangled mode of being functions as a portal into the garden as a post-apocalyptic landscape. Kudzu thrives in damaged, abandoned, and marginal spaces – on the edges of human infrastructure and history. In Okoyomon's installation, it visually manifests what grows after collapse, what emerges after the end of the world. Wild and unruly, it is not cultivated but co-composed. It does not merely survive in the exhibition space, it remakes it, challenging anthropocentric notions of agency. Its forceful nature invites us to image alternative modes of power, resistance, and growth. Kudzu is both method and metaphor: a process of becoming, touching, and reworlding. It reveals how sticky, tangled, and humid the histories of enclosure and life after colonization can be. The vine performs a landscape resistance that is not static or picturesque, but feral, unruly, and sympoietic.

Subsection 5: The Sculptures – Ruins, Gods, and the Mythic Weight of the Post-Apocalyptic Garden

The final element of the installation is a group of six large, animated sculptures that punctuate the space like eroded monuments from an unfamiliar era – at once ancient and futuristic. Rather than appearing to be installed or place, these figures seem to have emerged directly from the soil, as if grown from the earth's memory. Each figure is roughly human-sized, but their proportions are irregular and organic. Their surfaces are rough, visibly stitched and matted together from raw wool, dirt, wire, and blood. The wool, thick and untreated, clumps and twists around their limbs and torsos, sometimes resembling flesh, other times bark or decaying foliage. The sculptures do not stand upright in conventional ways; many are hunched, twisted, or leaning, partially embedded in the soil and overgrown by kudzu vines. Swallowtail butterflies rest on or flutter around then, emphasizing their permeability and integration into the ecosystem. They are not statues in the classical sense, but porous forms in constant interaction with their environment. Their physicality is deeply embedded in the installation's slow, entropic ecology. Their surfaces, made of biodegradable materials invite decay, mold and humidity to penetrate them. Their bodies absorb moisture from the air and seep back into the soil, breaking down over time. Rather than resisting deterioration, they collaborate with it. This material impermanence sharply contrasts with Western sculptural

traditions grounded in duration, elevation, and anthropocentric monumentality. Okoyomon's figures challenge this ideal by embodying a Black queer rethinking of what as monument can be: fragile, wounded, symbiotic, and in flux.

The sculptures resist clear categorization, they are neither human nor animal, neither deities nor ghosts, but shapeshifting hybrids that blur the boundaries of species and time. Their names, "Ikuenebe, I will Never Succumb to Evile", "Omoehi, Child of Destiny I am Blood", "Oseaghe, A Tree With No Wind Looking to God", "Ihoemoegbe, Memory Has Forsaken Me, All The Ties Untangle in my Silence", "Ehidiamen, Heaven Has Refused Me, Roots of Errant Fire", and, "Efua, The Sun is my Own Darkness Swallowed in Flames an Angel Reborn", refuse literal interpretation. Instead of providing names that stabilize identity, Okoyomon offers poetic, mythic fragments that deepen the sculptures' emotional and cosmological resonance. The titles are affective coordinates rather than fixed meanings, suggesting elemental transformation: burning, bleeding, emergence, and atmospheric saturation. For example, "Ihoemoegbe, Memory Has Forsaken Me, All The Ties Untangle in my Silence" (Fig. 13), suggests a disintegration of historical coherence, a personal or collective amnesia that both wounds and liberates. The untangling of ties in silence gestures toward unravelling of colonial inheritances, the loosening of the threads that bind identity to fixed narratives. Its raw materials, interwoven wool and dirt into a collapsing torso mirror this unravelling. Another example, "Ehidiamen, Heaven Has Refused Me, Roots of Errant Fire" (Fig. 14), suggests refusal and fire, "roots" that burn and defy containment. The evocation of a heaven that denies entry speaks of themes of exclusion and exile, while the "errant fire" implies an uncontrolled energy, as if destruction is necessary for transformation. It allows us to imagine a different cosmology, one that is not rooted in transcendence but immanence, with fire as both refusal and life force. Like the garden itself, this figure burns in order to regenerate.

The sculptures become portals, thresholds between life and death, memory and speculation. They exceed capture due to their unfixed identities. In their presence, the audience submerges into a reimagined future, where the concept of the garden is no longer pristine and enclosed, but chaotic and powerful system of relations, transformation and collaboration. The sculptures, just like the garden, are not simply ornaments for admiration, but active agents in creation of new worlds – worlds where Blackness, queerness, and nonhuman life are no longer peripheral but as central to our collective survival. In flux between life and death, their presence can not be contained within linear time or singular identities. In the garden's overall ecology, the sculptures are part of the multispecies

entanglement. They are cradled by the kudzu, nourished by the soil, sheltered by the sugarcane, and entertained by the butterflies. As they land of their surfaces, they dissolve the boundary between the human made object and the nonhuman actor. They become sympoietic beings, they are made with the world rather for it. They are not ruins of a fallen civilization, nor are they utopian markers of a perfected world. They are thresholds of the garden as a post-apocalyptic landscape, broken, fertile and full of potential. Not fixed in history and stone, but entities that compost the histories, let them breather, mold, and seep into the future soils. They offer no answers, but they are storytellers, they are both ruins and seeds.

Transition: Toward a Theory of Relation

In *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, each of the five elements—soil, butterflies, sugarcane, sculptures, and kudzu vine—functions as more than just material or metaphor. Together, they form an intricate ecosystem of meaning, a multi-species landscape animated by histories of violence and ongoing acts of resistance and struggle. As an installation, the work operates as a kind of ecological archive: one that does not only remember, but metabolizes. It composts the residues of colonialism, racial capitalism, and ecological collapse into speculative ground for imagining otherwise. Threaded through the installation is the persistent presence of the garden, not as a nostalgic return to Edenic nature, but as a post-apocalyptic landscape, a ritual space, and a portal to alternative futures. This garden is both unruly and intimate, shaped entanglement, decomposition, and emergence. It holds together incompatible temporalities and interspecies relations, suggesting that life continues not ispite ruin, but through it. It is in Donna Haraway's terms a site of "making-with" rather than a making alone, where the human and nonhuman co-compose life across thresholds of time, space, and form.

The soil holds the afterlives of enclosure, sedimented with the memory of plantation ecologies and the forced transformation of both land and people into property. It resists extractive logics by remaining porous, generative, and alive with microbial and historical matter. The butterflies, bring into focus the cycles of transformation and migration and the haunting presence of queer ecologies fluttering at the edge of visibility. The sugarcane, historically bound to slavery and global trade, acts as a vegetal witness to the entanglement of plant life and racial capitalism; its sweet stalks foster bitter histories of displacement and commodification. The sculptures, named with care and poetic provocation, serve as guardians of the installation's speculative landscape. They bear the weight of memory and the intensity

of becoming, standing amid soil and vine as embodiments of ritual, resistance, and relationality. Finally, the kudzu vine, stages a vegetal rebellion: overtaking walls and boundaries, refusing containment, asserting a wild kinship that disrupts both native/invasive binaries and colonial logics or spatial order and purity.

Together, these elements enact what Anna Tsing calls a polyphonic assemblage; a world composed not through harmony or unity but through overlapping rhythms and uneven temporalities. They do not cohere into a singular narrative; rather, they remain in tension, excess, and relation. This is the installation's radical proposition: that we might learn to live in the ruin, to imagine through entanglement, and to survive by composing new worlds in the midst of the old one's collapse. The conceptual lens of hyperobjects (Morton), sympoiesis (Haraway), and polyphonic assemblages (Tsing) has allowed this chapter to unfold the ecological, political, and ontological complexity of each element. But it is through the practices of relation, as theorized by Édouard Glissant, and the frameworks of Black and decolonial feminist thought, that we begin to trace how these entangled elements articulate modes of being that are irreducibly ethical, situated, and world-making.

As we move into Chapter Three, the focus shifts toward the theoretical stakes of these entanglements. How does Okoyomon's installation enact Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, where opacity, errantry, and the right to difference shape new configurations of ecological and political solidarity? What does it mean to think with decolonial feminist theories that position gendered, racialized, and ecological violence as co-constitutive, and which also foreground the potential for alternative modes of kinship and becoming? How can Black queer ecologies further open up our understanding of the garden, not as a space of return, but as a site of radical futurity? It is in these questions that the conceptual labor of the thesis continues—bringing art, theory, and ecological critique into conversation, not to resolve their tensions, but to compost them into fertile ground for what Glissant calls the *tout-monde*: the whole world, in all its difference, relation, and becoming. [50]

[50] We will use the French term *Tout-Monde*, often translated into English as "Whole-World". In the context of disaster studies, the *Tout-Monde* represents an archipelago of diverse, hybrid interpretations of what constitutes a disaster across different global contexts. This whole is characterized by diversity and relationality rather than homogeneity or universality; it is structured through complementarity, not hierarchy. For more in-depth analysis of the term *tout-monde* read: Gaillard, JC. "The Tout-Monde of Disaster Studies." *Jamba* 15, no. 1 (2023): 1385–1385. doi:10.4102/jamba.v15i1.1385.

Chapter 3: Entangled Worlds - Relation, Gender, and Black Queer Ecologies

This chapter builds on the conceptual frameworks introduced earlier by engaging with theories of relation, decolonial feminist thought, and Black queer ecologies. While chapter one established a historical and philosophical mapping of the garden as a site of power, enclosure, and representation, and the chapter two explored contemporary reconfigurations of nature through multispecies entanglements and nonhuman agency using the case study of Precious Okoyomon, the current chapter delves into the relational, affective, and embodied dimensions of nature and landscape as experienced through gendered, racialized, and queer lenses. Central to this discussion is the work of Édouard Glissant, whose theory of *Relation* and the *poetics of opacity* offers a way to rethink landscape and identity not through fixed roots, but through rhizomatic, unpredictable, and entangled connections. Okoyomon's installation heavily influenced by the theories of Glissant and the case study that this paper focuses on is inspired by the play *Monsieur Toussaint,* originally published in 1961 and dramatizing the final days of Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution; exploring themes of colonialism, memory, identity, and resistance. In the bigger picture, his oeuvre and philosophy resist the colonial urge to categorize and know absolutely; instead, he insists on the right to opacity—to unknowability and difference without domination. Within the context of Precious Okoyomon's installation, Glissant's ideas help to frame the garden as a relational field, where histories, myths, ecologies, and bodies meet without needing to fully disclose or resolve their meanings.

Building on these ideas, this chapter turns to decolonial feminist scholars such as Sylvia Wynter, María Lugones, and Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso, who have critiqued the colonial and patriarchal foundations of the *nature/culture* binary, tracing how this divide has historically aligned "nature" with the feminine, the racialized, the non-Western, and the nonhuman—justifying domination and extraction. These thinkers invite us to reimagine subjectivity and ecology through relational, embodied, and intersectional frameworks that refuse the logic of mastery and instead embrace interdependence, care, and multiplicity. Alongside these critiques, the chapter engages with emerging perspectives in Black queer ecologies, which centers Black and queer experiences of land, nature, and embodiment as sites of resistance to dominant ecological narratives. Thinkers such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Jennifer C. Nash, and J.T. Roane offer insights into *queer kinship*, *Black fugitivity*, and *ecological intimacy* not as abstract ideals but as lived practices grounded in survival, pleasure, and refusal. These perspectives are essential for understanding how Okoyomon's

installation not only confronts ecological violence but also gestures toward alternative futures through embodied mythmaking, kin-making, and a radical reorientation toward land and life.

This chapter serves as a bridge between the philosophical and material inquiries of the previous sections and the deeply affective, poetic, and relational politics that animate Okoyomon's practice. Rather than repeating the material analysis of Chapter Two, it re-reads the installation through a theoretical lens, illuminating how the previously discussed elements - soil, butterflies, sugarcane, sculptures, kudzu vine - operate not just materially or symbolically, but philosophically and politically. What emerges is a vision of ecology that is not rooted in purity, separation, or balance, but in contamination, entanglement, and co-creation; a vision that embraces the end of the world not as closure, but as ground from which new forms of life and relation might emerge.

Subsection 1: Glissant's Poetics of Relation: opacity, errantry, and the world as relation

Okoyomon's installation does not present itself as an enclosed ecosystem, a cultivated garden, or a symbol of linear growth. Instead, it is fragmented, unruly, and rhizomatic – a shifting terrain that resists containment. This aligns with Glissant's concept of *Relation:* an ongoing entanglement of difference that refuses reduction or totality. In reference to that totality, the Whole with capital W to signal its philosophical weight, "is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge", knowledge that comes from the unknown, cast by the abyss, becoming knowledge, being experienced in relation, being shared and most importantly bringing us together. [51] It is this porous interdependence between soil and sculpture, butterfly and vine, death and emergence that animates Okoyomon's landscape and invites us to relationally engage to the environment and its history, and not merely observe it. As we expolored in the previous chapters, in Western landscape aesthetics, the aspiration towards order, clarity, and visibility is dominant. In contrast to that, Okoyomon's garden operates according to what Glissant calls the right to opacity: a refusal of full transparency, a resistance to being known entirely on dominant terms. Against generalization, "that which protects the Diverse we call opacity" [52], the requirement for transparency to knowledge leads to hierarchies and thus reduction. Glissant suggests that we should not only affirm the right to difference, but also go further than that and affirm the right to opacity; a right not to be locked away in an isolated, unreachable state, but to exist in a uniqueness that cannot be

[51] Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 8.
[52] Ibid 62.

simplified or reduced. [53] This insistence reverberates through the garden's refusal to cohere into a single, readable message, but instead, it invites the audience into an experience of density and excess, where nothing is easily distinguishable from the other, where soil dirties your shoes, the kudzu overtakes the relics of the Arsenal, and time feels both stretched and compressed.

In this sense, Okoyomon's installation becomes a relational landscape, not simply a representation of interspecies interconnection, but a site in which relations are materially enacted and co-composed. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the rhizome, Glissant reimagines rootdeness as "the symbolic figure of Relation", in which every identity within that system of Relation is "extended through a relationship with the Other". [54] Okoyomon's garden, in its non-hierarchical composition, enacts this principle. Sculptures of half-eroded angels and ancestral Black figures rise from the same ground as sugarcane and kudzu vine, refusing separation or elevation. This multiplicity recalls Glissant's concept of the tout-monde, the Whole World, as not a terrain of synthesis but co-existence, a rhizome of multiple relationships with the Other. The installation performs this vision of relation through the aftermath of historical rupture and environmental collapse. It is not a utopian, nor innocent landscape, but full of brokenness, residue, and hauntings; yet, it is also a space where new forms are composted and new worlds imagined. This resonates with Glissant's notion of Chaos, which is opposing to the normative understanding of chaotic, and opens up a new phenomenon: "Relation, or totality in evolution, whose order is continually in flux and whose disorder one can imagine forever.". [55] This understanding of Chaos allows for difference without separation – a radical kind of cohabitation and kinship that is dynamic, chaotic, and relational. It echoes the theories introduced in Chapter One - especially Morton's hyperobjects and Haraway's sympoiesis - but Glissant adds a crucial philosophical and ethical imperative to think these entanglements not just as material facts, but as the grounds for a politics of co-resistance. Relation, for Glissant, is not harmony but encounter, not transparency but opacity, not synthesis but Chaos. And exactly that is Okoyomon's garden, a site of emergence made of wounds, fragments, and wild overgrowth.

Subsection 2: Opacity and the Refusal of Legibility: Decolonial Feminisms and the Garden as Fugitive Space

[53] Ibid 190.
[54] Ibid 11.
[55] Ibid 133.

The landscape created in To See the Earth Before the End of the World is disorienting, overgrown, decaying, and continuously regenerating, rather than a fixed vantage point. The artist's refusal to present a singular, totalizing image of a garden resonates with Glissant's concept of opacity – a political and philosophical stance against reductive understandings of identity and experience. In the context of racialized and colonial histories of surveillance, legibility, and control, opacity functions as a form of protection, resistance, and world-making. By defying generalization, standardization, and conformity to the aesthetic standards of the garden, Okoyomon together with their nonhuman agents rebel against the One, the known and singular, and embrace the Other, the fluid, the unknown, and turbulent that shape our shared destiny. Decolonial feminist thinkers have powerfully extended these ideas by critiquing the modern/colonial gender system as a structure rooted in violence, surveillance, and classification – where to be seen is often to be disciplined or erased. In *Toward a Decolonial Feminism* (2010), Lugones theorizes the *coloniality of gender*, demonstrating how colonial conquest imposed heteropatriarchal norms that disputed kinship systems, redefined embodiment, and rendered nonbinary and Indigenous forms of life illegible within the Western epistemologies. [56] Similarly, Sylvia Wynter challenges the overrepresentation of "Man" as the universal subject of knowledge, rationality, and power, advocating instead for a reimagining of the human beyond colonial categories. [57]

Okoyomon's garden refuses the epistemic violence of imposed order. Its forms are neither entirely figurative nor abstract. The sculptures are fragmented, sometimes barely legible as bodies. The kudzu vine swallows what it touches. The butterfliesm in their cycle of life, death, and, decay, elude containment. Meanwhile, the musical composition from Gio Escobar of Standing in the Corner creates an ambience that invites us to sensory register the experience. This landscape practices, drawing on Black feminist aesthetics, is what Tina Campt refers to as *black visuality*: a visual register that doesn't ask to be seen clearly, but instead vibrates at "lower frequencies", disrupting how Blackness is captured or consumed by dominant visual regimes. [58] Instead of retreating from visibility, the sculptural figures and overgrown vegetation stage what Denise Ferreira da Silva in her article *Toward a Black Feminist Phoetics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World* (2014) calls a "black feminist poethics" - an aesthetic and ethical refusal of linear time, coherence, and

[56] Lugones, Toward a Decolonial Feminism, 749-751.
[57] Wynter, Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom, 260-262.
[58] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 6.

totality. [59] The sculptures are not simply representations of ancestors or victims. Their partial erosion, their cracked halos and wings, signal not erasure but persistence in a damaged form. Their names are poetic refusals of simplification, insisting on multiplicity, on interiority, and on aesthetic survival through fragment. In their lyrical and evocative quality, these names enact a "black feminist poethics" as described by da Silva, resisting linear narratives and offering instead fragmented glimpses into complex realities, imagining an ethical stance against domination ("Ikuenebe, I Will Never Succumb to Evil"), enacting temporal rupture and fragmented interiority ("Ihoemoegbe, Memory Has Forsaken Me, All the Ties Untangle in My Silence"), and staging a nonlinear rebirth through metaphors ("Efua, The Sun is My Own Darkness Swallowed in Flames, an Angel Reborn"), all while remaining open to multiple interpretations. The porous statues, entangled vines, and decomposing organic matter do not speak in a singular voice; they hum, echo, fragment, and persist, embodying a form of survival that is not heroic or whole, but partial, dissonant, and open-ended.

Furthermore, the garden becomes what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013) as a fugitive space - an ensemble of movements and gestures that “refuse what has been refused”. [60] In this sense, the garden functions as a site of transition, encounter, and transformation; a threshold space that tactically operates within the existing environment. This "tactical space" characterized by the kudzu overtaking structures and unexpected juxtapositions, actively engages and manipulates its surroundings for its own purposes. However, this tactical occupation also embodies a form of "fugitive space" as theorized by Moten and Harney. It is fugitive not in its withdrawal, but in its refusal to adhere to dominant spatial and temporal logics, creating an "undercommons" within the given structure. Its power lies not in escape or withdrawal, but in the act of staying - occupying a liminal space that resists prescribed refuge. Okoyomon’s installation embodies this refusal, exposing the brokenness of the world and inviting us into the undercommons: the ruins, the wild growth, and the fragmented histories. It is an insistence on inhabiting the entangled reality rather than clinging to limiting narratives or fantasies, recognizing that we are already within this complex and interconnected world.

Subsection 3: Queering the Entanglements: Black Queer Ecologies and the Radical Potential of Ruination

[59] Da Silva, Toward a Black Feminist Poethics, 81-86
[60] Harney and Moten, THE WILD BEYOND: WITH AND FOR THE UNDERCOMMONS, last paragraph.

Queer ecologies, an emerging field developed by scholars such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Jennifer C. Nash, and J.T. Roane, illuminate how Black and queer experiences, often marginalized within dominant ecological narratives, offer radical possibilities for understanding and inhabiting damaged landscapes. Rather than viewing "ruination" as a site of absolute loss, their work emphasizes it generative potential: s space where new forms of kinship, survival, and pleasure can emerge, often in defiance of normative ecological and social structures. This subsection's ultimate goal is to explore how Okoyomon's garden embodies a queering of ecological norms. The absence of formal order, the embrace of overgrowth and decay, and the entanglement of seemingly disparate elements (industrial remnants, cultivated plants, living creatures) can be read as a deliberate disruption of conventional notions of a "healthy" or "balanced" ecosystem. This queering extends to the temporal dimensions of the garden as well. The simultaneous presence of growth and decay, the echoes of the past in the salvaged materials, and the unpredictable movements of living organisms challenge linear notions of time and ecological succession. Furthermore, Black queer ecologies foreground the interconnectedness of race, sexuality, gender, and the environment. We will also dive in to how Okoyomon's installation speak to the specific ways in which Black and queer bodies have historically been positioned within and against dominant ecological narratives. Thinking about the legacies of slavery and colonialism that link the exploitation of land with the exploitation of certain bodies. The sugarcane, for instance, carries a heavy history of forced labor and the disruption of Black ecologies. Within this context, how does the garden's queered ecology offer possibilities for reclaiming or reimagining these relationships?

Catriona Sandilands and Mel Y. Chen, offer further frameworks for understanding the non-normative relations and affective entanglements that bloom in this landscape. The installation queers the garden by refusing its classical, domesticated forms - symmetry, cultivation, order - and embracing instead the wild, the fugitive, the decaying, and the relational. This is a queer garden not only because of its resistance to straight time and productivity, but because of how it stages interdependence among species, forms, and histories that are often seen as incompatible or incoherent. Additionally, Black queer ecologies as articulated by Gumbs, Nash and Roane, focus more on the dismantling of the assumption that ecological 'health' is balance, harmony and order restored. Instead, their work brings into the centre the marginal, fugitive, and entangled life worlds or multispecies alliances. These perspectives demonstrate ruination not simply as loss or absence, but as a mode of survival and potentiality. In this context, Okoyomon's garden and its decaying

sculptures, invasive vines, decomposing organic matter, and overgrown pathways, offers an alternative vision of ecology; one that is unapologetically queer, broken, and alive. This queering of the garden is not only metaphorical but also structural. The artist attempts to undo linear notions of time, growth, and death by layering historical residues with fresh organic practices. The sugarcane, heavily marked by the brutal history of plantation slavery, grows alongside the kudzu, a plant synonymous with colonial import and ecological excess. The figures, neither fully formed nor disintegrated, mirror the condition of incompleteness. The butterflies, are symbols of transformation and agents of decay. All these elements are not arranged to only depict a cycle or rebirth and restoration, but also a landscape of entanglement and contradiction – an undercommons of life emerging from systemic collapse.

J.T. Roane's work on Blackness, specifically the discussion on his article *Plotting the Black Commons* (2018) offers a critical framework here. Roane identifies how spaces of historical violence, particularly the plantation and the post plantation landscapes, are also spaces of insurgent life, of relationality that persists despite systemic erasure. Roan highlights the "ritualized enactments of social life refiguring death and the outdoors as sites for recalling ancestry and for unsettling white supremacist capitalist exploitation of the land and Black people alike.", through the concept of the 'plot' and the 'Black commons'. [61] These social practices that took place at the plantation are related to Okoyomon's garden, in their share fugitive spatial logic that challenges the respectively plantation's and contemporary artistic discourse's structures of white supremacy and cultivate spaces of Black sociality and resistance. Okoyomon's garden emerges as such a geography. It does not hide the ruins of the past; instead, it composts them into a terrain of possibility. The remnants of Western imperialism (symbolized by the crumbling Arsenal walls) are not erased but overtaken by lifeforms that refuse containment. This is not healing in a liberal sense, but what Roane would might call a radical form of inhabiting catastrophe: staying with the broken world through alternate visions and counter ecologies rather than seeking to fix or transcend it.

In her reflections on *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* Jennifer C. Jennifer Nash challenges the binary of human and nonhuman and the position of the Black scholar in the academic discourse that has long structured ecological and philosophical thought. She interrogates how Blackness has historically been positioned as outside the bounds of full humanity - as closer to nature, animal, or thing - and how this positioning can be reclaimed as a site of ecological relation. In Okoyomon's installation, this blurring is

[61] Roane, Plotting the Black Commons, 243.

literalized. The figures that rise from the ground—some evoking ancestors, others mythic creatures—are neither fully human nor fully other. They are porous, earthy, vegetal. They do not demand recognition, but invite relation through vulnerability. They hum, as Tina Campt would say, at a lower frequency, destabilizing the visual order of legibility. In this hum, we find the possibility of a new ethic: one that does not seek to restore the human to a place of dominance, but to rethink what it means to be in relation with the more-than-human world. Alexis Pauline Gumbs is another prominent scholar, and the last publication of her poetic trilogy of books [62] expands on the sonic tradition of dub, speaking of a "Black feminist ecological thought" that echoes, layers, and remixes histories of survival. Her work imagines marine mammals, sediment, and breath as kin, offering a poetics of connection across time, space, and species. This dub methodology is also present in Okoyomon's garden. Nothing appears singular or stable; everything doubles, reverberates, and transforms. The garden is not a site of origin or a destination; it is an ongoing composition, a chorus of the living and the dead, of what has been and what might still come. Gumbs teaches us that such a space does not have to be whole to be sacred. Its holiness is in its messiness.

To queer ecology, then, is not only to challenge who gets to be considered natural or legible, but also to embrace the incoherence and excess that dominant ecological narratives seek to suppress. The radical potential of ruination lies in this embrace. In the wake of colonial and capitalist extraction, Okoyomon's garden does not promise redemption or stability. Instead, it insists on the generativity of collapse through relationality and vulnerability. It offers a vision of ecological relation that is messy, affective, and unfinished—an invitation to inhabit the ruins with care, imagination, and a refusal to be made coherent. In this light, the garden becomes a site of what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls *Black feminist Poethics*: a practice of world-making grounded not in legibility or mastery, but in entangled, opaque, and ethical being-with. This is the poethics of decay, of overgrowth, of whisper and echo. It is the poethics of staying with the earth as it is—not as a backdrop for human drama, but as a collaborator in the unfinished project of living otherwise.

[62] See: Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist *Fugitivity* (2016), *M Archive: After the End of the World* (2018) and lastly *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (2020).

Conclusion

This thesis was set out to explore how Precious Okoyomon's To See the Earth Before the End of the World (2022) operates as a garden metaphor and how its regenerating and decaying material engage with questions of decolonization, kinship, and post-apocalyptic ecological thought. Across three chapters, I have argued that the installation proposes an alternative, insurgent model of the garden: one that is entangled with histories of colonial violence, racial capitalism, and ecological collapse, but also alive with possibilities for relational survival, resistance, and reworlding. Drawing from a wide theoretical framework; including Glissant's poetics of relation, Haraway's sympoiesis, Tsing's polyphonic assemblages, Morton's hyperobjects, and Black and decolonial feminist thought – this study has illustrated how Okoyomon's garden refuses purity, clarity, and containment. Instead, it insists on mess, opacity, and co-becoming as conditions for life in the ruins. Rather than a space of control or cultivation, Okoyomon's garden is post-apocalyptic: a landscape made of composted histories, broken temporalities, and feral ecologies. The materials – soil, sugarcane, kudzu vine, swallowtail butterflies, and sculptures – are not symbolic ornaments, but active agents that metabolize the past while enabling speculative futures. The soil holds the afterlives of plantation logics and enclosure, refusing extractive epistemologies, offering instead a living archive of relation by reminding us that we are all compost. The swallowtail butterflies, ephemeral and migratory, perform a queer ecology of transformation and loss through their life and death cycle. The sugarcane, loaded with the violent history of racialized labour, becomes a vegetal witness that connects monoculture with bodily exploitation. The kudzu vine, demonized as invasive, resists botanical and racial categorization, aligning with fugitivity and non-normative kinship. Lastly, the sculptures, partially eroded, constructed from raw wool, dirt, and blood, are mythic figures that refuse full legibility, embodying Black feminist poethics that privileges fragmentation, interiority, and opacity.

Okoyomon's installation is shaped by, and speak to, a global context of ecological art and political precarity. Its material are rooted in the entangled legacies of transatlantic slavery, settler colonialism, and extractive capitalism – systems that have long operated by exploiting both land and bodies, particularly those racialized, gendered, and made other. The sugarcane invokes the histories not only of Caribbean and American plantation economies, but also of a global commodity chains that continue to displace native ecologies and laborers in the Global South. The kudzu vine, labelled invasive in the United States and Europe, reflects broader anxieties about racial and biological 'contamination', echoing xenophobic

and colonial taxonomies of control. These vegetal and sculptural elements do not simply gesture to history – they inhabit its aftermath, offering a terrain where the ruins of empire are neither sanitized nor transcended, but composted into something still alive. The installation also challenges dominant ecological frameworks grounded in balance, productivity, and/or sustainability; concepts which, as many decolonial thinkers argue, often remain embedded in liberal humanist and settler-colonial logics. In its refusal to order, its embrace of decay, and its cohabitation of the human and nonhuman, the garden enacts Haraway's sumpoiesis – a making-with across species and scales. But Okoyomon's version of sympoiesis is not innocent or harmonious; it is fugitive, broke, and insurgent. It resonates with Glissant's tout-monde, a world not unified but constituted through difference and relation, and with Black queer ecological thought, where pleasure, grief, and survival emerge in the ruins of normative systems. The garden is thus not a retreat, but a confrontation. It confronts Western traditions of landscape aesthetics, where visibility, control, and beauty dominate. It also confronts the viewer with their own complicity in the systems that shape the Anthropocene. Yet it does not moralize or resolve. Instead, it creates a space of dense and affective opacity – a place where one cannot fully know, but must feel, listen, and stay with the trouble.

Situating To See the Earth Before the End of the World within a broader art historical context reveals how Okoyomon both draws from and diverges from traditons of land art, installation, and ecological aesthetics. Unlike earlier movements such as 1960s and 70s Land Art – often dominated by monumental gestures and largely executed by white male artists – Okoyomon's practice resists the heroic scale and extractive logic that often accompanied those works. Instead of imposing form upon the landscape, Okoyomon allows the garden to unfold organically with time, embracing unpredictability, decay, and multispecies co-authorship. In doing so, the installation aligns more closely with feminist and decolonial revisions of environmental art, such as those found in the works of Ana Mendieta, Diana Scherer, Simone Leigh, Cecilia Vicuña, Mire Lee, Pierre Huyghe, herman de vries, and more among other artists who foreground, nature, body, ritual, displacement, and material histories in their ecological interventions. Furthermore, Okoyomon's work contributes to a growing movement in contemporary art that explores the intersections of Blackness, ecology, and posthumanism. Their installation resonates with recent practices of artists such as Tabita Rezaire, Kapwani Kiwanga, or Ibrahim Mahama, who similarly explore themes of ruin, survival, and transhistorical connection through organic materials and immersive environments. These artists collectively challenge Western paradigms of mastery and visuality, centering instead opacity, relationality, and affective experience. Within this global

field, Okoyomon's garden emerges not as an isolated gesture, but as part of a larger aesthetic and political vocabulary that reimagines what art can do in the face of planetary crisis. Their work refuses to aestheticize the Anthropocene as sublime loss, and instead insists on entanglement, composting, and speculative renewal as forms of Black and ecological futurity.

In the face of ecological collapse, colonial aftermaths, and systemic violence, To See the Earth Before the End of the World does not offer consolation or resolution. Instead, it offers something far more urgent and radical: a space to stay with the trouble, to compost history, and to imagine otherwise. Through its unruly garden, Precious Okoyomon invites un into a world where decay is not an end but a beginning, where kinship stretches across species and time, and where opacity and fragmentation become tool of resistance and survival. In this world, the garden is not a retreat but a threshold – a living, breathing metaphor for what it means to build new forms of relation in the ruins of the old. It is in this tangled, broke, and blooming terrain that we begin to glimpse the shape of possible futures. Yet, this thesis remains limited by its focus on a single site-specific installation as a case study through which to explore broader theoretical frameworks. While it allows for depth of analysis, it inevitably narrows the scope of applicability across other artistic or geographical contexts. Additionally, the ephemeral and multisensory nature of the installation poses challenges for analysis through textual and photographic documentation alone. Future research could expand this inquiry by comparing Okoyomon's work with other contemporary artists engaging with ecological and decolonial themes, or by exploring audience response and embodied experiences more directly through fieldwork or interviews. Further engagement with Indigenous epistemologies and land-based practices could also enrich the analysis, offering alternative frameworks for thinking about gardens, kinship, and world-making beyond Western eco-critical theory.

Illustrations

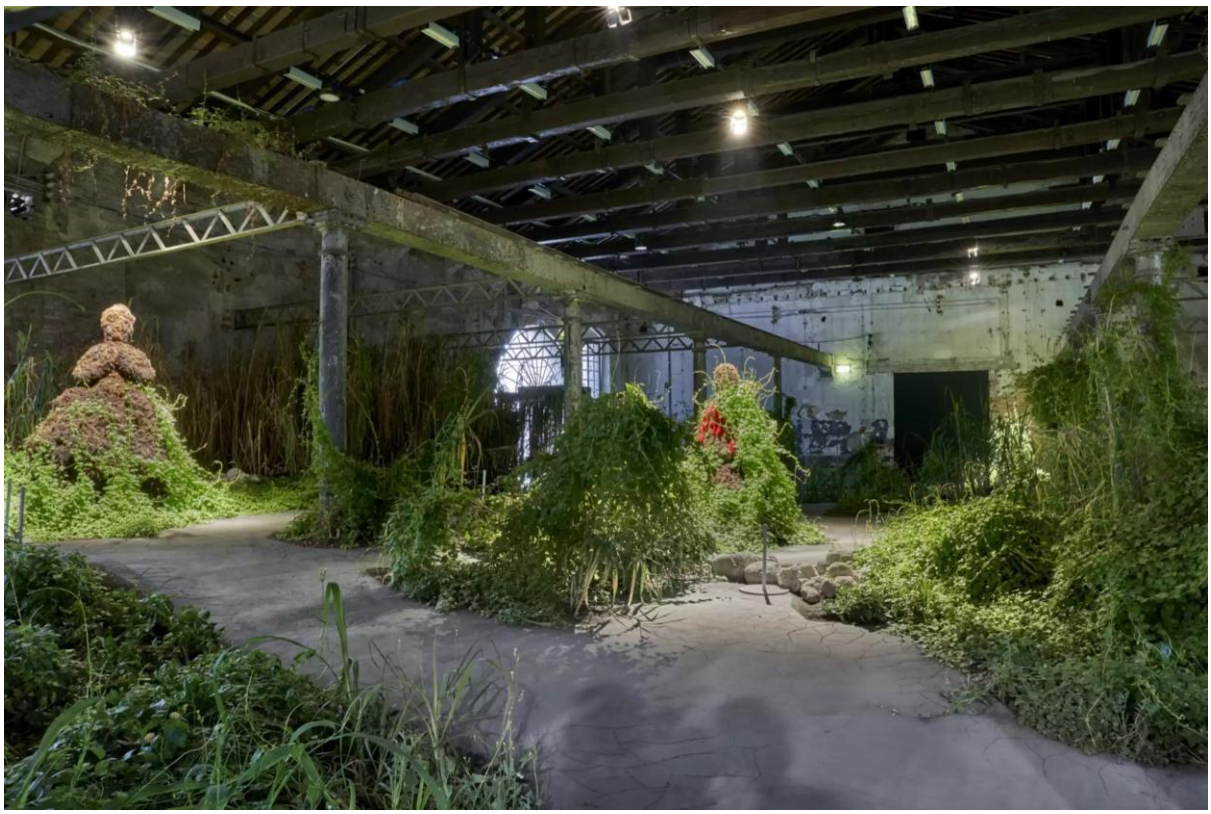

Fig. 1. Precious Okoyomon, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, mixed media, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

Fig. 2. Precious Okoyomon, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, raw wool, dirt, blood, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

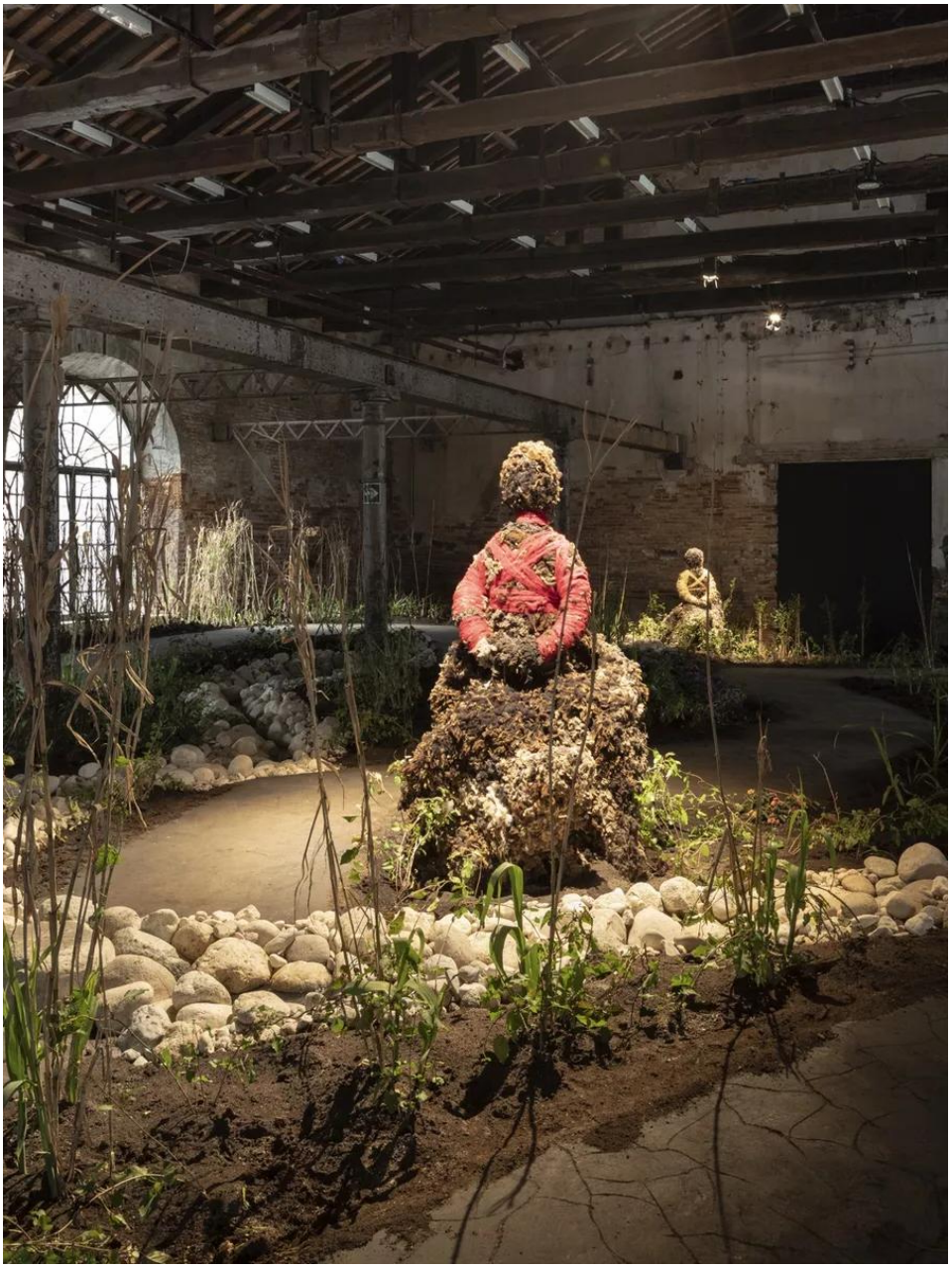

Fig. 3. Precious Okoyomon, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, raw wool, dirt, blood, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

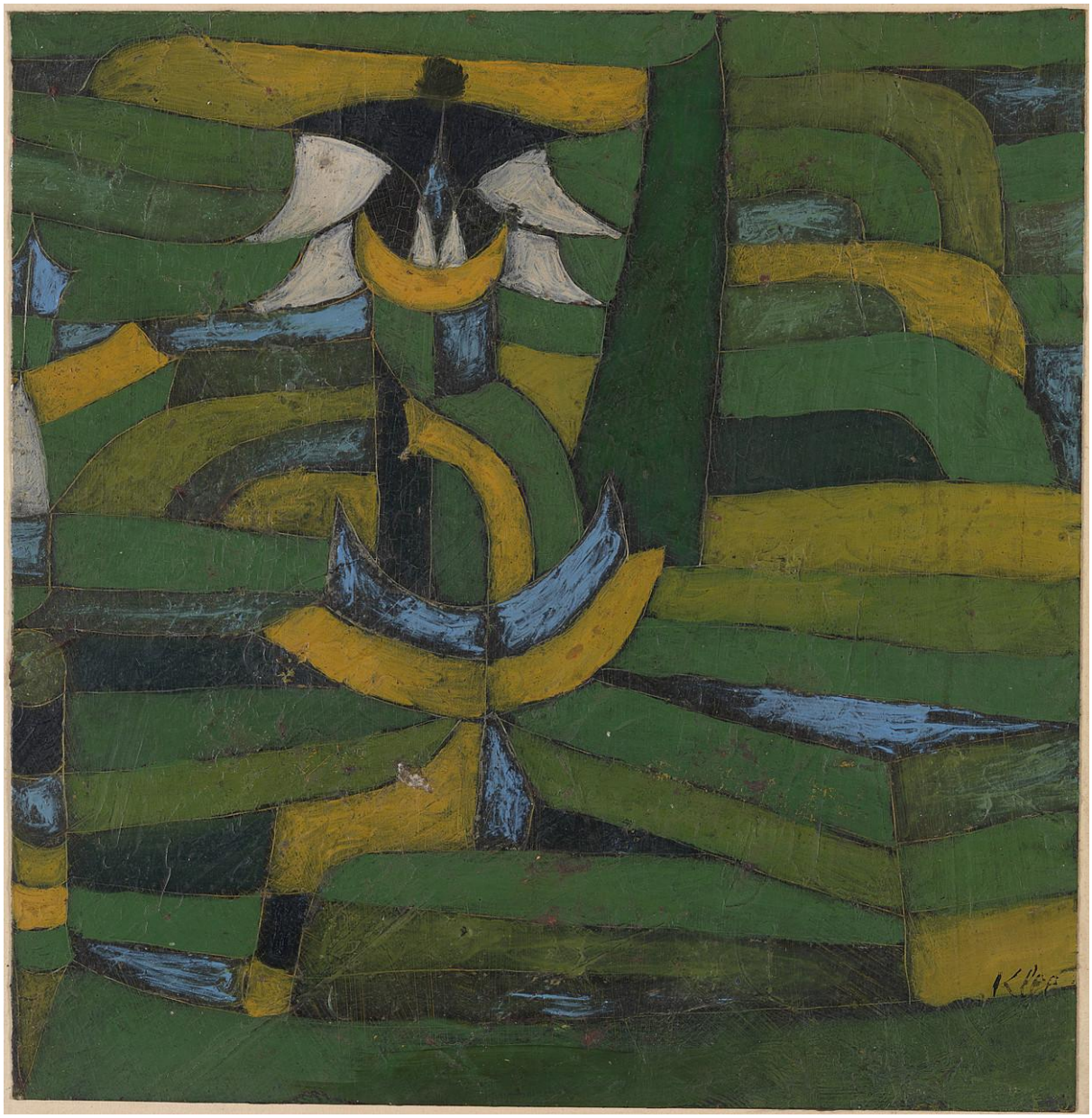

Fig. 4. Paul Klee, *White Blossom in the Garden*, 1920, Oil on paper, mounted on paper, sheet:17.8 x 17.2 cm; mount: 22 x 20.7 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Estate of Karl Nierendorf, 48.1172.157.

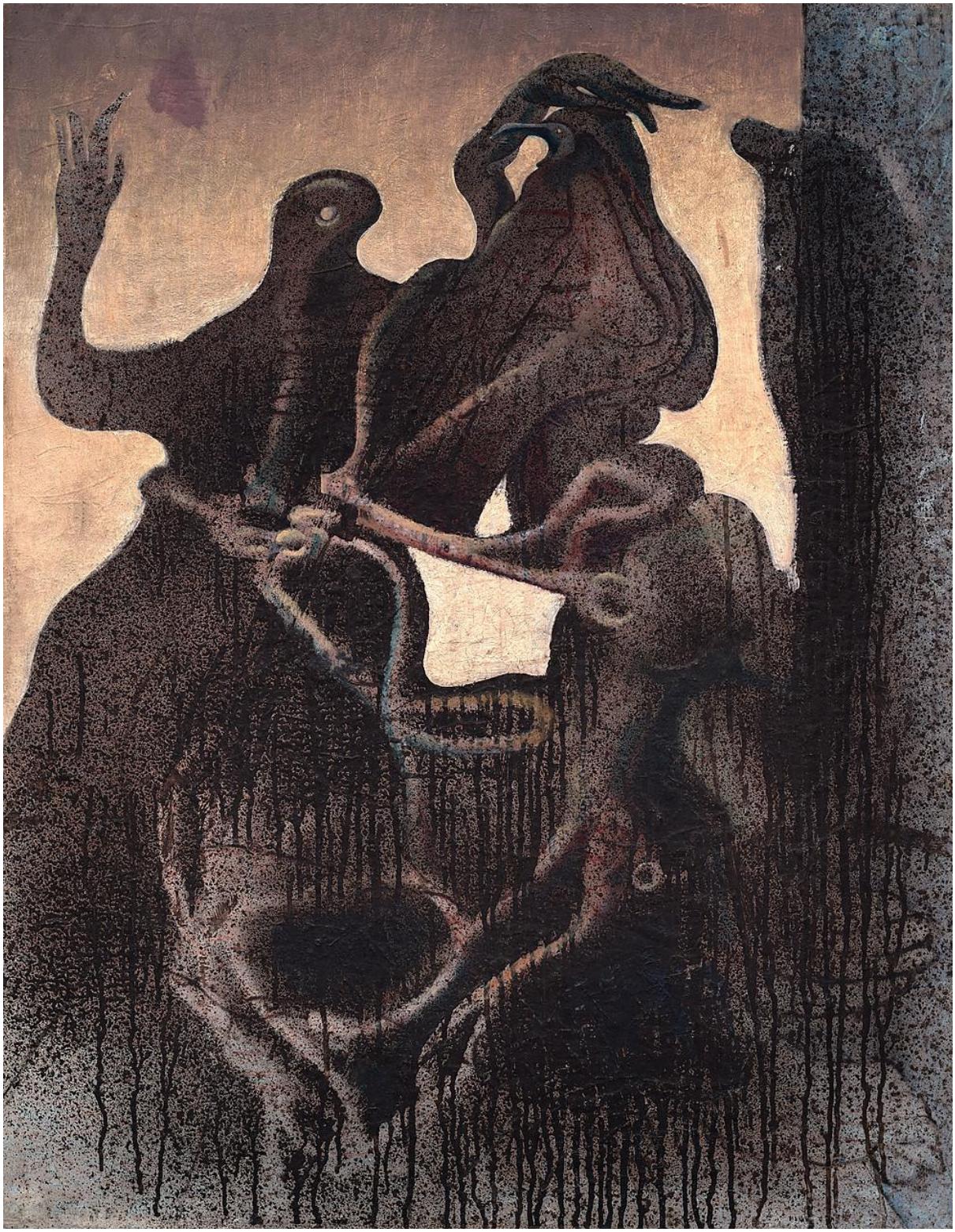

Fig.5. Max Ernst, *Zoomorphic Couple*, 1933, Oil on canvas, 91.9 x 73.3 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, 1976, 76.2553.75.

Fig. 6. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water, 457.2mx4.5m, Collection of Dia Art Fundation.

The Harvest
Wheatfield - A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan
© 1982 Agnes Denes

Fig. 7. Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield - A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill*, 1982, photograph, Downtown Manhattan.

Fig. 8. Ana Mendieta, Siluetas Series, 1976, photograph.

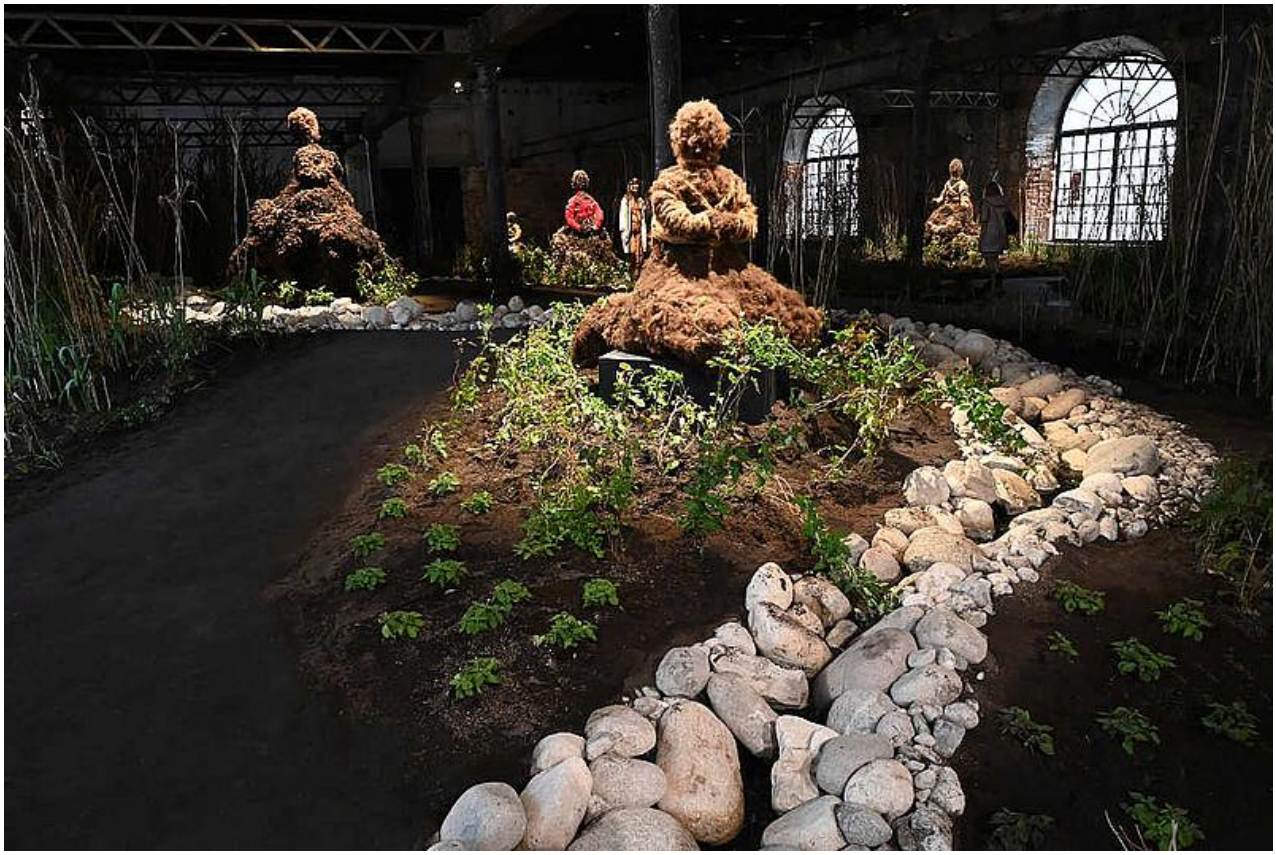

Fig. 9. Precious Okoyomon, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, mixed media, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

Fig. 10. Precious Okoyomon, *the sky is always black, Fort Mose*, 2022, swallowtail butterfly, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

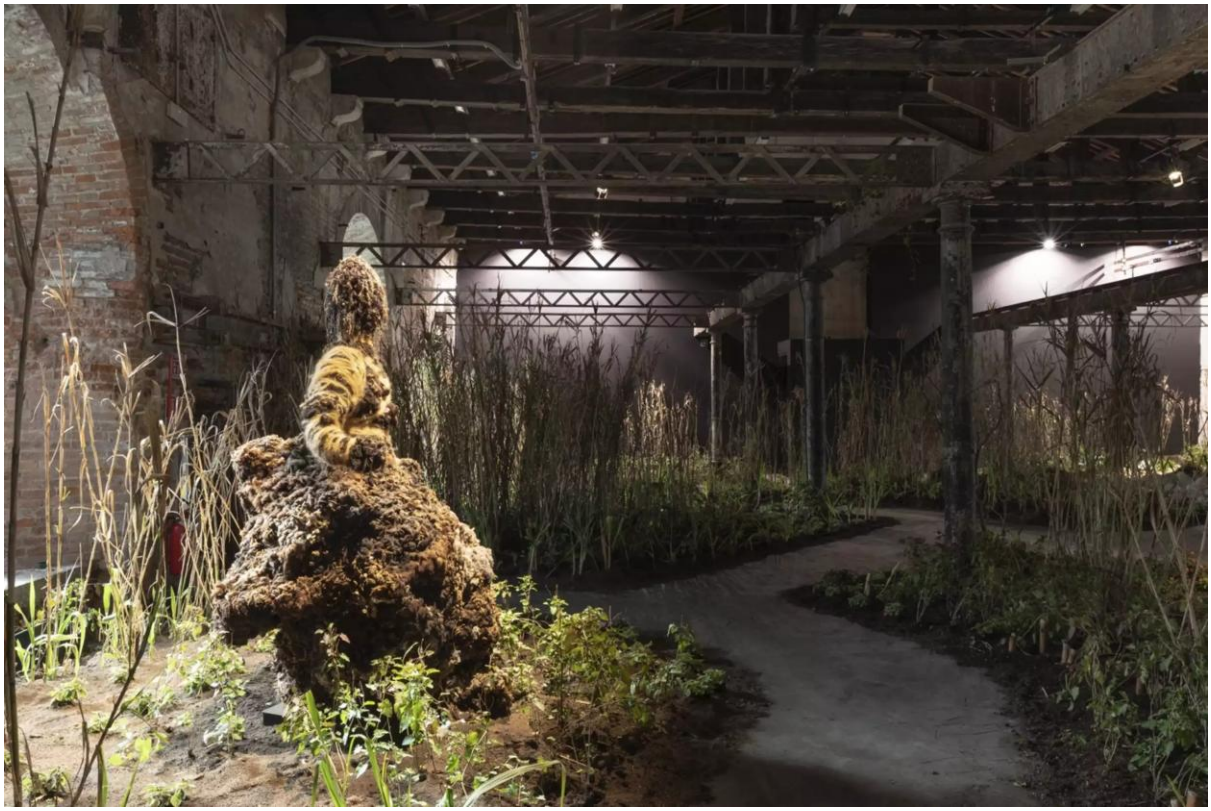

Fig. 11. Precious Okoyomon, *suns of consciousness*, 2022, sugar cane fields, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

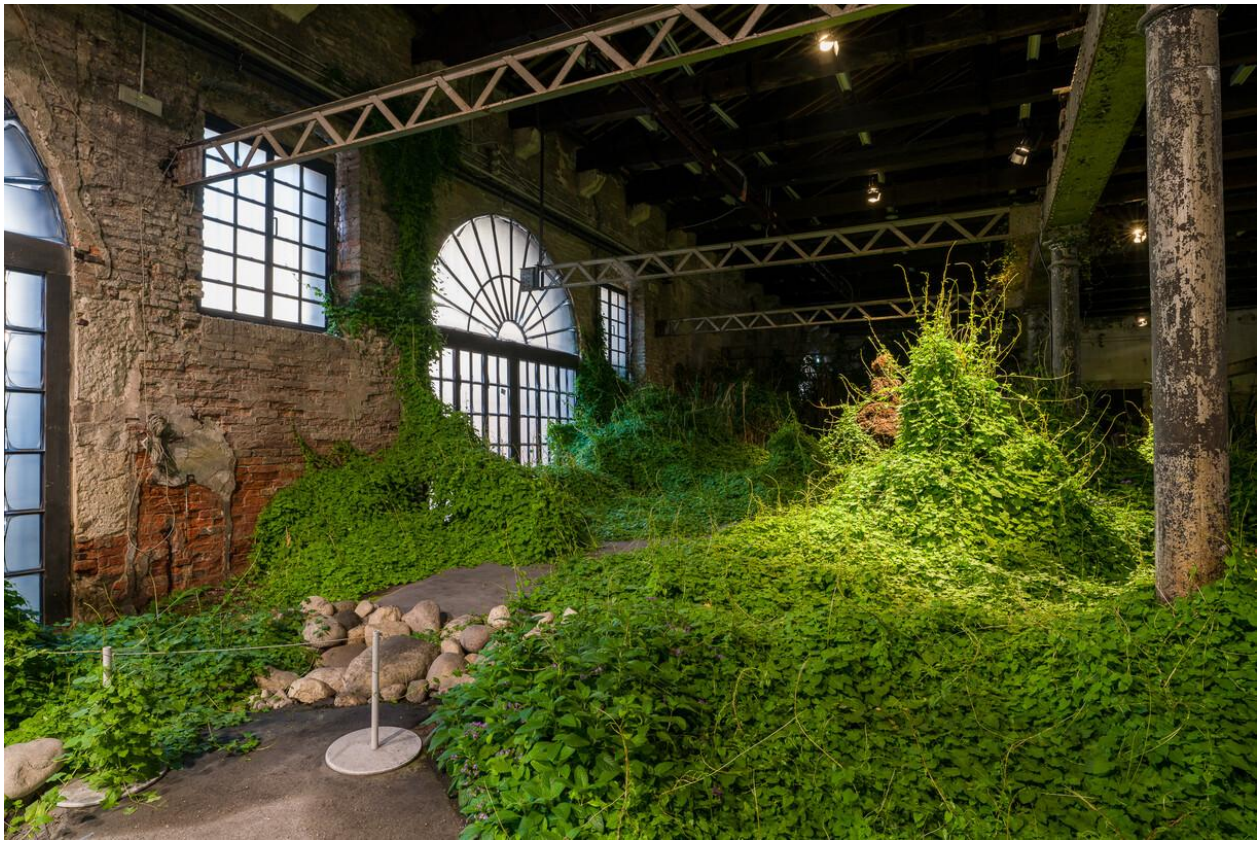

Fig. 12. Precious Okoyomon, *resistance is an atmospheric condition*, 2022, kudzu plants, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

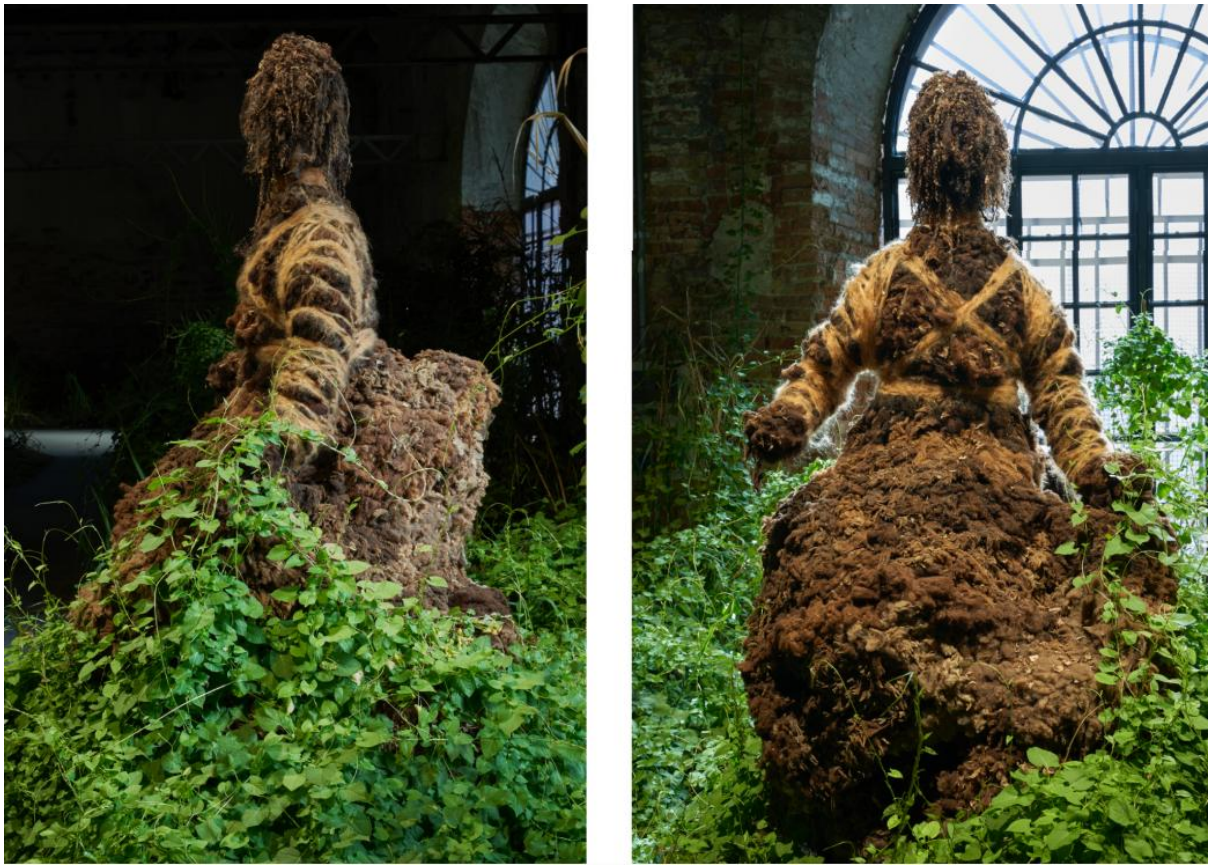

Fig. 13. Precious Okoyomon, *Ihoemoegbe, memory has forsaken me, all the ties untangle in my silence*, 2022, raw wool, dirt, blood, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

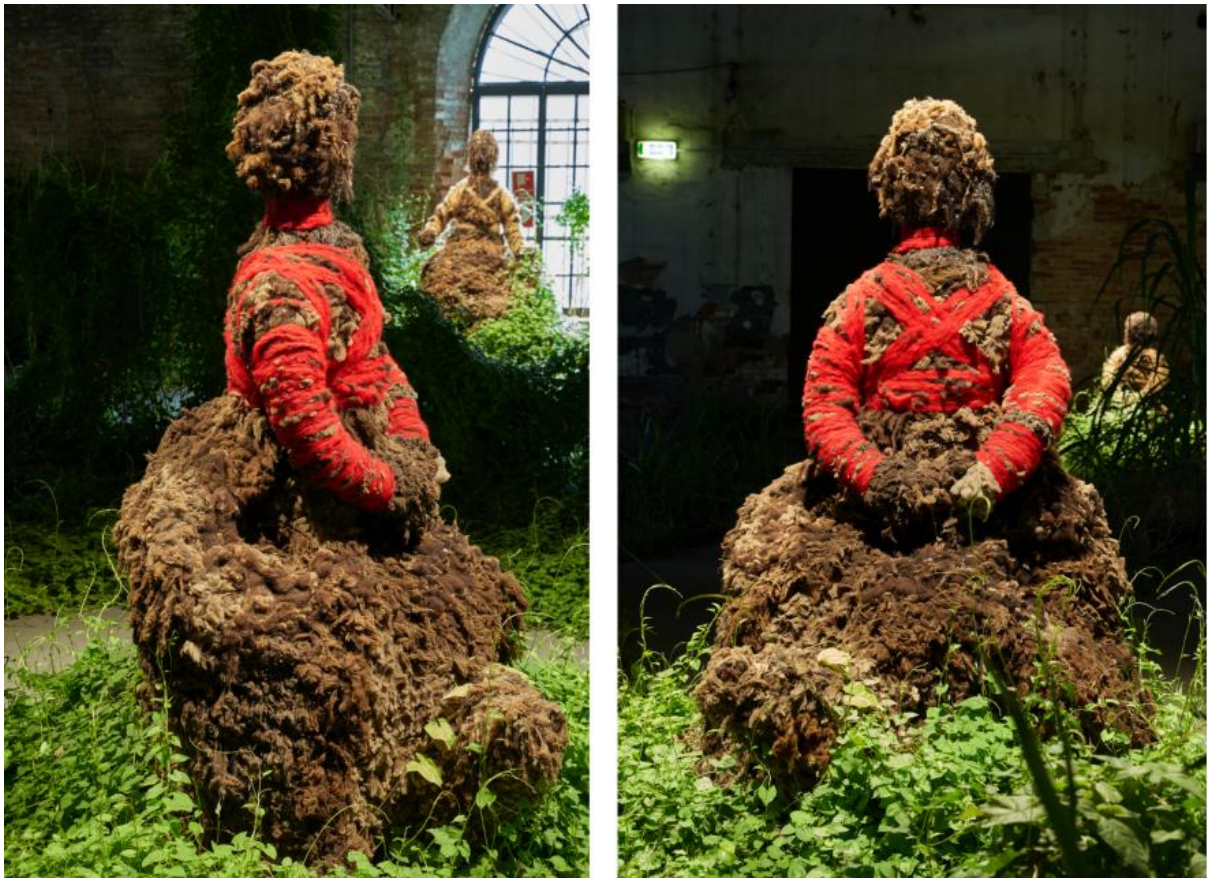

Fig. 14. Precious Okoyomon, *Ehidiamen, Heaven Has Refused Me, Roots of Errant Fire*, 2022, raw wool, dirt, blood, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia.

Illustration credits

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Fig. 13. Quinn Harrelson Gallery

Fig. 14. Quinn Harrelson Gallery

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