

Uriel Orlow. Wood, and other Archival Matters

Did you know that the ancient Greeks only had one word for wood—hylē (haili)—without making a distinction between the growing forests and the timber used by humans? Aristotle used this word to coin the concept of matter, the stuff of which a thing is made. Matter is stone, iron, bronze, and everything else—simply materials before they are shaped into a recognizable form.¹

According to Jason W. Moore, modern capitalist economies, and their boom-and-bust cycles, were arguably born in the island of Madeira.² *Madeira* is the Portuguese word for wood. In the first decades of the 1400s, Portuguese settlers began to fell the forests of Madeira leading to its rapid deforestation and consequent exhaustion. As timber harvesting gave way to sugar crops, enslaved Africans were brought to work in the island's plantation system. But as Madeira ran out of wood, labor productivity collapsed too, with sugar production peaking in 1506, then suffering an astonishingly rapid fall by 1525.

Brazil, another territory the Portuguese annexed, would be also named after a type of wood, Pau Brasil or Brazilwood, with the country's current name, Brazil, emerging as shorthand for Terra do Brasil ("Land of Brazil"). The name took hold when the Portuguese country leased the commercial exploration of Pau Brasil to a merchant consortium that set up its extensive enterprise along the coast. Brazilian, now the name after which the

1 Uriel Orlow, from the script of *Reading Wood (Backwards)*, 2022.

2 Jason W. Moore, "Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the 'First' Sixteenth Century: Part I: From 'Island of Timber' to Sugar Revolution, 1420–1506", *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, New York, vol. 32, no. 4 (2009), p. 345–390.

inhabitants of Brazil are known, was first used to refer to those whose profession was to harvest Pau Brasil.

The word “Madeira” that both names the island and the material is also intimately connected to *matter*, a concept that, as philosopher Michael Marder points out, first “arose in Aristotle’s thought by way of adopting the everyday word for timber, *hule*, for rigorously philosophical purposes.”³ Turning the term for “wood, firewood,” in a specific sense into the term “material,” in a general sense and ultimately into the term “matter” in the philosophical sense, Aristotle also opposed it to “form.” Left on its own, matter is just an amorphous non-entity, for it to become something it requires a “meaning which must come from without.”⁴ Wood, for instance, acquires a meaning when it becomes a piece of furniture or a tool. In Latin, the word *materia*, “substance from which something is made,” is also the word for “hard inner wood of a tree,” a meaning that carried over from Greek. In Portuguese, the Latin word *materia* split into the literary form *matéria*, and the vernacular *madeira*, commonly used to refer to timber or wood.

There is a second meaning to the term matter, however, as origin or source, that is, of matter as *mother*. In his book *Symbolic Economies. After Marx and Freud*, French philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux argues that the philosophical antinomy between materialism and idealism indexes the relation between man and nature. This, in turn, is tied to a conceptualization of the process of conception in which, as Goux puts it, only in the “male semen does the principle of the soul, that is, of life, reside.”⁵ While men bring to procreation the form of the progeny, on the part of the female “there is no order, no principle of internal organization, no generative power.”⁶ The reduction of the female body to an incubator leads not only to the devaluation of the maternal body but also to the erasure of the generative power of the mother, and by extension, to the devaluation of nature as mute and inert matter.

3 Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking, A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013, p. 30.

4 Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. by Jennifer Curtiss Gage, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1990, p. 214.

5 Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, p. 221.

6 Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, p. 213.

The differences between the sexes, as Goux goes on to argue, is *symbolic of the symbolic*: “superimposed on the sexual and organic mode of reproduction [...] is another type of reproduction, a *social, ideological one*.”⁷ The development of Western metaphysics is itself structured by the same gendered concepts and metaphors, in which masculinity and value are made to converge, while the mythical division between the male and female elements in procreation intersects with the opposition between technology (codified as male) and nature (codified as female), ultimately culminating in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*. Nature, Hegel wrote, “exhibits no freedom in its existence, but only *necessity* and *contingency*. [...] For this reason, Nature, in the determinate existence which makes it nature, is not to be deified; nor are the sun, moon, animals, plants, etc., to be regarded and cited as more excellent, as works of God, than human actions and events. *In itself*, in the Idea, Nature is divine: but as it *is*, the being of Nature does not accord with its Notion; rather is Nature the *unresolved contradiction*. Its characteristic is positedness, the negative, in the same way that the ancients grasped matter in general as the *non-ens*.”⁸

For Hegel, as Marder puts it, “the woods are wood awaiting its elevation [...] or the sublation of its immediate existence into the form of a house, a page in a book, or logs in the fireplace.”⁹ Nature, for Hegel, is fertile, but impotent: a bad infinity that only produces more of the same unqualified life that lives under the shadow of death. When not placed at the service of the “idea,” nature is nothing but “the corpse of the Understanding.”¹⁰ To be human, for Hegel, is to free oneself from nature and to free nature from herself:¹¹ the labor of reason is to transform nature into man’s manifest image. Once nature is wholly sublated into a man-made world, everything becomes a human sign.

7 Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, p. 225.

8 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Introduction to the Philosophy of Nature,” Arnold Vincent Miller (ed.), *Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature: Being Part Two of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1970, p. 17.

9 Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, p. 31.

10 Hegel, “Introduction to the Philosophy of Nature,” p. 14–15.

11 Teshale Tibebu, *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York 2011, p. 28.

Uriel Orlow's project *Reading Wood (Backwards)* (2022) explores the tensions between these two, divergent, meanings and their adjacent world views, the first seeing a tree as simply a resource, "material for our use," the latter referring to a "living being" which is also a source of life. For the artist, wood is not inert matter but a non-human actor imbricated in a human world. The archival world.

Well into the 1970s—long after all other European countries had forfeited their colonies—the Portuguese oversaw botanical expeditions to their occupied territories overseas. The Xyloteca of Palacio Calheta located in the former Colonial Garden in Lisbon (now renamed Tropical Botanical Garden) was created in the early 20th century and collected wood samples until the former Portuguese colonies won their independence in the mid-1970s. Taking as its starting point the concept of wood library (Xylariums), the artist examines what happens when the forest becomes a human sign, "a library, serving Western knowledge systems and economies of extraction?"¹²

Asking what restituting onto nature would mean, Orlow reads the archive against the grain, bringing materials that had been hitherto dispersed in various university departments back together in order to restore their non-human memories, undoing the attritional lethality that takes place gradually and often invisibly in archives.

Reading Wood (Backwards) is also part of a larger body of work the artist has been developing that branches into two, at times overlaid, lines of research. The first is rooted in a performative engagement with the history of botanical knowledge, and comprises *Forest Futurism* (2024), a film and ancillary installation in which the artist imagines the forest of the future while visiting forest fossils of ancient ecosystems; *Theatrum Botanicum* (2015–2018), a body of work that encompasses *Grey, Green, Gold*, a project inspired by the garden that Nelson Mandela and his fellow inmates began to grow during their imprisonment on Robben Island, and a film trilogy which includes *The Crown Against*

Mafavuke and its sequel *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke*. *The Crown Against Mafavuke* reenacts the 1940-trial of Mafavuke Ngcobo, a traditional herbalist who was accused of "untraditional behaviour" because he successfully began to mix chemically synthesized substances with herbal medicine, threatening the monopoly of the medical establishment. The reenactment is part of a larger project called *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke (Mafavuke's Tribunal)* which the artist describes as a "Brechtian 'Lehrstück'" examining pharmaceutical poaching of traditional knowledge and the failure of copyright laws when it comes to protecting indigenous intellectual property. Also part of *Theatrum Botanicum*, *What Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name* delves into the violence of taxonomy by creating a counter-dictionary, an oral compendium of indigenous South African plant names in languages including Khoi, SePedi, SeSotho, SiSwati, SeTswana, xiTsonga, isiXhosa, and isiZulu. In another iteration, *What Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name (Guatemala)*, the artist attempts to recover the indigenous languages and related bodies of knowledge that were erased when Spanish took root as the language of botany. The second thread, which began with the *Benin Project* in 2007, functions as an inquiry into questions of restitution. In *The Visitor* (2007), a photo essay narrating Orlow's audience with Oba Erediauwa, the then-king of Benin, the artist discusses the restitution of the Benin Bronzes with his royal host and his court. The Benin Bronzes were originally produced in Benin City, the historic capital of the Kingdom of Benin, a major city state in West Africa from the medieval period. The coppersmiths of Benin melted brass ingots, or bracelets to produce the bronze plaques, which were traded with Portuguese merchants, for pepper, cloth, ivory, and slaves. Some of these traders and mercenaries employed by the King appear in the relief plaques that used to adorn the palace. During Britain's aggressive expansion of colonial power, in 1897, Benin City was looted by British troops engaged in a retaliatory military

expedition against the Kingdom. The group of sculptures, including elaborately decorated cast relief plaques of animal and human figures, ended up in the possession of the British Museum. In Orlow's film, although both visitor and host agree the Bronzes need to return, and the exchange remains friendly, the communication is hampered by cultural barriers and different ways to deliver information or to impart knowledge.

Via their recurring intersections, the artist places these looted sculptures in a historical continuum that ties colonial expansion to the contemporary neo-colonial practices of the timber industry, as well as the legacies of bioprospecting missions, multinational pharmaceuticals scouring the globe for bioactive agents, botanical expeditions, and the collecting of plant samples. But by foregrounding "the politics and economies of knowledge," to quote German art historian Tom Holert, Orlow's projects also reflect "the tendency of addressing (and testing) art's capacity to make knowledge its subject, to act epistemically."¹³ Here I would like to return to where I began, to the log that awaits its meaning and the plant that awaits synthesizing into a therapeutic compound, and suggest that Orlow's projects go beyond the question of what constitutes knowledge (from pharmaceutical to philosophical knowledge) to ask how is knowledge constituted: what do concepts like "nature" or "the environment" connote? What does it mean to archive wood samples or to build something like the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, where a gene bank of all the world's seeds is in long-term storage?

In their 1875 treatise *The Unseen Universe, or Physical Speculations on a Future State*, Peter Guthrie Tait and Balfour Stewart fantasize about a spectral database, in which "continual photographs of all occurrences are thus produced and retained."¹⁴ This Victorian treatise is by now virtually forgotten but one could argue that Tait and Stewart anticipate cybernetics' conceptualization of information as negentropy, literally that which negates

entropy.¹⁵ Information, from the Latin *informare*, originally meant to give shape or form to something, and had hitherto no scientific meaning. After World War II, molecular biology began to treat genetic information as an essential code, the body being but its carrier. Information had hitherto no scientific meaning, but cybernetics refracted the age-old antagonism between idealism and materialism into the techno-scientific domain by gesturing towards a non-physical or metaphysical entity which endures past physical death—the locus of, as it were, immortality. By way of this brief digression, I would like to suggest that Orlow's work questions the relation between death and logos, to which Western epistemology granted a structuring force.

Commenting on Alain Resnais' 1956 short film *Toute la mémoire du monde*, Orlow draws our attention to "the physical realities of the archive," as "a chaotic underground vault filled with books and boxes [...], piles of newspapers on the floor, shelves bursting with books, stacks of paintings, loose papers and countless boxes full of pamphlets."¹⁶ This yet to be archived "documentary matter" which invites to see the archive as a "sea of documents" also forces us to "consider the sheer materiality of the archive before organisation has taken hold of it and stored it away," pointing to the "difficult ontological status of the archive's materiality," and its "closeness to natural forces," which its meant to keep at bay, like entropy, chaos or disorder. Rather than a spectral database in which memory appears completely detached from matter, Orlow puts matter and materiality at the forefront of his engagement with archives as repositories of memory. Orlow's archives are not repositories of documents but a form of restitution, howbeit not in the material sense of returning an object to its origin, instead they reconstitute memory to history, reconstitute long-forgotten names to overlooked things, reconstitute local languages and traditional knowledges to the contemporary episteme, and reconstitute the materiality of wood, of

13 Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics*, Sternberg Press, London 2020, p. 7.

14 Peter Guthrie Tait & Balfour Stewart, *The Unseen Universe, or Physical Speculations on a Future State*, Macmillan, London 1875, p. 145.

15 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, rev. ed. 1954, repr. by Da Capo Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1988, p. 158.

16 Uriel Orlow, "Latent Archives, Roving Lens," Ian Farr (ed.), *Memory*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2012, p. 205.

a plant, of a forest, to the forefront of our otherwise abstracted relation to nature and history. Archiving, in Orlow's work, could be thus construed as a verb without a corresponding noun, an activity via which that which was kept at the margins of knowledge constitutes itself as a political ecology.