

It's A Mess:

Gender Reveals, Forest Fires, Drag, and Speculative Fiction

by

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Abstract

In 2017, a U.S. border patrol officer just outside of Tucson, Arizona, filmed himself shooting at a box that read “BOY” at the top, and “GIRL” at the bottom. The box was filled with blue powder and explosives, igniting an explosion to indicate that he would be having a son. The explosion spread, and caused a wildfire that burned through 47,000 acres of land. *It's a Mess: Gender Reveals, Forest Fires, Drag, and Speculative Fiction* takes initial inspiration from this event to pose the question “what might it look like to be assigned a forest fire at birth? To grow up outside of a binary and within a collapsing climate?”. Working across drag, video, stained glass, and photography, the thesis is an interdisciplinary body of work that examines how the technologies we interact with shape and limit our worldview. The thesis connects the violence of upholding both a nation’s borders as well as gendered binaries to the colonial history of botanical classification systems, using the trend of gender reveal parties as the queer foundation to these intersecting problems.

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Burn Baby Burn: The Pyropolitics of Today

When you visit the U.S. Customs Border Patrol career services website, a video starts to play on a loop. In between the clips of officers - a diverse range of ages, races, genders - sternly looking past the camera, there are drone shots of a boat cutting through water, a helicopter flying over a forested area, a pick-up truck driving through the desert. As these short clips autoplay, the all-caps text in the foreground reads “ON THE GROUND, IN THE AIR, ACROSS THE WATER”. Before any information is given on the roles, positions, purposes of a career in border patrol, the work is presented as elemental. Not only natural, but embedded within and inextricable from, the classical building blocks of nature: Earth, air, water. It seems that the fourth and final element omitted from this line of duty is fire.

Dennis Dickey, a U.S. border patrol officer in Arizona, may have unwittingly answered the question of this elemental absence. In 2017, a 50-minute drive south of Tucson, or a 70-minute drive north of Nogales, Mexico, Dickey sets up a tripod, a camera, and a checkered box that craftily reads “BOY” at the top, and “GIRL” at the bottom. He aims his camera lens at the box, and then aims his high-powered rifle at it as well. From the uploaded camera footage, we can hear the gun go off three times, with no change to the scene. On the fourth shot, he hits his mark. In the low frame-rate footage, the pixels immediately shift to a spectrum of baby blues, and then immediately to a cloud of grey, and then fiery red and orange as the smoke settles and the viewer is left with a dry land flickering in flames.

To celebrate the unveiling of his future baby's gender, Dickey filled a box with baby boy blue powder and Tannerite, a combination of compounds known as a binary explosive.

Fire, as elemental and natural as it is, has no consideration for state borders. It has no patience for the speed at which an off-duty border patrol officer may try to mitigate the flames he had sparked. This particular fire, in tandem with the natural element of the windy air that April afternoon, moved through the Arizona dry land, and burned through 47,000 acres over the course of a week. While a nation may invest a trillion dollars in its borders being upheld on the ground, in the air, across the water, the fire may cut right through it.

In *Pyropolitics: When the World is Ablaze* by Michael Marder, fire is the theoretical framework through which our world may be viewed. Fire is not a positioning of binaries and borders, nor a means of blurring boundaries, but a force that transcends its own duality of heat and light. "Although fire lacks definitive contours", Marder writes, "its burning permits those who gather around it to come to light... in the glimmer of revolutionary fire... partisans rise to the level of political subjectivity, denied to them by the status quo that seeks their neutralising criminalisation and legitimisation" (Marder 52).

In Greek Mythology, Zeus punishes Prometheus for bringing fire back to mankind after Zeus had taken it away from them. Prometheus is imprisoned to a life of being chained to a rock, visited each day by an eagle that pecks at his exposed liver. The liver regenerates by the evening, and the cycle continues. As an additional punishment to mankind for this gift of fire, Zeus creates Pandora's box.

When opened, the box lets out all of humanity's doom and terror, and when closed again, all that is captured inside is hope. In Dickey's box, there is nothing left to open or close. Punctured by a bullet, the flame is released outwards and swallows its container. There is no interiority or exteriority for hope to be captured within, all that is left is fire.

The pyropolitics of today are increasingly marked by their "death-bearing ashes" as Marder states, no longer burning with the same revolutionary flames that have marked previous pyropolitical gains in decades prior. The pyropolitics we witness and experience in the 2020s is marked more by an eviscerating heat than that of a guiding light. Take the technology of firewalls, for example. A firewall is a network security device designed to monitor, filter, and control incoming and outgoing network traffic based on an opaque set of security guidelines. The firewalls that filter information that enters our devices' private networks, ideally, keep our technologies safe from any viruses. However, firewalls are increasingly weaponized for the inverse reasons: nations censoring their citizens from passing or retrieving information from external platforms. A firewall designed to keep its users safe from viruses has been augmented to such a degree that its implementation can now keep entire nations in the dark. The technological promises held within the light of pyropolitics: the promises of universal access to information, and immediate connection to friends and strangers across the world, has given way to the eviscerating qualities of the heat of pyropolitics: The obfuscation of information through algorithmic search results, the acceleration of AI-generated media that has eroded the veritability of images and videos both historical and contemporary.

The Glitch

Halfway through my video “on the ground, in the air, across the water”, the narrative shifts from a description of the Arizona gender reveal party wildfire, to the forest fires that marked summer 2023 back home in the Maritimes, specifically, Halifax, Nova Scotia. The smoke from these forest fires were so vast they changed how our eyes viewed the sky. Smoke particles reflect sunlight differently than air molecules do, filtering out the shorter wavelengths of blues and purples, leaving us with an apocalyptic red sky. In a doubling of filters, the smartphone photos I had taken of this sky on fire carried their own input/output logic. A smartphone, knowing that its owner is pointing its lens to the sky, knows that a sky should not be red, and corrects what it sees into a sepia-toned image closer to that of a grey, overcast day. It is within this friction of what one sees and what a system of information presents to you as the truth that the inner workings of its technology is exposed.

This is not the first time a smartphone has muddled its murky systems of imaging processing and how its information is delivered to its user. Earlier in 2023, the new Samsung S20 Ultra boasted its “space zoom” lens capabilities, showing that users can now produce a detailed image of the moon with their phone. No more disappointing images of a pixelated white circle among a dark sky, now the craters and scars of the moon can be captured with one’s phone on a night out. A reddit user with the handle *ibreakphotos* was skeptical of Samsung’s claims that its camera, housed within a phone 6.6 inches tall, 2.3 inches wide, and 8.8 mm thick, was capable of accurately capturing the details of a moon 384,400 km away. To put this proclamation to the test, *ibreakphotos* found a high-resolution image of the moon online, compressed it down to a few hundred pixels, and let this image take over his

laptop screen. Pointing the S20 Ultra lens to his screen, the resulting photographs were not the blocky, blurry white circle on his laptop, but instead detailed images of the moon. No craters were visible in the pixelated resolution of the moon-shape displaying on his laptop, but that didn't stop his phone from adding them. Samsung was caught in a lie, or at least of creating a false reality. It wasn't the phone camera's lens that was capable of capturing high-resolution photos of the moon. The phone was capable of recognizing its lens is being pointed to the moon and, like my iPhone was capable of recognizing I was pointing it towards the sky during the 2023 Halifax fires, its algorithm was taught to know what a moon looks like. The phone could fill in the missing information with the actual images of the moon it was trained on, and send out an image calculated between what it has been taught, and what you are asking it to see. Our smartphone cameras have not been taught to understand a world on fire, a sky turned red. If aliens suddenly landed on the moon, carved a face covering its entire surface area, filled each crater with a Baja Blast Blue liquid, and we tried to capture this spectacle with our phones, our phones would still understand what we are pointing it to, what it has been trained to understand as the moon, and present to us with the reality it knows.

The failure of my iPhone images, like the redditor ibreakphotos' pixel-moon experiment, or like Dennis Dickey's deadly gender reveal party, expose the faulty systems that have created them through their own miscalculation. Within the clumsy execution of the smartphone's operations, they accidentally reveal the invisible mechanics at work to present an altered photograph that otherwise might be mistaken for a native image. Within the case of the Arizona fire, the spectacle of its mis-execution caused a viral moment online that fueled conversations around the gender and social

politics furthering the increasingly dangerous and reckless gender reveal parties. If it was not for these failures, these images would carry the authority of veritability one's cameraphone often carries, and gender reveal parties would continue to exist without the discourse borne out of the viral disasters that have occurred over the past decade. In Legacy Russell's 2013 manifesto "Glitch Feminism", Russell posits that a glitch or error within an oppressive or broken system isn't necessarily a failure, but a window into an alternative horizon. The disruptions of these events and images are not just useful for revealing their workings, they also provide a way forward.

The Garden

The visuals for "on the ground..." were created from 3D scans I have been collecting of various botanical gardens around North America, specifically Montreal, Pittsburgh, Tucson, and Los Angeles. The video environment is the result of a hodgepodge of a catalog of scans taken from my iPhone. These plant captures were created using gaussian splatting, a 3D scanning process that combines a point-cloud (a set of data points) of an object or environment and calculates an estimation of each point in relation to one another to 'make up' any missing data the 3D scan may have missed. This creates a shard-like digital rendering of a real-life environment that appears fragile, and fractured. While they're depicting real life plants, they are also partly artificially created with the scanning software's own logic. The artificiality trips over itself: The scans are created from plants housed within the unnatural dome of a botanical garden, presented through algorithmic calculations of relational data, then imported into the video game engine Unreal, where I am able to duplicate, scale, transform, and then film their arrangement through the engine's virtual camera, its settings meant to emulate 35mm

film camera. Mimicking the lens of an analog camera, the Unreal video capture blurs in and out of focus, and the botanical gardens from different cities, provinces, countries, spill into one.



“on the ground, in the air, across the water”, 2024, video still

I began developing this catalog of plant scans before beginning this video work, or before beginning my master’s program, or before giving gender reveal parties any much thought. I began these scans just out of my love for visiting botanical gardens. These gardens have always served as a peaceful place for me to spend time alone among a controlled environment, surrounded by a variety of flowers and learn about what flora I was being gently nudged through. The unchanging temperature, the guided pathways, the name placards all gave a sense of order and comfort in their consistency. Like anything worth loving, this love is also worth interrogating.

In *Encounters With Lenin* by Nikolai Valentinov, the biographer recounts an anecdote regarding the future founder of the Soviet regime. Walking through a garden, Vladimir Lenin ponders

out loud to members of his group, “Could a professional revolutionary legitimately like flowers?” One of Lenin’s more over-zealous comrades quickly claimed that it was forbidden, explaining: “You start by loving flowers, and before you know it you are seized by a desire to live like a landowner lazily stretched out in a hammock who reads French novels and is waited on by obsequious valets in the midst of his magnificent garden”. (Barthes 87). The flower, the garden, and supposedly even French literature as well, have long been entangled in the politics of luxury and the ruling class. While I don’t know if I would say my love for a magnificent garden has yet ignited a desire for a personal butler, it would be unfair to dismiss botanical gardens’ roots in domination and servitude.

From the 18th century onward, botanical gardens in Europe were foundational tools to the project of the colonial empire. The creation of botanical gardens mirrored the desire to control nature, and dominate over the Indigenous peoples already living within these areas. As one of the many tentacles tethered to the monster of imperialism, botanical gardens can be seen as a microcosm that reveal both the functioning and dysfunction of colonial logic, particularly in their relation to the environment and exploitation of natural wealth. This extraction and control was naturally linked to the desire to classify and contain, “after all, how could [colonists] exploit resources efficiently if they did not know what plants existed where?”. (Subramaniam 94). Europeans would initially name plants they had “discovered” through wildly inaccurate translations of Indigenous names, attempting to conglomerate Indigenous knowledge into one “universal” “scientific” (read: European) categorization. This scientific investigation shows its errors immediately through the fraught translations between the colonial extraction of information and indigenous knowledge. One example of Dutch colonists of the

Americas' faulty translations involved a long Arawak plant name that later turned out to translate to "I don't know this one so I'll have to ask my uncle". Another is the researcher in Suriname who was given the name of a particular plant called *kakabroko*. Only much later did he discover that this name translates to "shit in your pants", suggesting the plant's laxative effects, or that the researcher was unwittingly made the butt of a joke by the locals. (Yoon 123)

In *Botany of Empire* by Banu Subramaniam, the biologist-turned-gender-studies-professor writes:

"With the rise of climate change and the continued decimation of forests around the world, there is an obsessive anxiety about the loss of unnamed species. In 2015 alone, about 2034 new species were discovered. Some botanists estimate that of over 8.7 million terrestrial species, only about 14 percent are presently known to science. In short, we need to speed up our taxonomic record and the "discovery" of new species to better chronicle and mourn the species we are losing. A profound irony. This obsession with counting species (producing data) betrays an enduring logic of coloniality: a study of plants without people". (Subramaniam 95)

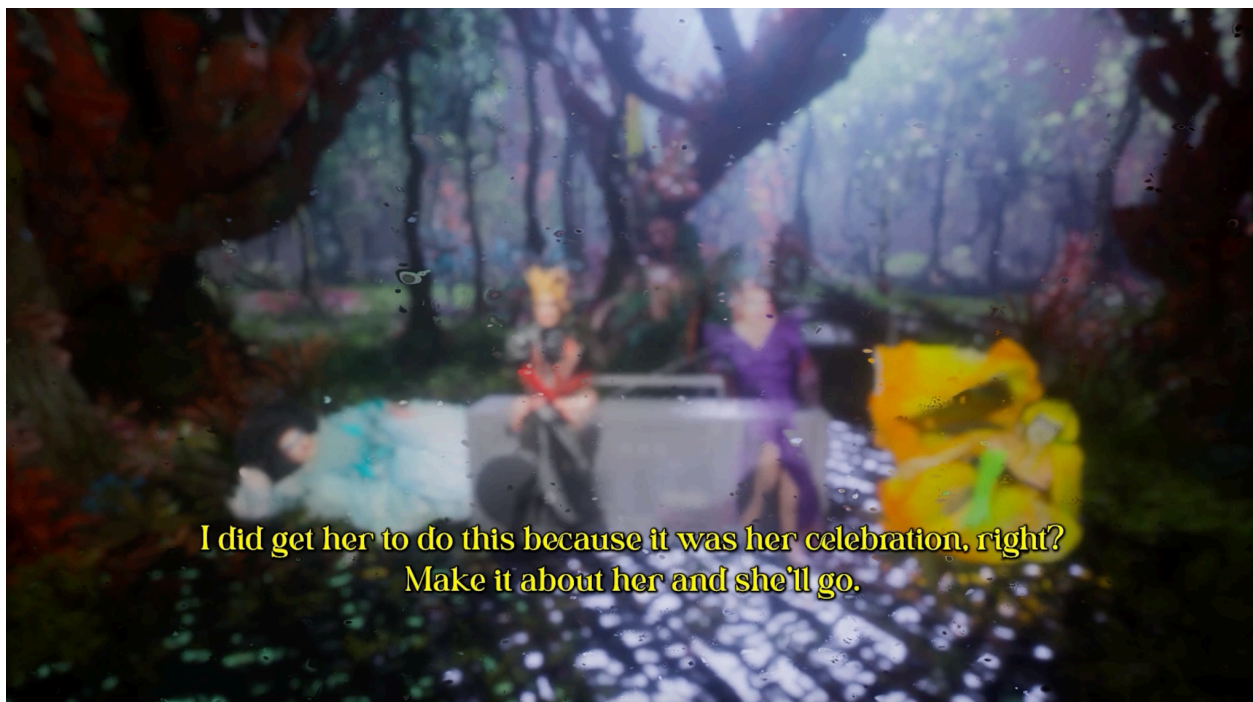
This profound irony that Subramaniam lays out in *Botany of Empire* is mirrored through the role of botanical gardens today. It is the same colonial tools that created botanical gardens in the West that provide them their urgency at this very moment. The pyropolitical world we currently live within is one of a collapsing climate. The colonial extractions and land dominations that melt our icecaps,

burn out forests, and poison our waters create a natural world of increasing extinctions. Because of this, many plants that are no longer able to live in our precarious environment, are being survived within the protective dome of the botanical garden.

At the end of “on the ground...”, the text ruminates on what it might look like to be assigned a forest fire at birth; to grow up alongside a pyropolitical reality and outside of the gender binary. It is this question of breaking from classifications and systems presented as objective truth that has driven my thesis studio work. The video work developed that runs in parallel to “on the ground...” is entitled “Peep Show”. Whereas “on the ground” is a glitchy, borderless hodgepodge of floating gaussian splats of botanical garden plants, “Peep Show” exists within the structured botanical dome. Still rendered in Unreal, the scene is stylized like a AAA video game, with assets taken from various “science fiction jungle” packages available to purchase and download.

Situated within an unspecified future, the digital short film operates from the point-of-view of those assigned an ecological collapse at birth, now stretched lazily in the magnificent garden of unfamiliar plant life with no world outside the botanical dome. Regarding previously mentioned themes of gender determinism, artificiality, and science fiction, drag becomes a convenient artform to bring into the fold. The five figures that lounge throughout Peep Show are all various drag personas I’ve been forming, some of them holding onto hyper masculine or hyper feminine signifiers of a time passed, others looking to the alien plant life next to them, or the fire and smoke around them, for aesthetic guides. The glitch also returns in the rendering of these drag figures throughout the video.

Dusting off an old iPad Pro, the renderings are created with the tablet camera's LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) sensor, a built-in sensor that records the depth between the lens and the subject/environment. When recorded in tandem with the iPad's video camera, the two sensors can create a volumetric, or 3-dimensional, video. These volumetric video recordings of myself are then imported into the Unreal Engine environment.



“Peep Show”, 2025, video still

This rudimentary, DIY approach to volumetric video recordings is a sharp contrast to the professional sheen of the video game engine's worlding. The captures flicker in-and-out of visibility, stretch, distort and pixelate like spectres within this artificial world. Just as “on the ground” shifted from a removed description of the Arizona forest fire to a first-person account of the Halifax forest fires, “Peep Show” moves from a speculative fiction narrative of this imagined future to a real-world

interview between myself and Jenna Karvunidis, the 2000s mommy blogger credited as the inventor of gender reveal parties. Time folds in on itself as an old boombox plays the audio of my conversation with Karvunidis to the plants and figures within the garden. Our conversation moves from her explaining why she threw a gender reveal party in the first place (an excuse to bring her distant mother back into her life, so that the grandmother-to-be could have a relationship with her future child), to the explosive nature of gender reveal parties in the 16 years since she ignited the trend with her pink-frosting cake. Near the end of the conversation, Karvunidis discusses the gender reveal explosion that occurred near her home in California in 2020. An eerie echo of the Arizona wildfire, the fire burned through 20,000 acres of land, and resulted in 18 injuries, and one death. Karvunidis describes waking up to find ashes from the wildfire falling into her backyard swimming pool, a haunting spectre of the trend she had unknowingly ignited back in 2008. It was important to me to interview Karvunidis to provide a human origin to the trend. When I began this project, I was cognizant of the fact that the focusing on gender reveal party disasters from a critical, queer lens could be perceived as a smug joke at the expense of families innocently celebrating their future newborns. I am grateful to Karvunidis for letting me into her L.A. home when I visited her in 2024, and for her transparency on the familial reasons she decided to throw her party, as well as for her trans advocacy as an attorney in the U.S.

The Weeds

Michael Marder ends *Pyropolitics* on the question of ash. When the guiding light of fire reduces itself to ash, what is left? “Does the political fully become itself on the verge of disappearing? Is it

known solely through its effects on the victims of the world-historical blaze?” (Marder 230). Just as horror and science fiction have been creative avenues for humans to articulate the anxieties of rapid technological advancement and apocalyptic futures, so too has it informed our language regarding collapsing climates. In recent years, a phenomenon known as “zombie fires” has spread globally, but particularly here in Canada. Zombie fires refer to blazes that smoulder in the permafrost of winter, only to reignite immediately in the spring. An undead flame buried underneath the ash. Maybe, there is still a possibility for something to light anew out of the ashes. Maybe it is time to look not on the ground, or across the water, or in the air, or even through the flame, but to look underneath it all.

In *Plant Thinking*, Michael Marder writes:

“The figure of the plant (which, like a weed, incarnates everything the metaphysical tradition has discarded as improper, superficial, inessential, and purely exterior) furnishes the prototype for post-metaphysical being. Plants are the weeds of metaphysics: devalued, unwanted in its carefully cultivated garden, yet growing in-between the classical categories of existence itself... Weeds will outlive metaphysics – of this we may be absolutely certain.” (Marder 88)

While Subramaniam’s scholarship has provided a critique for the colonial naming and classification conventions of plant life that are presented as universal and objective science, Marder challenges the forms of intelligence overlooked within the hierarchical grid of Western thought, namely the intelligence of the very plants we struggle to name. Marder is not just concerned with the classifications within plant taxonomies, but the hierarchical Great Chain of Being ideology that still seems to

uncritically haunt our worldview. “The old question about the meaning of life should . . . give way to questions about the meanings of lives - both human and non-human” (Marder 42). To grapple with our pyropolitical world, as our technologies and systems we’ve put all of our weight and faith in fail and crumble around us, it is imperative to not only think about but learn from the plant life growing beneath our feet.

Just as the plant is treated as the weeds of metaphysics according to Marder, so too have science fiction and horror been historically viewed as unserious literature within academia, and video games and drag have been cast to the periphery, viewed as low-brow entertainment, not even existing within a hierarchy of capital “A” Art forms. When these structures privilege one way of thinking, making, being, over another, they uphold colonial ways of thinking and remove the productive possibility for slippage and mutation of interdisciplinary research creation. If something like a bird-shaped cake, baked and photographed by a California mommy blogger in the 2000s, can be the origin of a trend that has eviscerated over 100,000 acres of land, poisoned bodies of waters, and killed a number of people, perhaps even the the smallest weeds or the campiest of B-movies may provide us with the knowledge and tools to grapple with the reality we find ourselves in.

The Carrier Bag

There is an inevitable messiness in mapping the links between borders, science fiction, drag, fire, botanical gardens, failed technology, climate collapse, gender reveals, plant life, etc. In defending, or perhaps leaning into this messiness, I turn once again to science fiction. In *The Carrier Bag Theory*

of Fiction, sci-fi writer Ursula K. Le Guin pinpoints the technology of the carrier bag as an alternative to the notion that the first human invention was a spear. The spear has long been at the centre of storytelling. A man-made technology symbolizing that of a warrior. The spear is a sharp linear tool that sets up the binary for narratives of hero/villain, good/bad, win/lose that shape our worldview. In the essay, Le Guin puts forward the carrier bag as a more fruitful tool for storytelling and worldbuilding. A narrative carrier bag makes room for the messiness: multiple narratives, different points of view, and conflicting ideas, exist alongside one another. It's with this anti-hierarchical framework that I have been approaching my thesis work, allowing for speculative fiction and real-world interviews to co-mingle, allowing a multitude of different media and ways of working to be held within the carrier bag of the gallery walls. The carrier bag of my work is a gaudy one. There are loose cosmetics that have spilled from their own containers and onto everything and anything within the bag. The botanical imagery rendered in "Peep Show" and "on the ground..." spill into the photographic worlds of "OH BABY 3" and "OH BABY 5". That same imagery from the hot glued sets of the photographs spill out once more from the border of the images into the gallery floor. The field recordings that compose the ambient track of "on the ground" are filtered and looped back into "Peep Show". Words sung in "OH BABY" re-appear in the form of illuminated stained glass.

It was important to me, in embracing the sprawl of working with many different creative tools, narrative perspectives, and areas of research, to make room for the aesthetics of camp within my thesis. Just as a carrier bag can hold contradictions, so too can that of camp. Borrowing from camp forefather Jean Cocteau's words, Philip Core has described camp as a "disguise that fails... a lie that tells the truth"

(Core 9). It is this same methodology that science fiction adopts, a fictitious world envisioned as a critique of our real-world structures, as well as the same philosophy of glitch feminism, an error that exposes the failed disguise.

In *Time's Monster: How History Makes History*, Priya Satia argues that torn fragments of time have been sutured into a triumphal, linear, and progress-oriented vision of European colonialism *as* history. She compels us to ask what it would look like for the field of history to truly reckon with its past. How could we make history anew? The spear Le Guin asks us to move away from is the same tool of triumphant linearity that Satia articulates. What then, can a carrier bag teach us about our dominant colonial narratives? In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes: "Colonialism is not content to impose its rule upon the colonized country's present and the future... With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it and destroys it" (Fanon 219). The carrier bag makes room for stories beyond the ones told by those that hold the spear. It carries the pasts, presents, and futures of the ones pierced from it; of the ones that witness the piercing, as well. It carries the scraps in the fabric of time that were discarded in Satia's sutured linearity.

Our world is one of haunting. If we are to think with plants, would the ones I've spent so much time with in the domes of botanical gardens view themselves as undead? Propped up spectres of uprooted land now marked by zombified flames? While these questions have no answers, I have nonetheless been lingering on these ideas throughout my thesis work. My aim in my thesis work is to

put down the spear, and consider the ghosts and zombies we cannot see, embrace the failures of our technologies of gender, language, translations, and images, and continue loving flowers.

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