

# CIRCULATING UNDERCURRENTS

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*Beatrice Glow*

I strive to amplify invisible, suppressed stories shrouded in the geopolitical shadows of colonialism-induced migration through site-responsive installations, participatory and lecture performances, trilingual publishing, and experiential technologies. My research-creation process connects me to scholars, scientists, and community advocates to collectively address the skewed politics of the archive within and beyond institutional walls. I am fascinated with the relationship between Asia and the Americas, between diaspora and indigeneity, and the oceanic circulations that connect islands to islands, continents to continents, and cultures to cultures. I attempt to capture memory, affect, smell, social imaginary—intangible undercurrents whose pervasive interconnectivity threads our humanity. This essay delves into the thought processes and multiplatform artistic practices of my most recent projects: *Aromérica Parfumeur*, *Mannahatta VR*, and *Rhunhattan*.

In August 2016, I opened *Aromérica Parfumeur*, an exhibit that passed as a perfume boutique in a Chilean shopping mall. The installation sought to expound on settler colonialism through an aromatic archive on social botanical history. I made up the word *Aromérica* to combine *aroma* and *América* to draw out how the foundation of the Americas was borne out of a search for spices as conquistadores were, first and foremost, spice hunters. *Aromérica's* "fragrance line" boasted of "eau de Colón" (Cologne), which is a play on the Spanish pronunciation of *Columbus*; "Blanc Le Colonial" (Colonial White), which was nauseatingly sugary; "El Picante" (The Spicy), which references "El Dorado" and was shocked with sharp notes



**Figure 1** *Rhunhattan Tearoom*, September 2015, installation with acrylic painting and decal collage on ceramics, ink on paper, scent. Dimensions variable. This was a sensory feast of sight and smell referencing seventeenth-century spice wars. Botanical, cartographic, and archival imagery depicting colonial atrocities were embedded into tableware that mimicked delftware—blue-and-white pottery made in the Netherlands that was influenced by the importation of luxurious Chinese porcelain during the Age of Discovery. This reappropriation of chinoiserie reveals complex underpinnings of trade. Golden nutmeglike forms exuded scents of colonial commerce.

of nutmegs and cloves; and “Oro Negro” (Black Gold), Malabar pepper. The conceptual and physical properties of perfume represent the ultimate alienation of plants from native origins, as analyzed by visual culture scholar Daniela Bleichmar (2012). The process of removing “exotic” plants from their natural habitats in order to distill them for their olfactory properties mirrors the caste systems that categorized colonial human subjects, visualized through Miguel Cabrera’s caste paintings. The project

sought to resist the fading historical memories that haunt like a repulsive perfume while underlining a parallel between how the imaginary, systemic violence and smell are invisible yet omnipresent.

One scent of colonialism that I have been tracing for the past few years is that of nutmeg, a spice that was once worth its weight in gold that I perceive as “the petroleum of the seventeenth century.” I do this through my multiplatform project, *Rhunhattan*, a tale of two islands at



**Figure 2** *Spice Route Series*, August 2016, installation of digital prints on silk, each 54 × 54 in. These silk prints depict the social history of plants, while borrowing from the aesthetics and history of mantones de Manila, which were silk shawls introduced as Asian luxury goods to the Americas and Europe and then popularized by flamenco dancers.

the birth of globalization when atrocities were committed out of lust for sugar and spice. During the spice wars, Dutch Nieuw Amsterdam was captured by the English and renamed “New York.” By 1667, the Treaty of Breda resulted in the Dutch relinquishing their claim to the colony in exchange for Rhun (also known as “Run”), the first and only British colony in the Banda Islands of present-day Indonesia, thereby gaining monopoly of the lucrative nutmeg trade. This exchange led to the near complete decimation of the

Bandanese and the Lenape people’s deepened dispossession of Manaháhtaan (original Lenape name of Manhattan). While Manhattan has risen to unprecedented financial success in the last four centuries, Rhun has faded into obscurity despite having been the colonial empire’s crown jewel. After the British lost the colony of Rhun, they moved on to colonizing India, and the Dutch received territory ripe with sugar plantations in South America.

*Rhunhattan* explores the ramifications of these intertwined geopolitical fates of

land dispossession, genocidal trauma, and globalization's wheel of fortune. It is no exaggeration that the spice wars had a disproportionate impact on global history; the world map was redrawn over a taste for aroma, coffee, and sugar. I tease out these stories of mundane foodstuffs through mock chinoiserie oozing with the sweet stench of colonialism. I am also experimenting with digital storytelling through virtual and augmented reality and am planning a psycho-geographic walk centered on the original site of Fort Amsterdam (present-day National Museum of the American Indian, New York) that shares the same star fort architectural design as Fort Nassau in the Banda Islands.

During the early research phase, while I was able to find documentation on the atrocities the European traders inflicted on the Bandanese, it was perturbing to find how little there was of accessible information on the Lenape. The scarcity of material on precolonial realities of New York evidenced historical erasure. Diasporic bodies have long been instrumentalized in the construction of the Americas to uphold the myths of a New World without indigenous peoples. As a diasporic daughter of Taiwan and twelve-year house guest of Manaháhtaan, I needed to address this historical blind spot to disrupt complicity in settler colonialism. An experience that comes to mind that testifies to this history is a 2009 sojourn with Marco Farfán to his village, Guayabo, that is located in the coastal province of Chincha, Peru. As we visited coastal plantations, he shared with me that after the abolishment of slavery, Chinese coolies were introduced as indentured servants, a legitimized form of slavery, to replenish the labor forces needed to construct a New World. There is no photo documentation of his Chinese-Peruvian or his Afro-Peruvian ancestors because slave

history was not recorded. However, the history runs in his veins, as well as that of many families in the Americas.

To unravel these entangled stories of the "intimacies of the four continents," aptly coined by Lisa Lowe (2015), I needed to begin with where I live, New York City. Presently, I am working with public historian Jack Tchen, founder of the Asian/Pacific/American (A/P/A) Institute at New York University (NYU) and cofounder of the Museum of Chinese in America, thinking through how our allyship, which is positioned at the intersectional and diasporic connections between Pacific worlds and the Americas, can help advocate for recognition of Native New York. Together we've been asking how artists, educators, students, historians, ecologists, and community stakeholders can work together to build foundational knowledge out of a fragmented history. This past year I have been learning about indigenous geography through the groundbreaking work of ecologist Eric Sanderson of the Mannahatta Project at the Bronx Zoo's Wildlife Conservation Society, and the journey of Hōkūle'a, a Polynesian double-hull canoe circumnavigating the world. On June 5, 2016, history happened: Hōkūle'a visited Manaháhtaan bearing the message of "Mālama Honua," which means "to care for Mother Earth." The navigators relied on the time-tested tradition of wayfinding, which requires close observation and deep knowledge of the skies, cosmos, waters, and nonhuman animals. Out of respect for the land and its peoples, the Polynesian Voyaging Society wanted to make first contact with the Lenape people, and that opened many questions around how to revitalize indigenous knowledge and culture. It also painfully revealed how little we, a great majority of people inhabiting New York, know of Lenapehoking, the traditional



**Figure 3** *Spice Route Series*, August 2016, installation of digital prints on silk, each 54 × 54 in. These silk prints depict the social history of plants, while borrowing from the aesthetics and history of mantones de Manila, which were silk shawls introduced as Asian luxury goods to the Americas and Europe and then popularized by flamenco dancers.

hometown of the Lenape people, of which Manaháhtaan was, and is still, a part.

These experiences inform a series of projects dedicated to Manaháhtaan, with an emphasis on native plants. I choose to work with native plants to honor the land that feeds and nurtures us. In the ecosystem, the air, the insects, the algae, the soil, the stones, and the human and nonhuman animals all depend on each other, and this interdependency must be respected. After all, we are not all going to Mars. This interest in grappling with the sociocultural dimension of plants is tied

to understanding the dominant Eurocentric misconception that land and natural resources can be owned. It is also about rethinking human agency in relation to nature by shifting our perceptions to seeing how plants have shaped world history and geopolitical struggles.

These perspectives feed the creative process behind *Mannahatta VR*, where I am collaborating with Alexandre Girardeau of Highway 101, ETC, Jack Tchen, and the A/P/A Institute at NYU. Given that Broadway is part of a vast matrix of Lenape pathways that connect Manaháhtaan to

the greater northeastern region, we digitally reconstructed one block of Broadway in virtual reality (VR) to begin to unpack settler colonial markers as well as indigenous resistance in the urban landscape. In the exploratory VR experience, one can use a bow and arrow to metaphorically shoot down the mythic “purchase of Manhattan” by shooting down a monument in Battery Park that commemorates the Dutch purchase of Manhattan. Upon shooting the target, one is transported into the indigenous “future.” The word *future* is a placeholder, as we are looking for words to encapsulate the concept of temporality beyond the Western-centric linear time line that *future* connotes. This space is evolving through ongoing conversations with Lenape and indigenous community advocates on what a dimension that upholds indigenous cultural values for

environmental stewardship looks like. We are using virtual reality as a canvas to help us collectively learn from, envision, and build dialogue on how to respectfully amplify indigenous cultural perspectives.

As I write, this project is still in the making, which I find the most interesting phase because there are multiple plotlines and concurrent narratives racing through my mind on how to approach the many layers of Manhattan. It is an island that forgets it is an island once pulsing with ecological and cultural wealth. It is a site whose shaky foundations reveal strata of corpses, trash, and colonial violence that eclipse Manaháhtaan. It is a place whose story is tied to another archipelago ten thousand miles away in the Banda Sea; all islands are mountains rising from the ocean floors. In the face of global environmental degradation, inequality, and



**Figure 4** *Aromérica Parfumeur*, August 2016, installation of olfactory pieces. This was a fake perfume boutique in a shopping mall that revealed how plants shaped world history by connecting the founding myths of the Americas to the search for spices. Conquistadores were first and foremost spice hunters. The project underlines a parallel between how the imaginary, systemic violence and smell are invisible yet omnipresent.

polarizing debates over political and cultural borders, it is urgent to recognize that all ethnospheres and biospheres are, like archipelagos, connected beneath the surface. I dream of highlighting these rhizomatic underwater connections and collapsing the distance of Rhun and Manaháhtaan through a psycho-geographical walking tour with an augmented reality tablet that will overlay the two islands to explore this intertwined geopolitical fate, bringing forth the shared colonial and indigenous historical realities. Imagine through the lens of a tablet enabled with an augmented reality app that a nutmeg orchard flourishes at Ground Zero, Fort Nassau merges with the

National Museum of the American Indian, a battleground enshrouds Soho, and the Banda Sea flows into New York Harbor where the Lenape people and colonists carried out their daily activities together.

I will research in the Banda Island archipelago in spring 2017 to continue to piece together this translocal colonial history. My hope is that through this body of work revealing the intimate relationship New York has with the seventeenth-century spice wars, *Rhunhattan* as a multi-platform project will deepen reflections on globalization's wheel of fortune and social costs, erasure of indigeneity, and invisible narratives between Asia and the Americas.



**Figure 5** *Mannahatta VR* (work in progress), November 2016, screenshot of virtual reality experience in the HTC Vive headset. This is a virtual reality experience created with Highway 101, ETC, to bring together the past and present of one block of Broadway, developed through consultation with Lenape peoples, ecologists, educators, and technologists. We ask ourselves: How can we expand knowledge of indigenous Manhattan? What does a sustainable indigenous future look like?

I hope that the immersive experiences merging art, education, and technology will spur a new consciousness of how even small things—such as a nutmeg—can render exponential ramifications. As I continue to mine how the transhistoric weight of spice, silk, and porcelain have propelled forward countless caravans and ships in the birthing of imperial globalization, I am reeducating myself about the broken human relationship with land and waters. We are living in debt to our unborn generations and must learn how the Lenape sustainably managed the island for the sake of futurity over millennia. In a time when massive glaciers the size of Lower Manhattan crashing into the ocean does not make a media splash, we have a great responsibility to fight apathy. We are living in urgent times, and there is a need to revitalize indigenous cultures and knowledge for environmental stewardship. We need a paradigm shift from erroneously believing that human beings are landlords of Earth, and that islands are solely pawns in a global chess game. We need to move

beyond the echo chambers of our solipsistic “egosystem” and start to see humans as being part of the ecosystem.

### **Acknowledgments**

Many thanks to Jim Blasi for preliminary design help.

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**Beatrice Glow** is an interdisciplinary artist currently anchored in New York. She has been named the 2016–17 Artist-in-Residence at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute (A/P/A) at New York University (NYU), a 2015 Joan Mitchell Foundation Emerging Artist Finalist, recipient of the 2015 Van Lier Visual Art Fellowship at Wave Hill, a 2014 Franklin Furnace Fund grantee, and a 2008 US Fulbright Scholar to Peru to pursue a research-creation project retracing coolie geography. Her most recent activities include the Honolulu Biennial 2017; *Aromérica Parfumeur*, a solo exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Chile (2016); *Lenapeway* and *The Wayfinding Project* at the A/P/A Institute at NYU (2016); *Rhunhattan* at Wave Hill (2015); a lecture performance as part of Asia Contemporary Art Week’s *Field Meeting Take 2* at the Venice Biennale (2015); and the pop-up *Floating Library* (2014) and *Aquarium from Austronesia* (2012) aboard the *Lilac Museum Steamship* on the Hudson River. She has written *Taparaco Myth*, a trilingual artist book in Chinese, English, and Spanish, and has contributed to *post* at MoMA and *Art Newspaper*. She helped launch the Performing Asian/Americas: Converging Movements work group with the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics and earned a BFA in studio art from New York University.