

# Re-Natured

## Chanell Stone's *Natura Negra* Series

Lucia Olubunmi Momoh



**Chanell Stone is a vision. Positioned at the center of a blooming plantain lily plant in a white sports bra and linen skirt, she confronts the viewer with a steady gaze—not an invitation to take in the exposed elements of her body, but a challenge to see a controlled and complex work of art and, at the same time, to see a Black womxn.**

The photograph and self-portrait, *In Search of a Certain Eden* (2019), constitutes part of Stone's *Natura Negra* series (2018–2019) and was featured in her first solo-museum show, *Natura Negra*, at the Museum of the African Diaspora that ran from December 4, 2019–March 1, 2020 [one of the last exhibitions this author visited before shut down]. The exhibition featured intimate self-portraits and natural, urban landscapes that explored Black Americans' relationship to nature through these urban "forests."

*In Search of a Certain Eden* presents Stone standing, amidst a square patch of fertile earth surrounded by concrete, in a lush plantain lily—a tropical plant with heart-shaped, apple green leaves lined in yellow from which delicate and fragrant, trumpet-shaped white flowers blossom once a year. A native to the tropics and the U.S. South, the lily's precarious position within an urban planter in the American northeast speaks to the kind of uprooting Black Americans have experienced time and time again. Meanwhile, the lily's lush and blossoming state expresses a resilience that Black and Native peoples have been forced to develop in the face of constant threats to our livelihood throughout the history of this country. Stone's steady gaze and central positioning further illustrates a connection with both, existing as uprooted individuals and thriving in spite of America's contrived and contested racial and natural landscapes.

Considering that pre-conquest Africa (from which Stone and myself descend) hosted the most rooted and most ancient of peoples, the events that led to our near-constant displacement (the Middle Passage, enslavement, Caribbean revolts and Revolution, Civil War, and the Great Migration) seem to have fostered in many of us a desire to both find safe soils in which to set down new roots and the unique ability to survive and even thrive sans les racines in foreign, hostile spaces. Black womxn—often purveyors of the past, of a community's cultural heritage and connection to the natural world—had the especially difficult challenge of procreating, rearing, and nurturing Black people during volatile times. We have had to build security and redefine belonging, to (re)create community and cultural identities in terms of tenuous connections or, what Caribbean philosopher [Édouard Glissant](#) calls, Relations to other uprooted individuals and intuit connections to alien ecosystems. Stone's *Natura Negra* series reads like a poem of relations, a poem about the re-naturing of an African womxn in this hostile American civilization.



Stone personally comprehends the resilience of the uprooted. Her family settled in Los Angeles during a wave of the Great Migration. Upon arrival, they found themselves living in public housing. By the time Stone was born, they had upgraded to a decidedly middle-class lifestyle and area. However, they remained in close proximity to neighborhoods marred by generational poverty made manifest in the dilapidated buildings with barred windows, as seen in *Court Mirages* (2018), which features a structure that Stone and her family drove past regularly and which she only later in life realized was a part of the projects. Stone herself hardly felt any which way about the landscape of the city; it was simply the environment of her youth. She grew up far from the rural, agricultural South and came of age in the sprawling urban space of Los Angeles, which seemingly provided little access to nature.

Though workable land seemed inaccessible, Stone's grandmother continued her horticultural practices by growing all sorts of plants in the cement patio of her home. In this garden, Stone became re-natured as her grandmother taught her how to care for plants that one could turn to nature for medicinal purposes.





In *Potted Earth* (2019), Stone kneels before the succulents overflowing from the pots and planters in her grandmother's garden. With no initial soil and little space, Stone's grandmother utilized an innovative vertical method of display for her plants, attaching baskets to the bars lining the outdoor space. Long, vertical blinds visible from the interior space work with the metal fence to direct the wandering eye back down to a crouching Stone. Here, she wears a white skirt—a color the artist has said she feels called to wear, incidentally a color most associated with the Yoruba orisha Oshala, the Creator. Now Stone has jettisoned her top; here in her grandmother's garden she lets down her guard. She does not expose herself to the viewer or for the viewer, but instead the hint of exposure communicates to us that she is at home—this is her Eden.

While in New York, Stone needed to search for a certain Eden. We now understand what specific qualities she sought out in Brooklyn. Lush, natural urban ecosystems recall home—they connect her to family, maternal knowledge, and mamma Earth with whom she always seeks and finds communion—a space where Stone felt rooted.

Stone's self-portraits hold broad significance, claiming her body as her own and in connection with nature. A planter in Brooklyn or her grandmother's garden, Stone holds space for a deeply felt connection to nature in her intimate black-and-white photographs.



**I often say, you can't sufficiently address feminism without bringing race into the conversation, and if you're going to talk about race, you should also bring up class, and if you're talking about gender, race, and class, you should really bring up the devastation of our natural environment and, while you're at it, indigenous spiritual traditions.**

They are all irrefutably linked, and yet few artists have managed to so effortlessly bring all of this—gender, race, class, the environment, and spirituality—into conversation. Chanell Stone's *Natura Negra* series does just that and more. Her portraits speak to our history, that of displacement, migration, the struggle for belonging, and the resilience of Black and Native womxn when in communion with the natural world.

## Credits

Thanks to Chanell Stone and Lucia Olubunmi Momoh.  
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*In Search of a Certain Eden*, 2019  
Photograph, archival pigment  
print  
Brooklyn, New York

*Potted Earth*, 2019  
Photograph, archival pigment  
print  
Los Angeles, CA

*Court Mirages*, 2018  
Photograph, archival pigment  
print  
Los Angeles, CA