

The Share of
Opulence; Doubled;
Fractional
curated by Cédric Fauq

14.09. -
03.11.2018

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The project acts as a fantasised reading of Percy Julian's life and accomplishments through an exhibition, a publication / poster, and a series of events. Using his time in Vienna (1929–1931) as temporal nexus from which to launch a tentacular investigation, the project's different components highlight and pervert motifs from his biography to create unlikely relationships between condemnation, credits, luxury, blackness, commemorative sculptures, hormones, and plants.

Tale I — Percy Julian (1899–1975), an African American chemist who discovered the formula to synthesise estrogen and testosterone from the soybean's protein structure, studied in Vienna from 1929 to 1931 to complete a doctorate in organic chemistry under Dr. Ernst Späth. At the time, Vienna was at the forefront of chemical research, especially plant-based chemistry. Within two years, Julian managed to successfully extract four different alkaloids (1) from an "Austrian" (2) plant he was working on: the *Corydalis cava*. This provided him with the necessary techniques and methods to, later on, extract and synthesise alkaloids and hormones from other plants.

Tale II — Julian did not only spend his time in Vienna studying. Outside the United States for the first time, he encountered a world where being a black man in academia was a very different experience. In letters to colleagues and friends, he narrates how he felt perceived as a wonder rather than a threat, how he got close to Vienna's Jewish community (3), and how he got to enjoy operas, balls, and other pleasures.

Condemnation — Back in the U.S., some of Julian's letters from Vienna were used against him to discredit his academic achievements. What triggered the publishing of the letters was a supposed affair between Julian and the wife of one of his colleague as well as internal quarrels at his alma mater.

Beans — Julian then became an industrial chemist and focused his efforts on beans, notably the Calabar bean and the soybean. Thanks to the Calabar bean—which is said to have been used in legal disputes in West African communities as a lie detector—he found a remedy for glaucoma. He extracted even more from the soybean: fire extinguisher foam, cortisone, progesterone, testosterone, estrogen, paint...

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Tale III — When Julian learned of his mentor Dr. Ernst Späth's death, he returned to Vienna and commissioned a bust to be displayed at the University of Vienna. Julian is also said to have paid for Späth's funeral.

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1. Alkaloids are chemical compounds found in nature. They have various effects on the body, as they have pharmacological, psychotropic, stimulating, and toxic properties. Caffeine, cocaine, nicotine, and morphine are examples of alkaloids.

2. The plant was said to be "Austrian" at the time but is in fact also endemic to the mountains of eastern Africa and the Himalayas.

3. For more information about the affinities shared by the Jewish and Black diasporas, refer to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1995).