

Notes from the middle of a field, on the last day of October, during apocalyptic times, learning from those who already survived the end of their worlds, and from other species, denouncing forms of green colonialism while aspiring to live with nature

Raluca Voinea

Published in German in **Springer**, Vienna, issue 4/2024, *Climate Dignity*

The legitimate question to ask, in October 2024, as we stand here in Eastern Europe, in the middle of a field, surrounded by other fields, all looking almost empty – we know they are actually composed of layers and sediments of all sort of histories, we know their strata of projected desires, yet they appear as almost empty fields, here in the middle of a plain, in the South, in the middle of a future desert, with strong winds and unbearable drought – so here, the question to ask is, what are we doing here?!

In a plane, it is easier for a human to see oneself in a proper scale – between the wide horizon and the fresh turned-over earth, to see oneself as both small and powerful, not crushed by the mountains or the sea, not dwarfed by the secular forests or the jungle, not cushioned by the hills, humans seem to be at their true scale in a plane, like a tree, in a presumably empty field, where they need to confront their own limits while not shying away from aspirations.

In this specific field where we stand, existentially stranded, in the south of Romania and slightly north of Bucharest, we were surrounded this summer by crops of scorched corn. It was a depressing sight, repeated all throughout the Eastern and Southern part of the country, as well as in most of the Balkans. These fields all around were all cultivated industrially as monocrops, following the promises to feed the world. For what good a field is if it cannot feed the people? How can people live from the land if those still alive in the villages are an elderly population who cannot work the land anymore, while for the young ones remaining, the only option that pays back a little is to get subsidies, buy a huge and expensive ploughing and seeding and harvesting machine, and bring upon the land the genetically modified crops. And yet, as we could see this past summer, monocrops, no matter how hardened the seeds they came from are, eventually succumb to the more and more devastating effects of climate change. Intensive agriculture fails to feed the people and in the process destroys the other beings as well.

What is to be done, and can we, a small community of artists and cultural workers, many of whom have never worked the land before, do anything here, in the field? *Where are we?* poses anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro as the proper “ecological question”, understanding ecology as a question of the place¹. And indeed, positioning ourselves² has become one of the tasks we tried to perform

¹ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: *Le regard du Jaguar. Introduction au perspectivisme amérindien*, Éditions la Tempête, Bordeaux, 2021, p. 145.

² In 2023-2024 tranzit.ro organised a freestanding course, partly at the Station, on situated decolonial thinking and concepts, led by theorist Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, titled *Non-Western Technologies for the Good Life* [<https://ro.tranzit.org/en/project/0/2023-11-01/non-western-technologies-for-the-good-life>]. The positioned self, as it is addressed by decolonial thinker Rolando Vázquez, the self that “cannot assume to be the center of the

consciously since we came into possession, and therefore responsibility of stewardship, of a plot of land near Bucharest, in the spring of 2021. Inevitably, we were pushed towards this task, implying becoming aware and taking action at the same time, by the very land and its condition. Positioning became a process of learning, based on observation, reading, commissioning expert studies, mapping, starting over, listening, being patient, accepting limits, networking with similar positions.

We learned from the soil, the birds and the insects that once invasive agriculture (with tilling, pesticides and monocrops) was gone from even such a small surface as we had, life was not only coming back but diversified progressively from one year to another; we were grateful to the trees we planted, which survived the heat, and we placed our confidence in them configuring the landscape for the next decades; and we started looking at initiatives, groups, communities, from our immediate neighbours, to artists and to indigenous practices around the world, to which we connected in spirit, and more and more also in embodied relations.

We don't own the land, the land owns us, says Valiana Aguilar, founding member of the collective Suumil Mooktaan, Sinanche, Yucatan, who are relearning the Maya ways of inhabiting the land "with care and tenderness"³. From subtracting our particular plot of land in Romania from the frame of individual ownership to learning how to care for it, before it can care for us in return, proved to be a much longer and difficult process than we expected, and yet we found out that many are confronted with the same challenges, even when their knowledge is much more grounded in the practices of their ancestors. Next year we will see if the seeds of traditional corn gifted to us by Valiana and the people of the Milpa⁴ will be better equipped to face the drought in our territory.

"The rural has proven throughout the times, and recently again during the covid-19 pandemic, to be ideal spaces to start working on our shared future. Yet, we believe the rural is not a 'fixed' territory and 'it is how it is'. Rural in truth is a locus that needs to be realized, understood, and created." This fragment from the New Rural Agenda Charter, proposed by Jatiwangi art Factory (JaF) collective from Indonesia, which should have been discussed initially in a public assembly at documenta fifteen in June 2022⁵ gave us, the group of urbanites attempting to situate ourselves in a village, more confidence in our role of shaping the understanding of the rural. While knowing that this role includes the re-appropriation of the "rural", together with other important notions such as the natural resources, which should be a common good, from the claws of the right-wing and neo-fascist directions that are framing them as conservative, nationalist fictions. We exchanged with JaF not only our imagination of the rural as a cohesive transnational common grounding, but also mutual embassies in the form of trees planted in our gardens: a black pine as the JaF embassy at the Station, and a mahogany as the Station's embassy

world, [being] always conscious of the radical plurality of worlds and histories around her" [Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity Decolonial aesthetics and the end of the contemporary*. Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020, xviii.], was one of the topics running through the conversations, within and beyond the course.

³ From Valiana Aguilar's online presentation for the participants to the *Non-Western Technologies for the Good Life* course, 24 February 2024.

⁴ The crop-growing system used throughout Mesoamerica, especially in the Yucatán peninsula, in Mexico.

⁵ The summit was cancelled due to COVID-19 regulations: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/calendar/new-rural-agenda-summit/>

at Perhutana, the project of communing the land through foresting, in Jatiwangi⁶. In a time when diplomacy has lost even its symbolical power in the face of the war-hungry leaders setting the agenda of death for the entire planet, planting trees in awareness of each other still remains one of the few actions in our power that is not entirely devoid of meaning.

When we gave our project a name, The Experimental Station for Research on Art and Life⁷, we moved away from Western-defined concepts such as nature, environment, sustainability, and took inspiration in the all-encompassing “life” as it is understood in the world-view of non-European indigenous people, including nature and people alike, on the same plan, co- and inter-dependent. While the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 16) takes place these days in Colombia⁸, it is worth noting that, even if precise statistics are disputed, it is widely accepted that indigenous communities are preserving much of the biodiversity left on the planet⁹. Since we started the Station, the entire planet is on the verge of cataclysm every day, yet from one season to the next we notice how the life we make possible brings more life, how every flower that grows in the place of Syngenta crops lures insects unseen in that place the year before. In the middle of the field, we learn the answer to our question: we are there to counter the apocalypses around by being mediators, facilitators, those who can allow for more worlds to exist, rather than endlessly extract from one world imagined for our own species only.

Indigenous people, says Viveiros de Castro, are not perceiving the time running out until the world collapses in the same way that we do in the modern, capitalist worlds, for “their world ended in 1492”. “Do you want to know what it’s like for the world to end? Ask the indigenous people, because they are experts in this!” continues de Castro in his conversation under a mango tree with Indigenous figure Ailton Krenak¹⁰. “White people are interested in the accounting of the world”, Krenak responds, “while indigenous people are interested in how many worlds they can create”.

When we started planting the Cosmos Garden¹¹ at the Station, our landscape designer, Georgiana Strat, explained how in the absence of both the tractors and ourselves, humble gardeners, the land would be

⁶ <https://perhutana.id/story/>

⁷ <https://ro.tranzit.org/en/project/0/2021-05-01/the-experimental-station-for-research-on-art-and-life>

⁸ <https://www.cbd.int/conferences/2024>

⁹ In cautious terms, the UN state: “Indigenous Peoples’ territories encompass 28% of the surface of the globe and contain 11% of the world’s forests. They are guardians of most of the world’s remaining biodiversity.” <https://www.un.org/en/observances/indigenous-day>. In an article from 26 September 2024, authors Latoya Abulu, Aimee Gabay and Sonam Lama Hyolmo contextualize the debate around the figure of 80% of the biodiversity on the planet being maintained by indigenous populations, underlining the need to see the multiple and nuanced origins of this non-official statistics, while not undermining the importance of acknowledging both the ways in which indigenous communities have indeed different cosmologies and life-understandings that allow them to be better guardians of biodiversity, and the increasing pressure from extractive capitalism on their lands and territories. <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/09/do-indigenous-peoples-really-serve-80-of-the-worlds-biodiversity/>

¹⁰ “Conversa na Rede”, the Hammock conversations organised by Selvagem platform: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp5NlnNE4BI>, 17 August 2023. <https://selvagemciclo.com.br/en/o-que-somos/>

¹¹ <https://ro.tranzit.org/en/project/0/2022-10-29/cosmos-garden-the-pilot-episode>

gradually reconquered by the forest which used to be the dominant landscape 500 years ago. Only that a big forest still exists, part of it protected area, at 700m walk from the Station. We are not in such a need to expand that forest, she suggested and we agreed, and instead we could use our experimental framework to plant those species that can show different levels of coexistence, different levels of resilience to climate effects, that can allow for a multitude of species to thrive by providing them with nourishment throughout the seasons (messed-up as they became, less and less recognizable as seasons). Around two years after we started planting that garden, during a practical workshop at the Station, biologist Alina Ivascu explained to us how meadows in the Romanian Carpathians, partly shaped by pastoralism, are havens for one of the largest biodiversity in the world. People can be part of ecosystems and support them at the same time.

In his book “The Invention of Green Colonialism”¹², environmental historian Guillaume Blanc takes the case-study of the creation of national parks in Ethiopia to show how the myth of the African continent as an Eden destroyed by the local populations was enforced by Western “experts”, replacing the former colonial administrators with the parks’ wardens and supporters, working with international bodies such as UNESCO and WWF and with the local governments, including the socialist one, to enforce the idea of evicting local inhabitants as the only way to save the natural habitats. He deconstructs the legitimacy of the experts’ reports by showing their neocolonial approach throughout the decades as well as the shallowness of their expertise, contradicted by the reality on the field and sometimes even by their own data. Under the pretext of preserving “nature” and biodiversity, the international institutions and experts enforce laws that “give nature to the people” while “preventing people from living in it”¹³. All based on the imagination and desires of people from the Northern hemisphere, disenchanted with their modern life and projecting on the African continent, seen indeterminately as a vast wild territory, which needs to be saved from its own people and given back to “nature”. “UNESCO is aware that it has for too long perpetuated this image of Africa. Anxious to remedy matters, in 2003, it created the concept of ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’. This category allows for the inclusion of societies which, unlike the Europeans, do not divide the world only into ‘cultural’ and ‘natural’ categories. The problem is that the African parks which have been on the list of natural world heritage sites for forty years are still there today. And those inhabitants who have escaped eviction still continue to be penalized on a daily basis for their agro-pastoral activities. These parks are seen as the last traces of the African Eden, and it is still on this basis that they are protected.”¹⁴

While rewilding projects are necessary to restore some chance of survival for certain species as well as to counter the devastating effects of capitalist exploitation of the land, we have to learn where and how, by whom and against whom they are implemented. Associations of citizens are buying forests in France in order to prevent both private companies and the State from exploiting them¹⁵, and an activist NGO in

¹² Guillaume Blanc: *The Invention of Green Colonialism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2022. Originally published in French as *L’invention du colonialisme vert. Pour en finir avec le mythe d’Éden africain*, Flammarion, Paris, 2020.

¹³ Id. 12, p. 127.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 176-177.

¹⁵ Association Forêts Sauvages: <http://www.forets-sauvages.fr/web/foretsauvages/99-coordonnees.php>

Romania is buying land to prevent the opening of a mine in that place¹⁶. These are the good examples, to which we associated ourselves when we with the Station said we can turn a capitalist tool such as private property against itself, and that we can see the enclosure as a form of protection rather than one of exclusion. Yet, there are also the examples of green colonialism, green washing and sometimes sheer green ignorance, such as the ones, mentioned above, described by Guillaume Blanc in Africa, but also the blatant use of afforestation by the Israeli state to conceal Palestinian villages erased in 1948, and also to prevent their former inhabitants from returning.¹⁷ The phantasm of the paradise devoid of people, of terra nullius or of greening the desert are deeply ingrained in the colonial imaginary and passed on to the next generation, such as the Silicon valley moguls, dreaming of immortality and aspiring to terraforming Mars.

As we stand in the middle of our field, we are learning from the trees the vertical wisdom, as ancient Egyptians used to call it. Yet there is so much more to learn from the rest of the species, as well as from our peers in this culture-nature world, and that knowledge can bring us the horizontal, spiral, rhizomatic and entangled ways of living, in a field that has never been empty.

¹⁶ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/proiect-mina-aur-blocat-ong/31581887.html>

¹⁷ <https://visualizingpalestine.org/visual/green-colonialism/> and Liat Berdugo, "A Situation: A Tree in Palestine," *Places Journal*, January 2020. <https://doi.org/10.22269/200107> among many articles on this topic.