

## Feral Phytocracy: Vegetal Apparitions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

by Špela Petrič

Late May, about a month into my three-month residency at the Nida Art Colony, a thought from my incessant internal monologue stopped me dead in my tracks. As most afternoons, if the swarms of mosquitos permitted, I had been wandering along the sandy paths criss-crossing the dunes. These dunes weren't exactly the aeolian formations I fantasized about when invited to the thin strip of unsettled land caught between the Baltic Sea and the Curonian lagoon. Instead, I was met by an unbearably picturesque mossy pine grove straight out of a Disney fairy tale. Planted in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as part of a bio-engineering attempt to stabilise the dunes and protect the settlements (and notably ports) from the effects of erosion and deposition, the pine forests are 'manmade', protected by Unesco as a natural-cultural heritage site. The tension between the absent 'truly natural' wilderness and its aesthetically pleasing albeit monotonous cultural double was almost unavoidable; it was inscribed in the NAC symposium catalogues I had glanced through, in the way the National Park employees described the landscape, in the ecosystems themselves... or was it just me looking for trouble in the *kurort* of health and wealth?

Making my way through the blueberry-bedded forest, I tuned in to the hum beneath the ceiling of my cranium:

*Look at this beauty, this breath-taking pine spectacle. I despise the fact you are irresistible to me, I am disappointed that in spite of everything I know about your precarious displacement, about the harsh deforestation perpetuated by the early capitalist machine searching for primitive accumulation, you, that were brought here to remedy a human miscalculation, you that are somehow complicit -- I deeply disagree, but your sight and scent overwhelm me with sweet affect. I will not succumb to the naïvety of romanticising you as nature; I dismiss the bourgeois taste that finds this tamed wilderness pleasing, I see through you...*

In parallel, another line of thought, one processing my privilege as an artist-in-residence enjoying the otherwise unattainable spoils of the middle-class was developing, rhythmically punctuating the former:

*The topics of urgency have faded. Instead, I contemplate deep time and the post-romantic, post-modernist Eden, questions of nature/culture and conceptions of myth-places. We are encouraged to be critical, but it's a controlled criticality, isn't it, aimed at no one in particular, subdued and pacified by the sunset sauna on the beach. What am I actually here for? Is there space for the artist-vegetariat, the fragmented piece-of-bodies held together more by semantics and digital footprints than physical forces? Nothing queer is allowed to exist here. Just like paths and gazes, topics and discourses are imposed by centuries of constructions, tied to the authenticity of the fabricated place. Connecting to any of the local, green cube issues, critically or not, maintains their status of a force to be reckoned with, confirming their relevance to contemporary existence -- it legitimises this museum-nature while marginalising our*

*error-prone, self-medicating, technology-dependent, painfully-heteronomous sado-masochistic being that has to deal with real nature-cultures in the real world.*

I jolted, eyes wide with the 'aha' moment. The irreconcilable parallel ruminations of my hyper-activated mind spat out the strange realisation: *I am the pine tree.*

For four years as a former science researcher working with plants in an artistic context I was fully convinced by the leading philosophers on the topic that human empathy with plants was not possible (see Marder: "The Life of Plants and the Limits of Empathy") - at least not in its authentic, non-anthropomorphic sense. But at that moment I felt what could only be described as authentic empathy. I wasn't pretending to be the pine tree, imagining what it must be like to be slow, photosynthetic, with roots growing into my offspring, connected in some orgasmic community of vegetal oneness.

What I felt was the violence of my own judgement on their bark-skin, the dismissal of their actual, physical presence because of the historical succession over which they had no control (just a capacity; pine trees grow quickly and have deep, wide-reaching roots, so they are *useful* for stabilising soil). Wasn't I as the victim-and-perpetrator-in-one epitomising the confusing affect of our increasingly radicalised societies? Wasn't this the other end of the dis-ease that had been haunting me since my arrival? Being out of place but having to do?

Embarrassed but relieved over my little epiphany I kept walking.

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Through the five millennia of the Spit's existence its ecosystems have been in continuous flux, transforming with climate conditions from white dunes to prairies to forests and back. Before the Prussians cleared the land of vegetation in the 17th and 18th centuries, most notably during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), the Spit was covered by pine and birch forest. However, the Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), which now flourishes on the undulating terrain, was imported to the dunes from Denmark during the reforestation campaign in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (although, oddly enough, genetic analysis traced their origins to the forests of what is nowadays Germany). Today, efforts are underway to preserve the genetic diversity of the Curonian Spit pines; near Juodkrante is a clandestine plant nursery with precious pine chimeras, salvaged old strains of Scots pine grafted onto the rootstock of the new arrivals. Although the two seem outwardly identical, perhaps the cormorants have learned to distinguish the endemic from the foreign, choosing to nest precisely in the protected centenary coniferous forest, the last remnant of the pre-anthropogenic vegetation, rather than its younger, human-planted counterparts. Herein a conservation conflict emerges; not only are the cormorants a thorn in the side of fishermen, allegedly successfully competing for the catch, they are, like humans, an engineering species capable of transforming terrestrial ecosystems through their chemical and mechanical impact. Through fast expansion and large amounts of guano they leave behind a sullen landscape of few ruderal species

amongst washed-out dead tree trunks perched on the hillside like brutalist ruins. As wild birds the cormorants are protected by the EU Birds Directive, as a tourist attraction visited by a relentless convoy of tourists on their day-trips to the National park, as a threat to indigenous biodiversity closely monitored by nature research centres ready to sound an alarm if they overstep the tolerated bounds of ornithogenic expression. In the 26 ha of nesting grounds, pine trees are victims of cormorant ferality, a disruption counterbalanced by nature reserve conservation laws vigilantly limiting any unauthorised human intervention (anecdotally, this includes preventing the widening of paths to accommodate baby strollers, prompting the mother of a fourth generation Neringian fisherman family to cry out: *How can it be that the pine trees are more important than my child?!*)

Even within this agonistic climate of transient interspecific class-alliances, biologists, residents, holiday-makers and most likely pine trees, too, can agree on one unwanted alien: the black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*). This fast-growing, thorny tree from North America, a species considered invasive even its native continent, outcompetes other arborous inhabitants of the Curonian Spit particularly after fires, a phenomenon which the black locust seeds are well adapted to. Once the tree takes root in an area, it is practically impossible to exterminate – cutting down the trunk invigorates the root system to produce a family of shoots, eventually growing into a monocultural community.

A thousand kilometres to the south, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his national conservative Fidesz party have been battling against the European Union's 2014 proposal to put the black locust on the list of alien invasive species. Though the plant was brought to Hungary's territory only a little over 300 years ago, it now covers a third of all their forests. No longer just the muse of great Hungarian poets, the so-called white acacia has become an important agricultural asset, producing honey and wood. Recently it had also been inaugurated into the collection of national symbols/values called Hungaricums. While most European countries worry about the uncontrolled spread of *Robinia*, the Hungarian nationalists are spreading hysteria about the Union's intention to destroy their Hungaricum, oblivious to the claims of the Hungarian Academy of Science's Ecological Institute that pointed out Fidesz' statements were "based on the most outrageous misconceptions and false allegations." The party gathers at rallies, planting white acacia trees as a gesture of defiance, the local against the global, with the green acacia leaf tucked behind their hats.

I was inaugurated into the topic of "autochtonity" during a course on Systematic Botany while studying at the Biotechnical Faculty in Ljubljana. At first posited as the scientifically objective matter-of-fact, an effect of migration, evolution and climate history, the ecological narrative of the allochthonous, foreign species soon acquired a pejorative tone. The reasoning was sound - the new locations (to which the plants were brought by humans) had no natural grazers or pathogens to keep their populations under control. They were intrinsically armed with aggressive survival strategies and were highly efficient at channelling the resources from native species, which had through centuries of ecological negotiations developed a sophisticated

balance well-suited to the given territory. Thus the ‘foreigners’ were multiplying uncontrollably, plunging ecosystems into disarray, monoculture, death and decay. The unspoken agreement was that biodiverse, locally-specific communities were not only functional and resilient but also beautiful. To me this aesthetic judgement posing as a biological fact didn’t reveal its potential ideological and xenophobic undertones until a decade later, when I was already deep into my science-to-art transition.

In September 2018 the Slovenian right-wing newspaper Demokracija published an open call for a children’s story, one that would promote traditional family values and heighten the sense of national identity. The good characters should be personifications of our native animals; the evil ones represented by foreign invasive species. Coincidentally as I’m writing this passage, the first Festival of Invasive Plants featuring scientists, engineers and community workers is taking place in Ljubljana. Its tagline: “Identify, repurpose or give away: from harmful to useful foreign plants”. Under the umbrella of ecoanxiety and climate change, weeding out the foreign invasives is a community-forming activity. The local organises to resist the totalising global.

Benevolent non-governmental organisations like Trajna are “working towards supporting solidarity and cross-species co-sustainment”. One of their projects involves making paper from the wood of the invasive tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) and wrapping native seeds in it before planting them. Apparently the *Ailanthus* paper is a good fertilizer substitute and promotes seed germination. The unsettling symbolism of shredding alien invasives to feed autochthonous plants is perhaps at the heart of the critique that Trajna is trying to bring to light; but they are also one of the few organisations in Slovenia that are actively developing a new nature-culture of *living with*.

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I devoted my time in Nida to researching phytocracy (plant governance), which ultimately lead to a participatory artwork in the form of fabulative expeditions into plant nature-cultures. The provocative inversion of perspective is rooted in the notion that when it comes to expressions of ‘vegetal will’ within plant-people entanglements, anthropocentrism is blinding us to the ways vegetal beings organise their environment and hack other organisms (including humans!) to serve their needs and desires. (For authors brilliantly navigating this intriguing premise, see Michael Pollan (*Botany of Desire*) and Richard Doyle (*Darwin’s Pharmacy*)). Through the research I hoped to become a master of vegetal visions, the Pied Piper luring the audience into a vibrant plant reality folded neatly onto the one we know. To be convincing, I would perform the magical inversions within one of the existing ethico-onto-epistemologies, asking participants to suspend their disbelief and see from the plants’ perspective. But which relational framing to choose? Which one would plants approve of? Science? Paganism? Market economies? Wouldn’t a verbal narrative go against my personal experience with plants, one that made me realise precisely the opposite: the semantics of our logos limit the understanding of their syncretic being?

This is not the dead-end it appears to be. Rather than submitting to a silent practice, I resolved to drown the erroneous flatness of any single plant representation in an assemblage of grapevine stories, and to pursue deconstructions and recombinations of ethico-onto-epistemological tools that strip them of their mesmerising and unquestioned power. So that from the crack between fact and fiction something other might grow.

With a similar aim and inspired by Braidotti's nomadic writing the present loosely strung together observations of verdant shoots penetrating the social asphalt hope to propel the reader into a multi-directional relation to the feral vegetal world with whom we share this moment of widespread ecosystem and socio-political transitions. While in the past gardens were designated sites of philosophical medi(t)ations on/with plants, places where negotiated presence was to be enacted and consequently understood, the contemporary condition of the ecological uncanny serves us with vegetal apparitions in unexpected and mundane territories. To those who see them, these spectres demand attention, cutting through the bland green backdrop and asking where our allegiance lies, the symbolic and material inextricably coupled.

In this time of global weirding, the tree of god, the black locust and even the 'misplaced' pine of the Curonian Spit use their capacities well; they entice us with sweet honey, multiply with vigour from bits of roots left by attempts of their extermination, or inject an artist's afternoon walk with a perverse but striking bout of empathy. Who is to say we are not witness to phytocracy in action?

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