NOTES FROM AMARANTH LAND (II)

Julia Mensch, Bolívar & Buenos Aires, Argentina, March 2023

Yuyo colorado, Bolívar, Buenos Aires Province, Argentina.

1.

Yuyo colorado (red-colored weed), my teacher plant

Philosopher **Noelia Billi** defines GM soy as a zombie plant, the corporate plant, and capital's ally par excellence. In a conversation with her at her home, located in a quiet neighborhood in the city of Buenos Aires, looking out onto a leafy yard through her studio window, Billi proposes thinking about the scenario in Argentina from this plant's perspective: a being created in corporate laboratories which, in order to prosper, must control every being and all the systems of relationships and exchange that surround it. In order to develop, it needs a global neo-extractivist and corporate market system, it needs the rural population to be expelled from the

countryside, it needs there to be no people, plants or living beings in its vicinity, and if there are, they will succumb to illness or death. Its appearance is that of a soft, docile plant. It is medium in height, with rapid growth, a uniform green color and high commercial value.

Four hours on the road bring me to Bolívar, a small city in the province of Buenos Aires which to my urban eyes looks more like a town than a city. A great friend comes from there, and it is thanks to her that I have planned this trip. Through the windows of the car that takes us there, I see the reign of the zombie plant, soy, soy, corn and more soy. There are advertisements for Cargill, Bayer, Syngenta and YPF Agro.

My friend from Bolívar has land, which she rents out, and GM soy is produced on it. One morning she takes me out to the rented acreage by car, traveling first along the highway and then on dirt roads, where it is difficult to find the parcel that belongs to her. It is impossible to recognize in the monotony all around us; without trees, everything looks the same, a sea of green gold. We travel through immense, even plantations of soy, all the same height, but in this uniform landscape we see upright, undisciplined plants that stand out in the midst of so much monoculture. In each one of the fields we pass, ***yuyos colorados*** stand tall, the most problematic weed for the transgenic model. **Amaranthus quitensis**, **palmeri** or **hybridus**, are the three species of amaranth that are resistant to agrochemicals, which I have not let learned to distinguish from one another. With firm, somewhat reddish stalks, upright panicles that are green, not yet magenta, different sized leaves and thick roots, they irreverently grow among the green gold's purportedly uniform tone. Taller than soy, it interrupts the monotony that surrounds us and at first glance, makes the GM monoculture look almost like a soy and amaranth polyculture.

After many rounds moving through the zombie plants and following her tenant's instructions, we finally find her field. At the entrance, a large family of amaranth receives us. I say family, because it isn't just one or two dispersed here and there, as is seen within the GM plantations. These are an abundant group, growing just in front of the gate at the entrance to my friend's land. Seeing so many amaranth plants on the land of my dear friend moves me, and although she lives, in part, off of green gold production, she reacts as I do. I sit down to observe and draw an amaranth plant in her field, looking to focus on its characteristics and smallest details, until the mid-day sun liquidates me. There are no trees or refuge in a soy plantation, just soy, soy and more soy. And amaranth, among other weeds, such as **white quinoa or *santa lucía***, their growth whispering a message.

2.

In my temporary home in Bolívar, a red bicycle awaits me, the same color that coincidentally, all of the bicycles I have had to date have been. Red like amaranth, although the color of my bicycle is uniform, without the broad range of reds and magentas that the different species of amaranth possess in their plant being. I remember that a friend from Chile told me that in her country, the young branch of the Communist Party used to use shirts in a tone of magenta called amaranth to identify one another following the 1973 military coup. She does not have much information

regarding this, but she recalls that many sons and daughters of the era's activists, pertaining to our same generation, were named Amaranto or Amaranta. While I find myself here, her messages remain in my telephone as notes to investigate in the near future. This political precedent, however, that communist youth would identify themselves using "amaranth shirts" [1] as a symbol in order to resist Pinochet's brutal dictatorship in a clandestine manner, make me think once again about their appearance. Aside from their condition as a weed resistant to agrotoxins, there is something powerful in its color and the exotic appearance of this plant native to Latin America, which by growing in GM plantations visually bursts forth from the soy's uniform green. If the latter is monotonous, a flat, homogeneous green, the former has shades that range from green to magenta, and its presentation denies classification, strong and exotic.

One day I go for a ride around Bolívar on my red bicycle like any distracted tourist, until I stop to photograph a silo bearing the name of a local agricultural firm called Catalpa, along with the name of the Swiss multinational Syngenta. I few blocks later, I find myself at the office of the Bolívar-based company, and I leave my bicycle to one side and again, take photos openly. I approach the door and present myself in my guise of a young Swiss-Argentinean artist and academic. A woman who must fulfill some administrative role attends me, and I tell her that I am in a doctorate degree program in art in Switzerland, working on plant intelligence. And given that Syngenta is also Swiss, I wanted to ask whether the multinational has a plant in Bolívar (since I do know that Cargill has one). The woman is amiable, and answers that no, they only commercialize their products. A few minutes later, I wind up bringing the bicycle inside, leaving the tidy reception area and speaking for a long time with **Walter Kroll**, the agricultural engineer who is the President of the company. He invites me into his office, and serene, sure of himself and confident, he deploys the discourse of transgenic agriculture. I hear the classic of all classics: there is practically no environmental impact, it has not been proven that glyphosate is cancerous, that there are as many studies on one side as there are on the other. The negative effects that there may be are due to improper application and use of phytosanitary products, etc. etc. Just as I have already heard regarding the transgenic model from its partisans many times, responsibility for agrotoxins' negative effects on health are put down to improper use on the part of producers or those applying them, absolving the companies that produce them and the State that accepts their indiscriminate application from any responsibility whatsoever. In order to apply them in the supposedly correct manner, one basically has to suit up like an astronaut. But fumigation takes place alongside populated sites, where human and non-human beings live. How should these beings be dressed in order to inhabit the fumigated fields? In the reign of the corporate plant, there can be no other beings. It alone, allied with capital in order to grow.

The engineer affirms that once applied, the phytosanitary products break down, and that by the time they reach consumers, the rates of toxicity are very low or nil. And he convincingly continues: "In fact, humanity is alive, and lives using them. And no one has irrefutably proven that there is some severe problem with an illness anywhere, above all with cancer, which is what is most often discussed." He speaks about green band phytosanitary products, which have almost zero environmental impact. Among the ones he mentions is a new glyphosate, also green band, which he confirms is much more environmentally friendly. I make note of names to investigate later and to speak about with the agroecologists I know, but the first one I find on the internet speaks of green band herbicides that contain 60 and 70% glyphosate.

Without mentioning the work of countless scientists' work in detail, whose studies and research have been accompanying the struggles of fumigated populations for decades (where cancer is the first cause of mortality, and hyperthyroidism is the second chronic illness, along with a rise in the number of cases of allergies and problems in the respiratory system, skin, neurological issues, infertility, spontaneous abortions and birth defects),[2] in order to refute the engineer's statements, it suffices to mention that in March of 2015 the International Agency for Research on Cancer, part of the World Health Organization, declared that glyphosate can provoke cancer in human beings.[3] But I do not mention any of this in our conversation; doing so would ruin my guise as a young Swiss-Argentinean artist and academic and the engineer would stop answering my questions and would not receive me in his office.

In response to my consultation, he affirms that amaranth is the most complicated weed, and that it appears particularly in GM soy plantations. The first problem it presents is that it competes with the crop and suffocates it. In addition, it makes harvesting more difficult since amaranthus develops a woody stalk, practically a trunk, that the machine cannot harvest because it breaks passing over it. Amaranthus also generates humidity in the plantation, tainting soy plants green and ruining them. He states that it creates many complications for food production. He says "food", but what he is actually talking about is the production of a commodity. He gives me his card before we say goodbye and he invites me to contact him for whatever I may need. On my way out I pick up a Syngenta pamphlet promoting the herbicide Eddus, which is titled "The Party is Over for Amaranth" to take with me.

3.

The name of the agricultural engineer who rents and cultivates my friend's fields is **Ernesto.** He is from my generation and probably his parents chose his name in honor of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Ernesto seems to be very aware of what he is doing, but at a given point had to make a decision, and that was to go ahead hand in hand with the transgenic model. Why he did this, and what made him think it may have been the right way to go, are questions I cannot pose to him. As yet I have neither his trust nor the opportunity to do so. But while we are in contact, I continue to ask myself whether knowing how toxic the agriculture he is practicing is might not make him afraid of visiting the fields on a daily basis? How can he walk among poison-bearing plants day in and day out?

I learn from the responses and clarifications I receive: There are three kinds of amaranthus weeds: quitensis, palmeri and hybridus, which is a mix of the first two. Some amaranthus, but not all, are resistant not only to glyphosate, but also to three groups of herbicide, which makes them very difficult to control. He mentions lists of herbicides, pre emergent, post emergent, GIT, PTO, selective, more for rescue, like venasolin, fomasafen and metolacloro. To my ear, the lists of names can only be associated with the chemical industry, not with the production of what is supposedly food.
He says that a single amaranth plant can produce 200 thousand seeds. In order to visualize that magnitude, he explains that in comparison, 200 thousand seeds are more or less the density that is utilized in one hectare of GM soy. In turn, it germinates throughout the summer, begins to

grow when the temperature rises and continues to do so without pause from September until April. Therefore, it not simply a matter of killing it once and that's that, he affirms, but that it continues to sprout constantly. He concludes by saying that he has even heard that it has one of the highest rates of growth in the entire plant kingdom.

Following his explanations, Syngenta's announcement that "The Party is Over for Amaranth" seems far from certain. The corporate zombie plant seems at the very least to be in trouble, faced with the growth of this ancestral crop.

4.

I arrive in Buenos Aires loaded with amaranth plants. Wrapped in newspaper, I set them on the floor in my patio and within minutes, they are full of black ants; I shake them off into the compost heap, wrap them up again in newspaper and now, plastic, to protect them from the fast and hardworking ants with whom I coexist. The following day, I take them to the studio of a fellow artist, friend and accomplice in this project, **Lucila Gradín**. For decades, Lucila has sustained a dialog in different ways with plants. It is my understanding that she looks to perpetuate them, to bring something in them that we cannot see, but that they do carry, to light, to create a dialog with that. Her studio looks like a herb laboratory, where there are drawings, jars, bits of wool and silk imbued with colors that she makes from plants of diverse origin, creating dyes utilizing their roots, leaves, stalks and stems in order to then paint with them.

I take my first family of amaranth to her studio with the intention of producing pigments to draw with. She asserts that the fact that ants had covered the amaranth so quickly is a good sign. Ants are not dumb; if they head straight to the amaranth, the plant must be full of nutrients. I ask myself whether they would have gone for GM soy, if I had also brought a soy plant back from the same field, and I propose to bring both plants back to Buenos Aires from Bolívar to conduct the experiment the next time I travel.

Lucila's investigation delves into plants' medicinal nature, and to this end she asks herself what medicinal properties amaranth might have. Given that amaranth is the transgenic model's most problematic weed, she says something that is very simple, but at the same time, crucial: "the cure is in the illness". If the illness of this transgenic model and this zombie and corporate plant is amaranth, what is the *kiwicha*[4] curing with its growth? What nutrients does it leave in the terrain devastated by green gold? With what beings of the soil does it relate in order to develop and survive? What is it silently telling us, all of us who are affected by transgenic agriculture, with its resistance and growth?

Before leaving her studio, we separate one plant only to dry and the rest go on to Lucila's kitchen laboratory; she sees me off saying that amaranth is my teacher plant.

[1] *Rebelión*, Revista de las Juventudes Comunistas de Chile, March 1989, Chile, p. 5.
[2] Julia Mensch, *Cartografía de un experimento a cielo abierto*, Pensamiento Salvaje, Bienal Sur, CNB Contemporánea, Buenos Aires, 2017, p.5.
[3] María Paula Blois, "Ciencia y glifosato: interpelando órdenes. Una investigación en la prensa en el contexto argentino," *Cuadernos de Antropología Social*, Buenos Aires, 2016, p. 76.
[4] Another name for amaranth commonly used in northern Argentina.