

NOTES FROM AMARANTH LAND (VII)

Julia Mensch, Carmen de Areco, Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, May 2024



Colorado, *amaranthus palmeri*, Carmen de Areco, Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I head out to Carmen de Areco before daybreak, while it's still dark outside, and as the sun slowly rises, I see homogeneous fields along the way. When I arrive, a 4 x 4 picks me up at the gas station we had agreed upon, and in the glove compartment, there is a hat with the logo of the German multinational BASF. We talk, and I proceed with caution, back in my spy disguise again, asking questions, trying not to give myself away. The person driving is amiable, and he takes me around two of the fields he administers as an agronomical engineer. They are lots where the *colorado* grows, the most widely distributed agrochemical-resistant weed across the nation's territory. He talks about amaranth's survival strategies in general, about how it sprouts all through the summer, how it jumps ahead, cuts some stages short and propagates, and about the

losses generated by the pressure the weed exerts on GM crop production. Stopping this propagation and pressure is what the use of what he calls fitosanitary products aims to do, poisons for which the current government has even lowered the cost. While I use language adapted to suit his, I hear him define the country's present situation as a moment of transition, describing today's administration as one that favors his sector more than others.¹ As is almost always the case in Argentina, the conversation takes a personal turn as we drive through the green desert of monoculture in his 4 x 4. He tells me that his wife is a social worker, interested in working in the field of health care. Without saying anything, I think about the contradiction; the possibility that the wife of a soy farmer, living in a fumigated town, winds up working with the very population whose bodies bear the effects of the transgenic model on their health.

We stop on the other side of the gate, while the producer patiently waits for me to film and take photos of the plant that he spends every day trying to eliminate. Being in this scenario again seems like a delirium to me: a monoculture transformed into a polyculture of **GM soy** and **amaranthus hybridus** and **amaranthus palmeri**, with an agent who promotes transgenic agriculture enabling me to do my work, and me there, adapting myself, wearing the disguise of Swiss-Argentinean artist and academic, with the untold aim of learning from this wise and powerful ancestral plant.

During that whole day, I don't see any people, just fenced in fields, where my teacher plant is growing amidst the soy, already wilted and ochre-colored, ready to be harvested and transformed into an export commodity. When I am left alone, with the horizon and *kimicha* and soy polyculture everywhere around me, I pay even closer attention to these wild plants that are redennominated resistant weeds, emerging proudly amid the intended, but not fully achieved, monotony of green gold. I see an infinite number of amaranth plants at different stages of growth, some small ones only 10 cm tall, others as tall as I am, with thick, solid trunks and rough panicles that are prickly to the touch. I remember what Dr. Ignacio D said about *amaranthus hybridus* changing its visible aspect in recent decades with the advent of transgenic agriculture. While its panicles used to be soft before (as they still are in diverse species of cultivated amaranths), now it is rough and aggressive to the touch.²

I observe an endless range of tones—greens, magentas and also ochres—in the diverse amaranth plants that surround me. Its ample color palette shows its enormous genetic variability, a variability that enables its high capacity for adaptation and developing resistance to the herbicides utilized in transgenic culture. The producer calls it “*colorado*”, and the nickname takes me back to some old Western movie, with typical background music. As I stand there, the *colorado* moves with the breeze, seeming to execute a dance whose steps I do not know, but very much want to learn.

¹ With the election of Javier Milei as President on November 20, 2023, Argentina now has a government of the extreme right.

² Ignacio D, interview/conversation by author, Esperanza, March 21, 2024.