Feral Qualities

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Preamble – My Garden

This year I started attending to a garden, the first ever that I could call my own, despite only renting temporarily (maybe for one whole tomato growing season, maximum for two). I am very aware of the fact that I am but a custodian of this piece of land. I am caring for it, learning what is already there and having some fun experimenting with it. I try not to remove anything, but only to add to the diversity, enrich and enhance with companion planting. I struggle with the idea that whatever I do or don't do (cut the grass or not, remove the dandelion and nettle or not, tie up the peas or not etc), I am still shaping a garden to how I want it. As time passes, I slowly learn about the plants, their cycles (every few weeks a different tree is in bloom, and later some start to change into spectacular colours for autumn and winter). It seems seasons work differently in England than what I know from growing up in Hungary: the small cherry tree started to blush its fruits 1.5 months later than I expected. I often think about how even after more than a decade I still sometimes feel like a newcomer in this country, and how I am adapting by putting down new roots, just like the plants in the garden – almost all originally from different places.

As I garden, I sometimes enjoy the failures as much as the successes. For example, in the veg patch, there is fierce competition between the chard, grass and wildflowers and a few ranunculi dotted around the edges, making an abundant display. I call this, half-jokingly, a "wild garden project". It is obvious by now that the garden is there firstly for the bees and other insects, then the slugs, then us. With this idea, I aim to acknowledge that this verdant garden has its own logic, and while I do tend to various aspects of it for a few hours almost every day, it is important to me that I respect its existing structure and logic. I don't mind humbling my own ambitions to let something new emerge. It seems, I often leave certain plants that I only

start to recognise months later as the species typically called “weeds” or “invasive”. For example, in a difficult, shady front corner of the garden, I left a plant with interestingly shaped dark green leaves, adding structure and interest to the spot. By early July it grew to about 1.5 meters, when I decided intuitively to chop off some of the top, as it was starting to topple over. Turns out, this was the best thing I could have done to maximise the brilliant display of yellow flowers which followed within a couple of weeks. Throughout August and September, this plant made me smile every time I opened the back door. A common weed called ragwort, says a friend of mine who helped to identify it on social media. Careful, in a year or two your garden will be full of them… if only, I thought…

Ragwort is listed as a weed in The Weeds Act 1959, which classifies certain species of weed that grow in the UK for specific control. Under the Weeds Act the Secretary of State for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can, if satisfied that specified weeds are growing upon any land, serve a notice requiring the occupier to take action and prevent the spread of those weeds. An unreasonable failure to comply with a notice is an offence. In addition, The Ragwort Control Act was introduced in 2003. This act aims to clarify and provide more detail on ragwort control in relation to the Weeds Act 1959. It states that ragwort doesn’t need to be eradicated entirely, but that strategic control is recommended where ragwort levels threaten the health and welfare of grazing animals and their forage.[1] While ragwort can be toxic to animals, generally if they are allowed to graze on their own, they leave ragwort alone. It is more dangerous if the hay is cut as they often can’t see it when they feed. Despite its bad reputation and toxicity, ragwort also has medicinal qualities and has been used for high blood pressure, water retention, bleeding, chest congestion, spasms as well as irregular or painful menstrual periods and symptoms of menopause.

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www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/start-rewilding/quick-guide-ragwort-and-dealing-with-the-challenges

From the cracks of human infrastructure resilience shall arise

The invasive ragweed flourishes in disturbed soils alongside roads, railway networks and abandoned farms, seeds carried by winds and soles; the “out of control”, “aggressive” giant hogweed with dangerous phototoxic sap outcompetes other vegetation along canals[2]; emerald ash borers and longhorn beetles are carried across large distances as stowaways in wood pallets used for industrial shipping[3]; storks stop their migrations altogether as they find year around replenishing food sources in open waste fields[4]; valuable autumn-smelling matsutake mushrooms grow underground in their preferred habitat of recently cut and disturbed forests[5]; bacteria abundantly multiply in the water and sediment associated with hydroelectric dams… While undeniably a very large number of species have been pushed out, reduced in numbers or lost altogether as a result of major infrastructure projects, human-induced disturbances and climate crisis, a few others found ways to survive and thrive in the cracks. While some of the species listed above can be highly valued and desired, like the matsutake mushrooms, many more have been marked with terms such as “invasive”, “alien” or “pests” and deemed unwanted or even dangerous for their allergy-inducing or toxic qualities. In certain cases, such as the noxious giant hogweed, creating an enemy goes even further: the plant, which originates from the Western Caucasus features in the British rock band Genesis’ 1971 song[6] as a Soviet agent in the shadow of the Cold War. Despite considerable efforts, the giant hogweed continues to evade eradication through the agency of certain feral qualities. ‘Feral qualities’[7] as a term has been outlined in *‘Feral Atlas’* a recent online publication by Sternberg Press edited by Anna L. Tsing with others. While

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See Ingela Ihrman’s solo exhibition Giant Hogweed (Heracleum mantegazzianum) currently on show at Karlin Studios Prague until 6 May 2021 which I curated.

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Feral Atlas. The More-Than-Human Anthropocene. Curated and Edited by Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena and Feifei Zhou. https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/world/acceleration?cd=true&bdtext=steffen-acceleration&rr=true&cdex=true&text=fq-feral-qualities&ttype=essay

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Lucy Cooke, The Unexpected Truth about Animals. A Menagerie of the Misunderstood. Doubledays, 2017.

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Anna L. Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins, Princeton University Press, 2015.

6
The song The Return of the Giant Hogweed was part of Nursery Cryme, 1971, the third studio album by the English rock band Genesis.

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Feral Qualities as an idea is described in Feral Atlas. The More-Than-Human Anthropocene. Curated and Edited by Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena and Feifei Zhou. https://feralatlas.org/

the wild strategies of certain species can often be regarded negatively, crucially the encoded resilient abilities are major contributors, if not underlining necessities, of local ecologies, alternative economies and planetary survival. Cultural anthropologist Bettina Stoetzer describes[8] the development of "ruderal" botany, that is, ecologies that spontaneously inhabit disturbed environments, such as the spaces alongside train tracks or roads, wastelands or rubble as it emerged in Berlin at the end of World War II. Stoetzer's research draws on fieldwork with immigrant and refugee communities and ecologists. With a focus on life in the ruins and alongside the cracks of infrastructures, we can question emerging ecologies, as well as social justice, in an era of inhospitable environments, she writes.

The relationship between technology, nature and society have shifted considerably due to industrialisation and the conditions created by large scale infrastructure projects starting before the 18th century and continuing to intensify into the 21st, including but not limited to energy projects, monocrop farming, forest management, factory production, waste repositories, mining and transportation technologies. These enterprises go hand in hand with the aims of states and capitalist interest to rationalise and standardise social relations, as well as to manage and simplify complex and entangled ecologies into more measurable, legible natural resources and all-around more convenient formats. To equip ourselves with agency in the face of the ecological and climate crisis, it is important to examine how the concept of nature was shaped by the compulsion of power in modernity, techno-scientific development, and growth structures.[9] Our relationship with nature and the related cultural practices continue to change due to these imaginaries. Top-down management policies together with the so-called "shifting baseline syndrome" – when each new generation perceives the environmental conditions in which they grow up as "normal" – means that standards for acceptable environmental conditions steadily decline. People forget far

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Bettina Stoetzer, Ruderal Ecologies: Rethinking Nature, Migration, and the Urban Landscape in Berlin. In.: Cultural Anthropology 33 (2), 2018, 295-323. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.09

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Rita Süveges, Beyond the Postcard: an Ecocritical Inquiry on Images of Nature. October 2020. In.: xtro realm (Eds.), Climate Imaginary Reader. Mezosfera, Oct, 2020. http://mezosfera.org/beyond-the-postcard:-an-ecocritical-inquiry-on-images-of-nature/

too quickly what used to constitute the by now exploited landscapes scarred with mines, burns, floods, waste repositories and deserts.[10]

In recent centuries, fossil fuels have underpinned an economic growth-oriented paradigm in a range of countries and political spectrums from libertarian capitalism to Soviet-style communism. Energy dependency is a dynamic that has become inextricably fused with social imaginaries, political affiliations and ecological consequences in terms of the climate crisis. As John Szabo explains in his article published in the recent Mezosfera *"Climate Imaginary Reader"*[11] for example, energy infrastructures and gas coming from Russia have played a prominent role in Central and Eastern Europe encoding how production, social, political and ecological relations have been constituted.

Regularly experiencing abrupt shifts and tensions, Central and Eastern Europe often remain seen as a lab for ideological, socio-political, cultural, economic and ecological experiments with phenomena including, for instance, the emergence of heavy industry, man-made industrial disasters and collective farming. After 1989 environmental resources have become a key battleground between local and international stakeholders, from communities to corporations and states, as each seeks to secure and formulate their needs, access and dominium[12]. In the past three decades re-territorialisation and privatisation have swept through the region. Lately, new phenomena such as the emergence of xenophobic nationalism, eco-fascism/right wing-ecologism, the oppression of non-normative identities and illiberal populism created attention and models for many nations.[13]

For states to get a better idea of their subjects and resources, streamlining and simplifying complex and hard to understand systems/relations and introducing efficient infrastructures have been crucial. Standardisation was a monumental undertaking all over the world, as exemplified by a fundamental problem - measurement systems. Particular customs of measurement have been culturally, situationally, temporarily and geographically bound, often embedded in the activity itself, and only as

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In Hungary, there are over fifteen thousand landscape scars, that have resulted from mining or other forms of anthropogenic intervention in the landscape, as quoted by Rita Süveges Ibid. mbfsz.gov.hu/hatosagi-ugyek/nyilvantartasok/bezart-banyaszati-hulladekkezelok

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John Szabo, Between Two Giants: Materialism and the Social Imaginary in the Energy (Transitions) of Hungary. In.: xtro realm (Eds.), Climate Imaginary Reader. Mezosfera, October 2020. mezosfera.org/between-two-giants:-materialism-and-the-social-imaginary-in-the-energy-(transitions)-of-hungary/

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Politics and the Environment in Eastern Europe, Ed Eszter Krasznai Kovács. Open Book Publishers, 2021. www.openbookpublishers.com/product/1328

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For more info see: Baltic Triennial 14, The Endless Frontier. Eds Valentinas Klimašauskas and João Laia, CAC Vilnius, 2021. www.cac.lt/files/various/BT14EN_(1).pdf

precise as the activity requires (think of words such as a handful, a basketful; description of how certain seeds should be planted one or two hand widths apart; or the expression the next village is two rice cooks away on foot etc.)[14]. Moreover, value often has been defined in a barter economy. However, these are useless measures for understanding and comparing patterns and capacities at a state level, or indeed at a capitalist level, where categories of people, land and assets must be interchangeable regardless of their lifeworld entanglements[15] and where they must be plugged into the same monetary, energy, transport etc system. The overwriting of these measurement systems and other and more widely associated ideas have also contributed to the fading of many local customs, peasant culture and ultimately a certain understanding of land.

Standardisation aids not only precise measurements but quick and efficient taxation and resource extraction. For example, in a standardised monoculture forest with no undergrowth, trees of equal age planted at an equal distance are much easier to plant, control and cut than those in an unruly ecosystem. The species-rich forests commons which gave home to so many and which local villagers would have used for food, firewood, medicine and other materials are enclosed and disappear. The monocrop system might be efficient, but it is clearly not sustainable. Soil gets depleted as quickly as one or two generations. The large and heavy machines which are used to extract the trees quickly and efficiently leave deep scars, contributing to soil loss. Opportunities for animals and other companion species disappear, communication and nutrition support systems between trees weaken, hence there is a low resilience to diseases, infestations, and fluctuations in weather patterns due to the climate crisis such as droughts and high winds which might easily wipe out the majority of the forest. The only way such a monoculture system can somewhat drag out its demise is either by adding artificial fertilisers, insecticides, pesticides and fungicides; reintroducing specific plants and animals (such as building houses

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James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. Yale University Press, 1998.

15
Anna Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life on Capitalist Ruin. Princeton University Press, 2015. p. 5.

for useful birds that lost their natural habitats), or through actual inefficiencies in the system in which life stands a chance to survive in the fringes. Weeds emerge despite the adverse conditions, hedge growth remaining at the borders of the otherwise monocrop farms provides slim opportunities for survival of the remaining diverse birds, insects and other species.

Political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott's in his seminal book, '*Seeing Like a State*'[16], talks about Soviet collectivization as one of his examples of 'a failed attempt at schemes to improve the human condition by the standardisation of society and nature'. The aims of the highly modernised agriculture system were actually similar and parallel with high modernism in the USA and elsewhere. The USSR and the USA were often sharing experiences at professional agriculture conferences and exhibitions, and connections were not completely severed even during the Cold War. Collectivisation provided an instrument that achieved appropriation and political control, both traditional aims of statecraft. As philosopher Manuel De Landa points out in his book '*A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*'[17], energy conversion between rural and urban ecosystems is essential to sustain the cities. This happens by shortening the food chain, and by redirecting the flow of biomass towards the top of the hierarchy through simplified ecosystems. This is one of the drivers of colonisation as well as the process of the dekulakisation and collectivisation of farms in the Soviet Union: the largely urban political movement of the Bolsheviks needed to bring affordable food to the workers in the cities. The new landscape of large state-managed farms and industrial agriculture was meant to be modern and electric with cropping patterns and procurement quotas centrally managed. In reality, they never achieved a high level of mechanisation, and even where they did, yields were the same or inferior to those before the Revolution in the 1920 s. The system devised served for nearly sixty years as a mechanism of control at a massive cost, including stagnation, waste, demoralisation and ecological failure.[18] The fact that collectivised agriculture could

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Ibid.

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Manuel De Landa, A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History, Swerve Editions, New York, 2000.

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James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. Yale University Press, 1998.

persist for so long was less due to the efficient plan of the state, and rather the improvisation, grey or illegal markets, networks of favours, bartering, alternative practices such as mushroom picking and other ingenuity that grew out of scarcity and to prevent the huge waste and inefficiencies built into the system. The same alternative channels had to be used to get hold of, for example, counterculture items, or to publish samizdat magazines. Life in the cracks attempted to compensate for the state's failures. Looking more closely at the Soviet era, certain behaviours have been able to survive not only despite but precisely because of the faults of the infrastructures. Their resilient strategies associated with taking advantage of the shortcomings and opportunities provided by the system have become crucial conditions for survival during the Cold War. These qualities encoded in the resistance and resilience of people created rich entanglements between ecology, economy and cultural production.

An ongoing example of such a system is Cuban society, euphemistically also called "people of scarce resources". Blockaded by the US since 1960 and isolated from sympathetic states it had to learn how to be self-sufficient to survive. In the years following the breakdown of the Soviet Union which also eliminated Cuba's preferential market for sugarcane and with harvest failing as well, the country was left in an increasingly poor economic condition. Under such circumstances, necessity generated domestic and self-made production in order to substitute large-scale industry more than ever during the years of the Special Period officially declared in 1991. In the 1990 s, the government prioritised food production and focused on supporting small farmers. Eventually, from 1994, it allowed farmers to sell their surplus product directly to the population as a move to lift the state's monopoly on food distribution. Due to the shortage in artificial fertilisers and pesticides, Cuba's agricultural sector largely turned organic, with *organopónicos* or urban agriculture of organic gardens playing an important role in the transition[19]. Scarcity had a direct effect not only on farming, crops and biodiversity but

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Roger Atwood: Organic or Starve: Can Cuba's New Farming Model Provide Food Security? In.:The Guardian, 28 October 2017 www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/28/organic-or-starve-can-cubas-new-farming-model-provide-food-security

also on culture together with most other walks of life. DIY, makeshift and recycled objects, mended old cars as well as odd and eccentric objects visually characterise the period, having many parallels with the former Eastern Bloc.

Without trying to overly romanticise the feral qualities that arise in the cracks of such simplified infrastructure systems as detailed above, I want to acknowledge their importance and the resilience they represent, both for ecology and human society. If the desire to completely streamline human infrastructures systems could be fully realised without any failures and cracks, the simplified skeletal and supposedly highly efficient structures would ensure the elimination of most biological and cultural diversity and would quickly lead to catastrophic failure. It is in this context that I want to point out that feral qualities are a fundamental underlying ability of life, without which survival would simply not be possible.

Sociologist Jason Moore writes[20] about capitalism's aims to make nature cheap by turning the work of living and non-living beings, including humans, into commodities that can be transformed and transferred to make more money, wrecking ecological communities in an active and often purposeful process of ruination. While statecraft may aim to improve conditions by administrative tools, infrastructures and by employing a high-modernist ideology of scientific progress, through the coercion of power they often fail and in fact produce similar effects to the problems of capitalism. Feral qualities and wildness offer hope through positive disturbance in this system. The disruption, disobedience and ungovernability associated with being wild allow not only for the survival of certain species and through it the survival of humans, but the cultural and political practices of resistance. In queer theorist Jack Halberstam's explanation[21], while the wild may conjure a place of ruination, destitution, anarchy and despair, it is also an active anti-hegemonic space from where new alternative political imaginaries can arise.

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Jason Moore, Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital, Verso, New York, 2015 referenced in Feral Atlas' article on Capitalism feralatlas.supdigital.org/world/acceleration?cd=true&bdtext=steffen-acceleration&rr=true&cdex=true&text=ad-capital&ttype=essay

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Jack Halberstam, Wilderness, Royal College of Art, Visual Cultures Lecture Series, Battersea, Gorvy Lecture Theatre, London, UK, 12 December 2017.