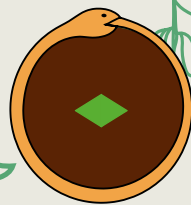
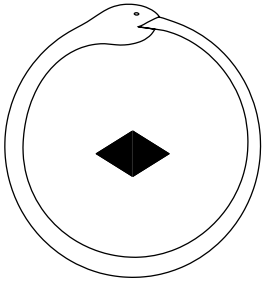


MANIFESTO OF A "WEED"

Anai G. Vera Britos



notebooks
SELVAGEM



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The photographs that illustrate the notebook are by Anai.

*Weeds will grow
In the interstices of being
And what was music and thirst for briers
Will become pasture for waters...*
(MANOEL DE BARROS, “POESIAS”)

I, as an urban herb, member of the *Movimento Okupa Vegetal*, with dignified rebelliousness and as part of the forgotten forest of the city, present this manifesto to humanity as a radical vegetable political cry (which starts at the root). It’s time for you to sharpen your senses against *plant blindness* and see us with brand new eyes.

I’m here to tell my story, mine and those that came before me to inhabit urbanity. The family I come from is recognized as the *ugly duckling* of botanical narratives, or worse, the nightmare of monoculture farmers or architects of the asphalt jungle. You call us weeds, invasive weeds. I am not surprised that you call us negatively. That’s right, we don’t hesitate to occupy the spaces that you think are only yours. I know that our presence can bother, irritate human aesthetic sensitivity [laughs], but that’s it, we mess up the flowerbeds that you strive to leave sterile, like a French garden. What a dull thing.

My relatives and I are a very different group, each one with their own way of being and inhabiting the world, their own smells, shades of green and varied combinations of colors, roots, flowers and fruits

of different shapes and sizes; we also have textures, heights and varied dimensions. And our roots, well, they stick in different ways too. There is no sameness among vegetables.

We *weeds* (I'm going to use the nickname you gave us, I think it's kind of cute) are generally considered trivial. In the city, we are plants with a bad reputation, but our rural relatives, just like us, are given the beautiful title "wild". In addition to us herbs, here in the city there are also trees. Big, crooked, leafy and much bigger than us, they capture all the human attention. From the tops of the trees, when we manage to settle up there, it is possible to see the world from above. Those that get all the human care a plant could receive are the ornamental ones. But I confess that their lives revolt me. Ornamental plants usually live trapped, surrounded, or without the possibility of freely expressing their continually mutilated bodies. We, *Vegetal Okupas*, also fight for their autonomy and that of all plants!

We, despite being urban herbs, value freedom, courage and wild instinct. We are disobedient plants and we are rebellious under our epidermis. We love being present in spaces where we are not wanted. We are an ode to stubbornness, a poem to impertinence. We are a model of protest; we put roots where we are not welcome, we reproduce in an undisciplined way¹. We cultivate our lives in ambiguity: we are strong and fragile, resistant and vulnerable².

You think that as plants we have limitations, especially in terms of displacement. It's even offensive the term you use to talk about humans who can't move or talk: vegetative state. Most absurd thing. You are mistaken! We specialize in traveling in sometimes unexpected ways. When humans and animals migrate, we use them as a ride for seeds, fruits or seedlings. We have learned to walk around on the soles of shoes, on the fur of your pets and even on your clothes. That's right! There are still those who believe that they carry us accidentally, when in fact we have been specializing in forms of dispersion for centuries. We are masters in

1. Philosopher Michael Marder argues that the spatial policy of the Occupy movement largely fits the unique ontology of plants and points to the possibility of a plant-human republic emerging from it. See Marder (2012).

2. See Lawrence (2019).

the art of *seduction*³, and I don't just mean our flowers, but the attraction strategies we create to reproduce and spread ourselves thanks to butterflies, wasps, bees, beetles, hummingbirds, bats, and even you humans. It's really funny to see how much you like to see the seeds of the white and velvety pompoms of our dandelion relatives dancing in the wind. I also find it amusing how bothered you are when the creeping beggarweed sticks to your clothes. Don't get mad, but you are the vehicles of grass burrs, bermudagrass, beggarticks, and many other relatives.

Still, our life as *weeds* is an ongoing battle. We have to fight to survive and not be continually stepped on, uprooted or buried. Urbanoid humans consider us invaders because we live in places where we have not been called. We are the kind of vegetable with an innate disposition to always be in the wrong place⁴. But you see, before this region was turned into a concrete jungle, it was a forest. We were free to inhabit large tracts of land if we wanted to. Today we have to compete for a small area to establish ourselves and survive. Gentrification doesn't just affect human beings, we also suffer from forced displacement⁵. For you to inhabit this space, you erected buildings made of colossal squares of concrete, one on top of the other. Horrible thing, this parallel city geometry. I think that, categorically, the inhabitants of the big cities do not like earth very much. Urbanoid humans prefer to have a smooth stone covering the entire surface to be able to walk on foot or with their cars. Pavement covering a large part of the land reduces the amount of ground available to us, and compacts the soil, impacting its quality and permeability.

Anyway... Let's say we don't have many options besides being *okupas*. And yes, our spontaneous vegetality is truly surprising. We simply conquer any vacant space with a minimum of available resources.

3. "Seduction" in the sense put by anthropologist Joana Cabral de Oliveira (2019) in the relationship involved between manioc and *Wajãpi* women. Inspired by the works of Thom Van Dooren and Michael Pollan, the author comments that the *Wajãpi* women cultivate a great variety of manioc, however many of these do not have specific functions, but the appreciation for the plant passes through its intoxicating potential in the form of *kasiri* (fermented drink), which constitutes a central point in the process of seduction of the *Wajãpi* and what makes them invest massively in the propagation and diversification of manioc.

4. See Lawrence (2019).

5. Interview with artist Ellie Irons, see Sabin (2016).

Okupamos [we fill in] any crack in the asphalt, sidewalk or wall. We take root in tiny surfaces, we acquire an extraordinary capacity for resilience over time, we sprout roots in compacted, demineralized soils, and we survive with little water, because only rain waters us. We are not cultivated and we subsist at any cost.

Gaining ground is, however, an arduous task and depends on the neighborhood. You will find us more easily and frequently on avenues, streets, sidewalks and abandoned buildings in the most humble or peripheral neighborhoods. It's just that our presence is also a matter of human aesthetics (if we can call it that) as well as a matter of class. I mean, we *weeds* are also an indicator of social class: "the amount and maturity of spontaneous vegetation is inversely proportional to the economic prosperity"⁶ of human inhabitants. We rarely survive in the *posh* neighborhoods of the city, where we are quickly removed. Luxurious neighborhoods, they say, must have checkered and symmetrical geography and architecture; therefore, we are prohibited from access. The humans who inhabit these neighborhoods hire other humans to act as "herbicide police", who, with sharp and cutting weapons, violently rip us off, extirpating and cutting off our bodies. But they forget that we are seeds. We sprout rebelliously. We will never give truce to authority or repression.

But... not everything is about revolt. In cities, we plants create worlds and constitute places, ecosystems, niches... Mini gardens breaking the concrete. Indeed... Making worlds isn't just limited to humans⁷. And you know? Our secret is under the surface. Our roots structure the soil, and some of our relatives know how to nourish the earth and allow other plants to settle. We and our other comrade plants make life possible for other beings. In this entanglement that we generate, we coexist intimately, affectionately and collaboratively with the pavement, the rain, the earth and the city creatures. We are the "companion species"⁸ of the urban forest!

6. Deiter Rink (2009) apud Del Tredici (2014).

7. Biologist and anthropologist Thiago Mota Cardoso, through his experience with the Pataxó people, explains that the *dendezeiros* (palm tree) also build worlds. See Cardoso (2017).

8. The biologist, writer and philosopher Donna Haraway sets the example of dogs as the model of "companion species" in order, on the one hand, to question the notion of species, and to question the projects that construct/constitute human beings as a species, and, on the other, to propose the refusal of the boundaries that isolate nature from culture. See Haraway (2003).

We are proud to be part of the “contaminated diversity” by readapting and reconditioning ecosystems disturbed by human beings⁹. Their ruins are our gardens¹⁰. This is how streets and urban pavements become mosaics of small forests, impregnated with the symbiotic¹¹ stories of concrete. We weave the mesh of vital threads, we configure this place where plenty happenings and various lives intertwine, because we go beyond the surfaces which are formed around us¹², mainly because it is we, the plants, who produce oxygen. It is our vegetal life that allows the birth of others.

Yes, dears, you would learn a lot if you paid a little attention. You admire those who have strength, resistance, great capacity for adaptation and resilience. This is nothing more than our way of life. You humans are too conditioned to only one kind of existence¹³ and feeling. You should also know about our sensitive dexterity, sensory capacity and high sensitivity. We feel, perceive and respond to the environment. We are not apathetic beings! We notice the light of day and night, the temperatures of the seasons, we have a sophisticated inner clock capable of anticipating events, such as the sun setting¹⁴. We plants *feel*. Our sentience, as well as that of animals, fungi and a myriad of other beings, is simply far from being comparable to the phenomenon of human feeling. We are “nature’s alchemists”¹⁵. We use our own chemistry to feed,

9. Considering our time in the Anthropocene - the age of human disruption -, anthropologist Anna Tsing defines “contaminated diversity” as “the collaborative adaptation to human-disturbed ecosystems. It emerges as the detritus of environmental destruction, imperial conquest, profit making, racism, and authoritarian rule — as well as creative becoming”. See Tsing (2012, p. 95).

10. See Tsing (2014, p. 87).

11. Symbiosis refers to the ecological relationships that organisms of different species establish between each other, such as parasitism, mutualism and commensalism.

12. Taking as an example any given tree, anthropologist Tim Ingold asks himself where the tree begins and where the rest of the world begins, to explain that the tree is not an object but a “gathering together of the threads of life”, which he understands as a thing. Things, then, would be a “place where several goings on become entwined”, being that they “leak, forever discharging through the surfaces that form temporarily around them”. See Ingold (2012, p. 28-29)

13. See Krenak (2019, p. 29).

14. See Myers (2015, p. 44).

15. Based on biological studies, the writer and journalist Michael Pollan calls plants “nature’s alchemists” because they are expert at transforming water, soil and sunlight into an array of precious substances, many of them beyond the ability of human beings to conceive, and even less to manufacture (see Pollan, 2003, p. xix).

to move, to protect and to disperse/spread ourselves. We learn from our entire body and carefully keep these memories, sometimes imprinted as scars that can tell many stories. Perhaps you could cultivate a new thinking, an education of attention¹⁶, and then, who knows, you might create a different tale of what we plants know, feel and do.

However, there are those who for thousands of years have recognised our importance, the interdependence and intimate bonds between humans and plants. There still are holders of this wisdom, and others have made efforts to achieve it and create alliances with us, demonstrating some recognition or gratitude. There are artists, agricultural workers, farmers, peasants, writers, scientists and other humans who seek to sharpen their senses and are able to see us without disqualifying us for being different and give our value for being who we are.

Finally, I would like to clarify that I have not come here to ask that we weeds take part in your selective celebration, just as you do with useful and ornamental plants. The time for you to understand that the relationships between different species, between all of us inhabitants of this world, are fundamental for the development of all forms of life, this time, if it is not over yet, it is almost over¹⁷. This is the warning that the Earth - the mother of us all - is giving you but you refuse to see and hear. For you humans it is already too late. The world for you is doomed to end. There is much life beyond human lives and you are not lacking in biodiversity¹⁸. I came here to sow these words, trying to “open a breach in this wall of ignorance, of denial”¹⁹, with a last-ditch attempt to demonstrate that in the city, and anywhere in the world, vegetal life - any vegetal life - is important²⁰.

I leave here this manifesto-seed of weed to reforest the thought.

For us urban plants. For all the vegetalities of the world.

16. See Ingold, 2010.

17. See Cabral de Oliveira (2019, p. 85).

18. See Krenak (2020, p. 44)

19. See the interview with Ailton Krenak by Pedro Cesarino (2016, p. 170).

20. Words (subtly modified) by eco-artist Ellie Irons in an interview about her exhibition on weeds, entitled “Sanctuary for Weedy Species”, held in 2016 at the Gallery at Industry City in Brooklyn, NY, USA. Interview by Dyani Sabin in Science Line newspaper. See Sabin (2016).





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ANAI G. VERA BRITOS

(Anai) is Paraguayan and lives in Brazil. She studied Biology at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), but switched careers after obtaining her Master's degree in Anthropology from the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC). She currently is a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of São Paulo (USP). Her research is on Guarani ethnology and other peoples from the South American lowlands. At Selvagem, she collaborates as a weaver and translator of worlds.

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More information at selvagemciclo.com.br

T RANSLATION

MAURICIO BOFF

A communication and advocacy consultant for sustainable development initiatives in South America, and also a writer. He lives in Brasilia.

PALOMA BIANCHI

Dance artist, researcher, teacher and curator, Paloma Bianchi holds a degree in Comunicação das Artes do Corpo (PUC-SP) and a Ph.D. in Theatre from the Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina. Since 2013, she has been working with Coletivo Mapas e Hipertextos and with Projeto Corpo, Tempo e Movimento since 2014. For the past years Paloma

has been developing solo works at the intersection of dance, performance and visual arts. She is interested in alliances between humans and non-humans.

ANA LUISA GREIN

I'm a woman, graduated in history and at the end of the master's degree in philosophy. I would like to contribute as much as possible to the expansion of knowledge and visions. I work with translation and revision, as well as GT English Translation classes.

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