HOLDING SPACE FOR DISCOMFORT IN COLLECTIVE WORK

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A Potential Role For Trees

> 'The first thing to realise in meditation is that there is no authority, that the mind must be completely free to examine, to observe, to learn.' (J. Krishnamurti, 2023).

This is an invitation to an experiment, in which your mind is 'completely free to examine, to observe, to learn'. You're invited to sit straight on a cushion or a chair. Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths. Feel how your feet touch the ground. Feel the other parts of your body: your legs, your upper legs, your sitting bones, your belly, your chest, your shoulders, your arms, your neck, your face, the top of your head. Feel the zones that are relaxed and send your breath to the zones where you feel tension. You can now start to concentrate on your breath. Feel your upper lip: here is where you breathe in cold air and you breathe out warm air. A lot of ideas will pass your mind, they are like grasshoppers in a Summer field. Observe them, let them pass and concentrate on your breathing again. Do this for another 5 minutes.

Our Relationship To Trees

Every minute, we breathe in and out several times. It is the most natural movement we make, so much so that we forget about it. Until something goes wrong: there is not enough oxygen in the room, or a cold or pneumonia makes breathing difficult. We mostly forget that we can breathe thanks to the trees on this planet. And thanks to the great jungles in the Northern and Southern hemispheres that ensure there is enough oxygen during our winters, when the trees here are at rest. Oxygen is the natural waste of trees, and our natural waste - carbon dioxide - feeds the trees. Trees are also the most natural solution to climate change. They reflect and absorb part of the solar radiation, they maintain local coolness and contribute to the creation of clouds through evapotranspiration. In short, we live in a relationship of continuous dependence with the trees. Stefano Mancusi, in his book Brilliant Green (Mancusi, 2019), points out that we are 'by nature absolutely dependent of plants, a bit like a small child is dependent on its parents. As the child grows up, especially at puberty, it begins to deny this dependence on its parent figures. This phase is important for the child to free itself and acquire its own psychological autonomy in anticipation of real autonomy, which comes much later. It cannot be completely ruled out that something similar also comes into play in our relationship with plants.

Nobody likes being dependent on someone else. Dependence is always accompanied by a weak, vulnerable position, which we usually prefer not to be reminded of. Sometimes we hate others on whom we depend, because they make us feel we are not completely free. In short we are so dependent on plants that we do everything we can to forget that.' In Celtic times a forest was considered to be a cathedral. Druids would perform their rituals in presence of specific trees. Gilles Würtz states in Chamanisme Celtique (Würtz, 2018) that 'trees are first and foremost living beings with whom we live and share our own lives. They are indispensable to life on Earth. We human beings are not indispensable to life on Earth. It is therefore only natural that we humans show them respect and gratitude.' With his book The hidden life of trees Peter Wohlleben critiques the objectivation of trees and how this is embedded in the way European forests are managed. With the book Wohlleben succeeds to raise the interest for trees worldwide, and how they communicate with each other: 'A tree's most important means of staying connected to other trees is a "wood wide web" of soil fungi that connects vegetation in an intimate network that allows the sharing of an enormous amount of information and goods.' (Wohlleben, 2016) But there is still so much to learn about the 'cathedral', as Susan Simard states in Finding the Mother Tree: 'more than a million [fungi] exist on earth, about six times the number of plant species, with only about 10 percent of fungal species identified.' (Simard, 2021)

There is much to learn about trees and plants. And how to do that better than to integrate them consciously as living beings, as collaborators in our collective work? It was the main reason to launch Anaïs Berck in 2019, an artist name that stands for a collaboration between humans, algorithms and trees. As a collective Anais Berck opens up a space in which human intelligence is explored in the company of plant intelligence and artificial intelligence. One of the main questions in this research based artistic practise is how to give trees co-decision rights in our work processes.

Anaïs Berck is rooted in other collective practises: Constant is an artist-run association for arts and media in Brussels, that learns from/engages with/practices from within feminisms, the principles of copyleft and Free/Libre + Open Source Software while formulating its own critic towards it. Constant loves collective, digital, artistic and thoughtful practices. Anaïs Berck's practise is also related to Algolit, a workgroup around libre texts and code, that started as a project of Constant in 2012, but has been an independent group since 2019.

When you're comfortable in your breathing rhythm, I invite you to think about a tree that is important to you. It can be a tree near your house, or a tree you used to climb as a child. Try to visualise this tree in detail. Picture its trunk, its branches, its leaves, its crown, maybe also its berries and fruits. And picture its environment.

Artefacts That Touch On Collective Trauma

By putting the tree and its representations at the center of their works, and by welcoming algorithms not at the service of extracting resources or value towards a commercial objective, but for making kin with nature, Anaïs Berck creates narratives which speak about trees and also challenge colonial views of classification, methods of standardization, and might speak critically about the effects of dominant cultures. Trees are put at the center of the creation, and therefore decenter the perspective of the human being.

By choosing the company of trees and algorithms, Anaïs Berck is necessarily touching upon the highly charged territories in the colonial legacies at the intersection of computationalism and botany. There, the implications of Western ideology, the centrifugal force of archivism, eugenics and extractivism are brought into focus and can generate complexities and discomfort. As an example, in 2017, Algolit conducted research on machine learning models and the underlying classifying algorithms. One of the first models we studied was linear regression because it is so ubiquitous and so easy to understand - compared to others. The algorithm is invented in the 19th century by Francis Galton, a notorious advocate of 'racial improvement' and highly influential in his time. As Subharda Das, researcher in the history of scientific racism and eugenics, UCL, London points out, we still use a whole range of his

statistical concepts today such as central limit theorem, probability, correlation, normal distribution. Is it not then a form of levity or complicity to continue to call his concept of 'normal distribution' normal? Here we land in uncomfortable territory.

I developed linear regression further as a forest game, which I played a.o. at Fontainebleau with students from Ecole Nationale d'Arts de Paris Cergy. For the 2019 exhibition Dataworkers at the Mundaneum in Mons, organised by Algolit, I developed the algorithm as a table game. Even though I had contextualised the algorithm and its ideologically flawed context in 2018, it was only with the

Dataworkers exhibition that we also took an explicit stance: 'Algolit tries not to forget that ordering systems hold power, and that this power has not always been used to the benefit of everyone. Machine learning has inherited many aspects of statistical research, some less agreeable than others. We need to be attentive, because these world views do seep into the algorithmic models that create new orders.'

'Zeros and ones, if we are not careful, could deepen the divides between haves and have-nots, between the deserving and the undeserving – rusty value judgments embedded in shiny new systems,' Ruha Benjamin writes in Race After Technology (Benjamin,2019). Racial bias in machine learning models is a disturbing fact that is still being addressed today. Cathy O'Neill also warns for this in her book Weapons of Math Destruction: 'To create a model, then, we make choices about what's important enough to include, simplifying the world into a toy version that can be easily understood and from which we can infer important facts and actions. We expect it to handle only one job and accept that it will occasionally act like a clueless machine, one with enormous blind spots.' (O'Neill, 2017)

One of the ways to consciously look at bias, we thought as members of Algolit, is to work with smaller datasets and take the time to get familiar with the content. As part of the experiment for the Dataworkers exhibition we decided to train the models on materials from the Mundaneum. And then the reality of the institution sneaked in. It took a lot of time to obtain the documents. And when we finally did, we were faced with very bad ocr versions of the digital files. We decided to ask the collaboration of the Distributed Proofreaders, a web-based method to ease the conversion of Public Domain books into e-books. There we fell in the trap: the more books they could finalise, the better, we thought. We did not take the time to study the materials first. After the exhibition we were pointed at a painful blindspot by Constant colleague Elodie Mugfreya. One of the books that was part of the digitization process, and thus of the exhibition, was 'L'Afrique aux Noirs', a text by Paul Otlet, the founder of the Mundaneum. As Mugfreya states in Celebration and Omission: 'L'Afrique Aux Noirs, I argue, is just one manifestation, among others, of the deeply racist character of Paul Otlet's person.' Nowhere in the exhibition we had critiqued this dark aspect of Otlet's biography. Why had we ignored this? How could this happen? It was not possible to repair the bug, as activities were long over. Together with other Constant colleagues who worked around Paul Otlet and the Mundaneum before we decided to write an Omissum. 'The omissum was made to be slipped into books, linked to websites or used in other environments about Otlet. In addition, we intervened in the Wikipedia page on Otlet in Wikipedia, section Political views and involvement.' It also invites people to add it to other publications about Paul Otlet.

Collective trauma was also present when Anaïs Berck was in residence for 2 weeks at Meise Botanical Garden, the former Royal Botanical Garden of Belgium, as part of the research 'Algoliterary Publishing: making kin with trees' [1] in 2022. The research proposed to explore the notion of a publishing house in which the authors are algorithms, presented with their contexts and codes; and in which the content of the books seeds with trees and nature. The choice of the Botanical Garden was made from the idea that if we work with trees, we also pay attention to the place where a lot of scientific knowledge about trees and plants in general is gathered to this day. In a country like Belgium, where on the 60th anniversary of Congo's independence, the king is still unable to apologise to the inhabitants of the former colony, we had to note that the Botanical Garden is a white institution that has not yet paid attention to the violent part of its history [2]. Botanical gardens as such are a colonial

invention. In Colonial Botany Chandra Mukerji writes: ‘During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, gardens played key roles in French political culture as acquiring and controlling territory became central to state government. […] However, while the French considered Quebec an interesting source of plants, they hardly saw it fit for demonstrating and developing French territorial power. The political stage was European, and botanical knowledge was centered there; therefore France, not Canada, was where botanical gardening could be made a visible and useful tool for power.’ (Schiebinger & Swan, 2005)

The botanical garden of Meise possesses the 15th largest herbarium in the world. On their website they state: ‘Our collection is the world reference for Central Africa.’ When talking to experts working at the garden, they proudly mention that the herbarium contains 85% of all known plants in Rwanda, Burundi and Congo, by chance the former colonial territory of Belgium. Denis Diagre, head of the Library in Meise, wrote his PhD on the origins of the botanical garden. He was the one who spoke about the relationship

This research was organised with the support of FRArt/Art & Recherche, and in partnership with ESA St-Luc Brussels, ESA La Cambre Brussels, Botanic Garden Meise, Villa Empain, the Royal Library of Belgium and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. It was initiated in June 2021 during a residency at Medialab Prado in Madrid granted by the Vlaamse Overheid as part of their 'Digital Culture Residencies' program. As a result of this residency, at the moment of writing, there is the will to start a workgroup inside the Botanical Garden, in order to start making public the unheard voices and other stories of its painful colonial past with Leopold II. As the Botanical Garden was short of funding, Leopold II offered to finance the institute in exchange of the deployment of botanical expeditions in Congo, a way to restore his by then bad reputation worldwide. The public proofs of this history we found in the garden are the small signs in the tropical greenhouse mentioning a classification number starting with ‘1907’: these are the plants that were transferred from Leopold II’s glasshouse to the botanical garden in 1907. It is only thanks to the colonial endeavour that botanical gardens exist as they do today. How could we reflect upon, let alone, create work, without confirming these violent practises? We were in the lion's den, but not all members of the team shared that same perspective. One collaborator proposed we would read together Layla F. Saad’s Me & White supremacy (Saad, 2020), a handbook in which Saad describes in a very clear way all conscious or unconscious painful attitudes white people can take on, when faced with the collective trauma of a privileged past and present. Collectivity in the team became difficult and uncomfortable. The next day, the same collaborator decided to leave the project. We were troubled. We faced an enormous bug, computer scientists would say. However challenging, bugs are there to resolve, learn and grow from them. A work that tried to give a form to this turmoil is Rewilding specimens. This installation, on show in the window of Constant 2 months after the residency, showed an encounter with a few taxonomists who renamed plants collected between 1885 and 1960 in Belgian Congo. For this occasion the virtual spirits of the type specimens who once lived a flourishing life in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, left the herbarium to rename the taxonomists and rewild their portraits.

When you have a clear picture of the tree, try to feel the spot inside your body that connects to the tree. Maybe it is situated in your belly, maybe in your heart, maybe in your third eye. From that spot you’re invited to connect to the tree. Once the connection is made, you can experiment by asking a question to the tree, and see if they answer.

Some Tools To Stay With The Trouble

‘Terrapolis is a mongrel word composted with a mycorrhiza of Greek and Latin rootlets and their symbionts. Never poor in world, Terrapolis exists in the SF [Speculative Fabulations/String Figures] of always-too-much-connection, where response-ability must be cobbled together, not in the existentialist and bond-less, lonely, Man-making gap theorized by Heidegger and his followers. Terrapolis is rich in world, inoculated against posthumanism but rich in com-post, inoculated against human exceptionalism but rich in humus, ripe for multispecies storytelling. […] In Terrapolis, shed of

masculinist universals and their politics of inclusion, guman are full of indeterminate genders and genres, full of kindsin-the-making, full of significant otherness. My scholar-friends in linguistics and ancient civilizations tell me that this guman is adama/adam, composted from all available genders and genres and competent to make a home for staying with the trouble.' (Haraway, 2016). Colonialism, neoliberalism, white privilege, systemic discrimination and climate change are deeply entangled issues that ask for clear stands, and as a consequence, they also ask for safe spaces to work in. How can we prepare for this?

A first and necessary tool is to set a clear frame and organise a frame check. After the residency in Meise, the research project was restructured, the budget was reorganised and an open call was launched to extend the team for the third and last residency of the research trajectory. In the open call the framework was explicitly set: 'During the residency participants develop algoliterary publications. These are publishing experiments with algorithms and literary, scientific and activist datasets about trees and nature. We ask ourselves: who and what is excluded, made invisible or exploited in the existent representations, discourses, tools and practices? How can we restore their presences in histories and storytelling? How can we heal and transform ourselves, our tools, our practices, our relationships to the world, our legacies? How can we help to destabilize the centrifugal force in botany, computation and publishing? How can we make books, databases, algorithms visible as objects of doubts and how to go beyond their established forms?'

Another useful tool is to establish a series of guidelines for the collaboration. This is a document that can be read out loud by the members of the group at the beginning of the collective process. A great source of inspiration and insights can be found in the reader that was compiled for the Constant worksession on Collective Conditions in 2019. Constant established their own guidelines for collaboration that are regularly updated. The intention of the guidelines is clear: 'We have written these guidelines to think of ways to be together comfortably and attentively. Furthermore, by addressing the guidelines as part of each worksession, we hope to create dynamic ways to keep training our abilities to expand and strengthen braver spaces. The guidelines are meant to create potentiality for all, and sometimes this is done by restricting the space taken by some.' The guidelines try to establish clarity on what can be done and said and what not, and on the consequences if attitudes are not met. They function as a social contract, that can be followed, questioned, commented upon. But above all, it can be referred to as a shared framework from which to start the conversation or to address issues that come up. A few examples of the short guidelines are:

- If you feel you're judging, leave the room and come back.
- Everything you do from the heart is good.
- If you prefer to do nothing, stay present and sustain the group energy.
- Enjoy the process, don't be obsessed by doing it 'right'. There is no success or failure. It is the process that counts.
- We're all learning to stay with the trouble in the complexities of climate change, injustices, paternalism, exploitations, privileges.
- All you need is to feel the willingness to show up and be present.
- Refusing and deconstructing sexism, racism, queer antagonism, ableism, ageism and other kinds of oppression.
- Leaving physical, emotional and conceptual room for other people.
- Respecting other beings, present or not, human or more-thanhuman.
- Caring for physical and digital environments.
- Avoiding to speak for others.

The last paragraph of these guidelines includes concrete instructions ‘If we run into conflict with one of these guidelines, or when we see that others are flagging our behavior:

- we do not fuel the conflict.
- we speak with each other.
- we step out of the room and breathe.
- we apologise.
- we come back with a renewed engagement to collaborate.
- if we continue to transgress the guidelines, we will be asked to leave.

The decision to ask to leave the collective process, can be difficult. The reading of the beautiful book Daughters of copperwoman by Anne Cameron can help convincing one of doing it. With this book the Canadian writer was given permission by the Noetkas - an Indian tribe with a strong matriarchal tradition, living on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island - to write down a number of stories, hitherto kept secret, orally transmitted from generation to generation. In the last chapter she clearly states that a person who is no longer serving the collective, is asked to leave. The same principle can be found in trees living in a forest. A tree will only start decaying when it is taking more from the collective than what it can give back.

The Constant guidelines formed a very suitable place to start writing a costumized version for the Anaïs Berck residency. As Joe Freeman pointed out long ago in her essay ‘The Tyranny of structurelessness’ it is important to structure collective entities. Following the practise installed by the artist-run collective space Varia in Rotterdam, we asked each member of the group to choose a buddy – a person they had never met before starting the residency. The idea was to check in with each other during coffee before starting the day, and at night before going home. There were also 2 coordinators who had the task to keep the space and the timing, and address issues that would come up. Each day one member of the group agreed to be the contact person in case someone felt the need to express discomfort, power issues or other difficulties. This person was reachable live or by email or telephone.

And last but not least, I proposed meditation as a tool. Meditation is a technique that allows people to make space for their inner landscape and let it determine their words and actions from there, rather than from their ratio or ego. Meditation requires a corner in the room with a rug and the number of meditation cushions needed. Meditating can also be done on a chair. The only condition is that one’s spine is straight and one’s chin slightly retracted. In the centre, you can create an altar with a few candles, rose quartz or other objects. Collective meditation can also be done online. After the meditation the assigned coordinator of the group can ask if there are experiences, thoughts or feelings that want to be shared. It is important to allow the silence for things to emerge. If nothing presents itself after a few minutes, one can close the space. Often people's body language shows that something is present. Then it's a matter of waiting. Or you can also address that person after the session. Intuition is a very useful tool. Meditation allows you to engage your intuition.

In a collective work process, all members of the group can draw their tree, expose the drawings in the middle of the meditation corner or use the pictures as avatars online. The collection of trees can also function as the advisory board during the entire working process.

Conclusion

It might take time before the conversation with the tree starts working. Meditation needs practise. And trees function on a very different time scale. Once it works, it will always work. The tree can become a personal advisor in any type of situation. Connection with beings wiser than ourselves or, if one prefers, connecting us to our inner intuitive knowing, detached from ego and performance drive, can perhaps be a key to collaborations that transform and see friction as a challenge to grow and not as something to ignore. The tools that were put in place were welcomed in a positive way and showed

their use and necessity throughout the residency. This article is an invitation to continue the laboratory exploring the same or other tools, knowing that collective work is a lifelong process of listening, taking risks, adapting, and celebrating successes with joy...

1. This research was organised with the support of FRArt/Art & Recherche, and in partnership with ESA St-Luc Brussels, ESA La Cambre Brussels, Botanic Garden Meise, Villa Empain, the Royal Library of Belgium and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. It was initiated in June 2021 during a residency at Medialab Prado in Madrid granted by the Vlaamse Overheid as part of their 'Digital Culture Residencies' program. ↩
2. As a result of this residency, at the moment of writing, there is the will to start a workgroup inside the Botanical Garden, in order to start making public the unheard voices and other stories of its painful colonial past. ↩

RESSOURCES

Staying With The Trouble:

AUTHOR
Donna Haraway

EDITOR
Duke University Press

DATE
2016

SUBTITLE
making kin in the Chthulucene

LINK
are.na/block/6659006

MEDIA
Book

NOTIONS

Care
care “is a generic activity that includes everything we do to maintain, perpetuate and repair ‘our world’, so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto and Fischer, 1990)

Community
As Édouard Glissant expressed so clearly, we are human to the extent that there is a diversity of cultures, of communities, or we could say, of "humanities," as he himself puts it. A global community where all humans would be "the same," where we would all have the same methods of calculation, the same types of production, the same language (through that well-intentioned but monstrous fantasy that was Esperanto) would be far more of a nightmare than a utopia.The real challenge is not at all to create a community in the end where everyone agrees, but rather to allow the coexistence of diverse communities, which remain distinct (through their languages, cultures, practices, and values) and do not merge in any way. It is through the exchange between these diversities of values, sensitivities, and structures of attention that the development of humanity can occur. The issue of creating a global common, which is necessary since we have only one planet, lies in determining what should be "communitized" and shared as survival conditions —and what should be protected from homogenization, to preserve cultural biodiversity, just as we protect biodiversity in animal life. This is not about aiming for a single community, but about understanding how the peaceful and mutually stimulating coexistence of different communities is possible... with enough friction to spark enlightenment, but not so much as to risk setting everything on fire. (Astruc & Citton, 2016)

Engagement
Every time I became involved (practically or theoretically) in a particular field of activity, I always wondered what the possible convergences of this field might be with neighboring areas or distant countries. This often led me, in my thinking, to go beyond the activity I was engaged in. Although my training was primarily in the arts, I must say that from the very beginning, my interests have extended well beyond the specific realm of art. The more deeply I committed to artistic practice, the more my interests broadened to subjects with philosophical, scientific, sociological, and also, and above all, political implications. In fact, even at a very young age, my concern (I would almost call it my obsession) was to be able to contribute to a global vision of culture. (Maldonado, Geel, 2019)

Mediation
The French term ‘médiation’ implies the idea of solving a conlict. In the tradition of ‘culture democratization’, ‘mediation’ aims to help people connect with art and to enjoy it, supposedly resolving a conlict between people ignoring the codes (therefore not enjoying contemporary art, for example) and artworks that are meant to be interesting per se. To do so, médiation explains art, and risks reducing its polysemic discourse to a single ‘correct’ interpretation.
Whereas médiation, in its traditional understanding, delivers ‘a correct’ interpretation authorized by the institution, in a vertical way (through canonic forms such as the guided tour), critical gallery education aims at developing a dialogical relationship, following a more horizontal model.
Contrary to the classical approach to gallery education, we [Microssillons collective] believe that art can be used to create productive intellectual or political conlict, to open a debate between citizens, to discuss political and social issues. To accomplish this, there is no need to promote the greatness of an artwork or to simplify its meaning; rather, one must work with it, sometimes manipulate it, to find friction points that can generate debate.
[...] the conlicts that occur during the projects can be considered as being in many ways more interesting than a ‘happy consensus’ and are signs of a vital and open dialogical process. (Desvoignes, 2015).

Solidarity

"Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment." (Hooks, 2014)