

Intervention Symposium—“Plantation Methodologies: Questioning Scale, Space, and Subjecthood”

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Monocrops and Melancholy

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I often encounter fields of soybeans where once there were forests or gardens, creeks or charcoal ovens, roads or schools. At first it is disorientating: my tacit spatial memory is erased because the stuff it might attach to is missing. Then it makes me angry. But over the years these encounters have given way to something else, to a familiar feeling of sadness and resignation: soybean fields are an affective space through which I need to move to do research and visit friends.

Prior to WWI, Paraguay’s eastern frontier was forested, organizing an indigenous labour force in extracting wood and other resources. The Green Revolution sent peasant families into the forest to cut down trees and replace them with small plots of cotton and tobacco. And then in the 1990s, soybeans began flattening the smallholder landscapes with a combination of bulldozers, fire, pesticides, and police violence. When I encountered these vast soy monocrops in 2002, they came with their own analysis that linked rashes and birth defects, vomiting, murder, poverty, and even suicide to the genetically modified beans and the chemicals that came with them (Hetherington 2020).

I wrote about this in an attempt to amplify what Latour (2004) calls the “matters of concern” which emerge on the soy frontier: the publics that gather around dead bodies, burnt houses, pallets of contraband insecticides. That form of storytelling widens the scope of material politics, and counters certain kinds of disqualification. For instance, where peasant activists were often ridiculed for thinking that GMOs caused ecological collapse, I tried to narrate those organisms as networks that unquestionably caused widespread harm. Yet few of these stories

make space for affective resonance. They were good for expressing solidarity in times of political organizing, but less effective at describing the emotional connections that might continue to exist even when the moment of political organizing has passed. The affect I want to describe here is not about things that are imminently going to disappear or re-emerge, but about things that ought to be present but aren't.

Or perhaps "ought" is too big a word; it's not that there's something intrinsically good about the huts and trees that were burnt down to make room for soy. After all, they too were part of a prior wave of destruction. But my sense of myself in space is caught up on those things, as is that of many of my friends. Their absence matters to me. I care that they are not there without being able to entirely justify why I care, why we care, or (and this is what motivates the act of writing) how I should try to make you care.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) suggests that discussions of "matters of concern" often miss this kind of affect. She offers a supplement, matters of care, for amplifying those relations that aren't easily taken up in a politics focused on *things*, that don't necessarily conform to the object orientation and directionality of pragmatic publics. Matters of care are by definition intimate, neglected by public discourse, and so very hard to scale up, or even to communicate to another person. But with attention, they might be made to resonate laterally, to bring out forms of community other than those favoured by politics or theory.

The striking opening paragraph of Philippe Descola's *The Spears of Twilight* (1996: 1) is an angry rant about an Amazonian landscape that Descola had to navigate in the 1980s:

[T]housands of identical little towns mushroom endlessly, each day putting out new tentacles, each day increasingly ramshackle and still without the power to swallow up the great forest. Too chaotic to hold the visitor's curiosity for long and too hybrid to elicit sympathy, these towns of corrugated iron convey a degenerate image of all the worlds that they bring into confrontation, an image that is a mixture of tenuous nostalgia for a

long-forgotten European culture and lazy prejudice against the unknown that lies so close.

The paragraph has not aged well: it's unreflective and imperious, soaked in contempt for peasant lives. Reading it is a good reminder that taste in landscape is a marker of class and colonial distinction. But if I'm honest, the main reason I hated this passage when I first read it was visceral. I was in just such a "little town" when I read the book, and I cared about it deeply. The landscape Descola detests is the habitat of some of my dearest friends. I didn't make it far past the first page before I abandoned the book.

Rereading it years later I recognize that we are saying the same thing, and from a similar vantage point. Both of us take breaks from other analytic goals to descend, in more hackneyed and problematic prose, into the landscape and say: "See, there it is! There's the thing you should care about!" We are both witness, as Northern interlopers, to the same process of destruction. He wrote only a few decades before me of a place not far away, and the ramshackle towns he described are probably now covered in soybeans. I recognize in his lament that terror of a loss of difference, of an encroaching, undifferentiated blob of frontier capitalism, a monoculture of plants and of the mind (Shiva 1993). But we don't care about quite the same thing, and that matters ethnographically.

Bartomeu Melià, an acclaimed Paraguayan anthropologist more like Descola than like me, was in his 80s when I interviewed him in Asunción. When I asked him whether he ever went back to his field sites, he clammed up and got tears in his eyes. "Honestly," he said, "it's very difficult. There's nothing left there. The soy just makes me too sad." He didn't want to say anything else about it, and at the time I shied away from the emotion and changed the subject.

Once on my way to a well-known nature reserve in eastern Paraguay, I got lost in fields of soy, and had to hire a taxi. The driver, a chatty middle-aged son of peasants who had been evicted from another part of the country to make room for soybeans, first treated our predicament

with fatalistic humor. But when he had to get out of the car to scan the horizon for landmarks, he became frustrated and then sad. “This was all forest when I was a kid,” he said; “they burned it down about five years ago, and I haven’t been back since. It’s hard to see it like this.” Instead of dwelling in that feeling, I asked him follow-up questions to try to pin down the year of the destruction.



Image 1: Wheat field (winter cover crop for soybeans) in eastern Paraguay (photo by author)

Two years later, as my book was going to press, I dropped in on Ña Costanza, a fierce community leader who had chased away tractors on foot when we were both younger. Her gardens, animal pens, and prized pomelo trees were all gone, covered over with soy. For an hour, we talked about family and friends, without mentioning the field. I was so used to seeing her

angry I thought she might get defensive if I finally pointed it out. But instead, she became quiet. “What are you going to do?”, she said; “Soy won. There’s nothing else.” Perhaps because I was visiting this time as a friend, but just as likely because when I’d approached the house I’d been swamped by my own sadness about her gardens, I just said “I know” and we sat quietly. I felt connected to Ña Costanza not through a shared matter of concern, but through quiet melancholy, and only later did I trace back the times I could have made similar connections.

In Freud’s famous rendering, melancholy arises from a failure to mourn, and through mourning to detach from a relation that has passed. Judith Butler (2004) points out that no mourning is ever finally about detachment, but actually about opening to new kinds of attachments, about realizing one’s body is traversed by relations that sometimes must be cared for. Because of this, she says, mourning (and melancholy) is also an opportunity for reflection on how we are tied to others and to worlds for which we can’t help but have an ethical responsibility.

Butler is mostly concerned with death in war, and believes that we have to insist on the nameability, the grievability, and therefore humanness, of all those killed by violence. But the sense of belonging I’ve lost in the soy doesn’t easily acquire personhood—it is ungrievable even in Butler’s sense (Braun 2017). The melancholy the bean fields provoke is not over the loss of a thing or a person (or not only), but to a queerer relation one didn’t know one had made by being in the world. It’s just a shudder that traverses the body’s world, woven through with memories, and not scalable or public.

All that is left of mourning then is the possibility of undergoing a transformation of the self that renews relations and responsibility. My melancholy for the soy-covered landscape ties me to Ña Costanza, and less directly to Melià and that taxi driver. And even to Descola, if I read him for the pain or fear in his voice rather than the colonial smirk. As Puig de La Bellacasa (2017) is quick to point out, matters of care like this don’t replace a politics based in matters of concern, but in acknowledging the care we have for the destroyed landscapes of late capitalist agriculture, we open up new ways of connecting. What links us is not kinship through a body, or even a proxy body, nor the familiar genres of outrage, or denunciation, but a quieter relation to a missing something that was always a shared property of being alive in a living world.

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