

SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

2022 | *Issue #1*

July 2022



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WHERE IDEAS GROW: LIFE AT THE LANDHAUS

Samantha Walton

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The Rachel Carson Center Review

2022 • 1

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Between January and April 2022, I was one of the first cohort of Rachel Carson Center Landhaus fellows based at the Herrmannsdorfer Landwerkstätten, an eco-farm in the Bavarian countryside south of Munich. There were ten of us: Flora Mary Bartlett, Subarna De, Thibault Fontanari, Péter Makai, Jared Margulies, Diego Molina, Bright Nrkumah, and Céline Pessis, along with our Landhaus manager, Moremi Zeil. In this piece, I reflect on what Rachel Carson called “the repeated refrains of nature,” their influence on thought, and the surprising places where ideas grow.



The Landhaus at Herrmannsdorf. © 2022 Flora Mary Bartlett. Used by permission.

As I'm about to leave the Landhaus, the Alps are erased from the horizon. The sky is a fierce and brilliant blue, the light piercing, perfect white. Over the last few months, the mountains have felt like neighbours. They've arched their backs across the fields and loomed up over the tiny points of white churches and pines. On the evening of my arrival, as I chatted to Moremi about Bavarian politics, climate change in central Europe, and places to ski or swim locally, I caught my first glimpse of them when the car crested a hill. In a pure, quartz rose, they stood out against a pale blue sky. Later, from my attic window, they appeared dark grey and contoured with patches of silver snow. After so long, it feels eerie to not see them at all.

We arrived in a picture-postcard winter. Snow buried the fields and layered in white lines along branches like lace. Each seed head had a white, spiked aura of ice, as perfectly defined as knife marks on a linocut. In late February, we felt the promise of spring. Sap snapped from the pines and birds hopped frenziedly from branch to branch. Then the snow melted. The sky turned yellow and

a hot rain fell. The terrace was coated in orange sand blown in from the Sahara. The ice on the lake was long gone and the water, which we had first swum in in January, was no longer biting. It was an impossible, premature summer. We wore sunscreen and cycled down the dried-up forest paths, turning up dust.



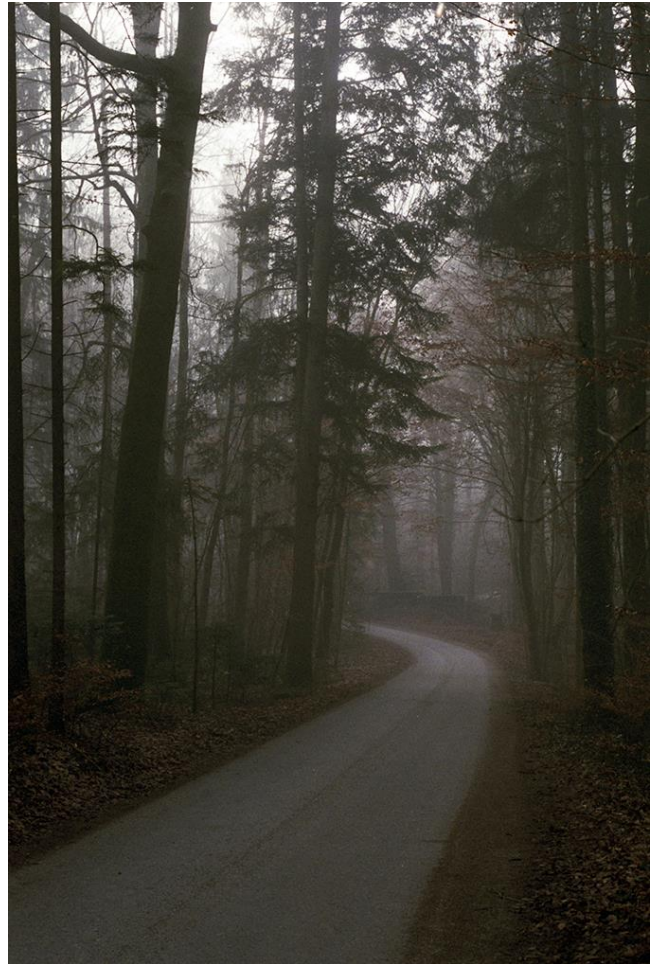
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These may seem like extraneous details, the background to a fellowship designed to nurture relationships between people. But the place has bled into our conversations and shaped the way we talked about our lives and thought about our research.

I can tie these stories to places, like pins on a map. Walking down a forest path, Subarna told me that pines reminded her of the coffee plantations of Kodagu, South India. The difference was, in Kodagu, coffee bushes would grow up to six feet under the tall jackfruit trees, a bioregional form of complementary planting which improves soil fertility and plant growth. I had never seen a coffee plant, so later I Googled them and saw they are broad-leaved bushes with deep red berries, like winter holly. From then on, I saw them everywhere, a phantom ecology in this distant, temperate place.

In that same forest, I walked with Flora and her camera and learnt about visual anthropology and “forest time” in the north of Sweden. Photographing neon orange marks sprayed on the boughs of cut trees, I saw through the eyes of the forester: the marks cut into the earth by the heavy tyres of machinery, the trees marked out for cutting, and those planted for future generations. These conversations created strange overlaps of disparate places, like double-exposure photographs juxtaposed for the sake of one complimentary idea. On a freezing, dark night I walked back to the Landhaus through newly ploughed fields with Diego and heard about a botanist’s work in the humid, green twilight of the equatorial jungle. On another trip, rambling in the steep forest paths of the Mangfall Alps, we spotted flowers and ferns unfurling from under dead leaves and lichen.

Jared had spent the last few years visiting field sites in South America where collectors come to admire, or often poach, rare cacti and succulents. Plant-spotting trains the attention, urging you to look down and focus on details that are otherwise lost in a blur of brown and sage green. We had no idea what most of the plants were called, but we stopped to look closer, without any desire to disturb their roots and yank them from the ground.



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It is striking how many of these interchanges took place as we walked. I have always thought of research centres as static places, offices and corridors, hubs where ideas cluster and grow. But our thoughts strung out like threads across the paths we traversed together. Thibault added a new dimension to this when he told me about his time walking with herders in the Karakoram Mountains, Pakistan. He came to the Landhaus to write a book about the songs Wakhi communities develop and pass on through repeated walks along stone pathways and roads. New relationships grow in these long periods of shared travel and traverse. You learn a lot about ecology, culture, and people as you walk.

It wasn't just on walks that ideas unfurled or bound themselves to place. In Munich, watching the Fridays for Future convoy drag a fire engine through the city centre, I was reminded of Bright's work on youth activism in South Africa, and vividly aware of the distinct challenges facing young people fighting environmental injustice in the contexts in which he works. Péter's research into games and environmentalism surprised me at strange moments, too. When I was working in the balcony room of the Landhaus, it was easy to find myself staring out across the green fields. Tiny lorries zipped along the lines of the roads and the world looked like the hyperreal landscape of a video

game. I came here to write about what life will look like after oil, and this elevated, distanced perspective allowed me to toggle through post-fossil-fuel scenarios as a kind of play. What would the land look like if oil was drained from the farm machinery, if the roads were erased, or made safe enough for us to cycle from the local station on our busted bikes, rather than relying on lifts in our rag-tag collection of borrowed and busted cars? Society-building games, like SimCity, weren't designed to address the climate crisis, but new additions to the genre focused on "reverse" building, degrowth, and rewilding might give players space to imagine different future scenarios for familiar terrain.



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When I found a moment to interview Karl Schweisfurth, the agricultural manager, he gave me a surprising vision of the farm's future. He is the son of the famous Karl Ludwig, who sold the lucrative Herta sausage company in 1986 in order to invest in ecological farming and commit to higher levels of animal welfare. The black and white pigs he then began rearing are part of the farm's identity. They snort and snuffle in hay by the carpark, they adorn its beer bottle labels, and they are emblazoned on T-shirts. Producing pork is lucrative. It's the reason long lines form around the meat counter at weekends and people sit so long in the Biergarten, filling up on snacks. But, Karl told me, we need to eat less meat for the sake of the climate. "Come back in ten years and the pigs may not be here," he said. Another Landhaus Fellow, Céline, had wandered in, and as an agricultural historian she asked more precise questions about what will replace the pigs. Lupin beans, which grew widely in Bavaria in the early twentieth century, are returning. There are ways to maintain soil fertility in a crop rotation without relying on animals. It will be down to innovative farms like Herrmannsdorf to lead the way.



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The white-out of the horizon in our last weeks at the Landhaus is too easy a metaphor for an unknown future. But the staggering shift in temperature, the early melting snow, the sudden heat, and the return of the damp and cold that make it feel like autumn has arrived in March—these are the weird weather conditions farmers are working with now. It is a bleak and frightening time for growers, particularly those living in poverty and in flood- or drought-prone areas in the Global South. Though, in this context, the Landhaus Fellowship may seem like a small thing, it is immensely hopeful that it may feed into changes taking place on one German farm, and that by being there and bringing new ideas and perspectives, the spirit of the Rachel Carson Center and the environmental humanities has a role to play here, as well as in the many different places and communities our research takes us.

The photos are by former Landhaus fellow [Flora Mary Bartlett](#), who is a visual anthropologist and professional photographer.



Samantha Walton is reader in modern literature at Bath Spa University and director of the Research Centre for Environmental Humanities. She is author of several books, most recently *Everybody Needs Beauty: In Search of the Nature Cure* (Bloomsbury, 2021), which she began at the Rachel Carson Center in 2018–2019 as a fellow. Between January and March 2022, she was an RCC Landhaus Fellow at the Herrmannsdorfer Landwerkstätten, developing a book project on life after fossil fuels. She tweets as @samlwalton.



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ISSN 2751-9317

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