

## Report for Shelagh Cluett Trust

**Alice Boner Institute Residency | Diana Policarpo | Feb. – Mar. 2019**

Firstly, I would like to make a suggestion to listen to a playlist I made while reading this report. This is a compilation of field recordings and songs I collected and edited as a 2hour mix to be part of my monthly radio show Heretics.

Heretics Episode 29 for Radio Quantica:

<https://www.mixcloud.com/quanticaonline/heretics-29-by-diana-policarpo-03042019/>

<https://www.radioquantica.com/-about>

On the second day after I arrived in Varanasi, me and Alex (the other resident) had a gift from the Institute to go for a long walk in city with a tour guide. I was amazing to see and feel the city with a guide, we had a lot of fun visiting different parts, but also a lot of temples and stories embedded in them, mythology etc. I remember very well coming back home to Assi Ghat on a boat, all those lights and smells.

I started a very organized daily routine for my artistic residency. I took a couple of hours per day to go visit different places, temples and field recording and then spent the rest of my time writing, drawing, composing and doing research for my project *Death Grip*.

On the second week I conducted an interview with the Red Brigade Trust representants, an amazing group of activists and educators based in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Ajay Patel and Usha Vishwakarma formed the organization in 2011 and focuses on empowering women through self-defense education. You can also listen to a small excerpt of the interview in the playlist above.

I was quite interested in the political work they were doing in Varanasi and Lucknow, but also the small villages around where so many reported crimes of sexual assault and rape were taking place.

I would love to have the opportunity to go back there in the future to produce a small documentary about their activities and educational program in schools for children and teenagers.

After I was nominated finalist of the EDP Foundation Prize just before my trip to India, I told them I wanted this new commission to be about the work I was going to do there. I also decided last minute before the end of my residency to go to Nepal to film and write the rest of my script for the *Death Grip* project.

I spent the most part of my time at the Alice Institute working between my bedroom and Alice Boner's library on this project, reading, drawing, writing and producing some of the work that was later exhibited at MAAT.

Before the end of my residency, the Institute organized an event for my artist talk where I showed previous projects and talked a little bit about the research and work I was developing in Varanasi that was going to be part of a big exhibition

later that year. We also listened to some sound works and had a conversation with the audience in the end.

## **Death Grip (2019)**

### Mycorrhizal Listening

Originally presented as a looped 15-channel electroacoustic score synchronised with two digital animations, light and sound sculptures, *Death Grip* (2019) is a critical revision of the violence enacted against women and non-human bodies in the backdrop of capitalist dispossession. Situated in the Himalayan regions of Northern India and Western Nepal where the caterpillar fungus species *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, colloquially known as *Cordyceps*, occurs in high altitudes, this project narrates the growth of economic markets through advances in the seizure of land and speed of extinction, whilst folding magic, mystical and animist practices into a narrative of healing and economic progress. Listed as an endangered species in 1999, the parasitical fungus is considered the most expensive biological commodity to date.

I was the winner of the 2019 edition of EDP Foundation's New Artists Award for the multimedia installation *Death Grip*, during the time it was being exhibited in Portugal. That also led me to the opportunity of receiving a grant for an artistic residency in China, which has been delayed to the end of 2021 due to the pandemic.

*Death Grip* is an immersive installation that combines an electro-acoustic score with moving image, light and sound sculptures, as well as temperature differentials. The topography of the installation creates a haptic experience felt through listening, resonance and vibration. It is reminiscent of the Himalayan regions of Northern India and Western Nepal, where the caterpillar fungus species *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* occurs in high altitude regions from 3000 to 5000 meters above sea level. Colloquially known as *Cordyceps*, the parasitical fungus was listed as an endangered species in 1999 and is since considered the most expensive global biological resource to date.

The installation is comprised of 15 audio channels distributed through different speakers in the space, with spoken word and sound that activates the different sculptures. The digital animations, light, colour and altered temperature of the space are also synchronized and create a sense of artificiality inspired by the natural landscape of the mountains and the underground world of the fungus. The two black and white 3D animations displayed on flat screens explore the underground choreography of movements of the biotic lifecycle, different scenes from the grassland environment in Nepal and the distributions of the fungus spores through the air, as well as its reproduction. Bodies and landscape are depicted as open systems that connect to other life forms. Learning from tradition and about Hinduism in Varanasi was very important for this project and to

understand many cultural and social aspects of how religion is part of everyone's lives.

In *Death Grip*, the viewer is invited to enter this dark space and situate a dialogue between these layers and fractured temporalities as a means of interrogating the present and the future after contamination. The narrative transcends the human and the natural in the direction of the no-longer-human and no-longer-natural.

I was interested in listening to how the life of the fungus and the workers that collect it are deeply entwined in the labour performed by humans and the underground architecture where the fungus operates. The parasite is a partner of sorts with humans, who take, steal, manipulate, gift and sell it in various contexts. Mushrooms are experts in precarity, as Anna Tsing says. I was interested in the boundaries that define the human against the other-than human and how these borders are blurred through this mutualism redefining operating ecologies.

During my residency in Varanasi, I looked into the current crisis and gold rush of *Cordyceps* in the Himalayan regions. Travelling there was very important for this piece. I spent a lot of my time conducting interviews, doing field recordings and working on the score and drawing for the animations.

Collecting materials and elements related to this dense research made it clear to me that this would be the first episode of the project, part of a larger narrative about bodies, land and the social, ecological and economic impacts experienced in Himalayan cultivation areas of India and Nepal. In this region, the *Cordyceps* fungus has become the most important source of income for nomads, individuals and communities. It is important to say that *Cordyceps* operates mimetically as both herb, animal and fungus; it is known as *yartsa gunbu*, meaning "summer grass winter worm." Death grip is the name of this form of behavioral manipulation and a first in the fossil record. This parasitic behavior lures insects to place themselves at the function of spore dispersal, turning them into a dead body that can host a fruiting body to grow on its vessel, enabling the production of spores.

The harvesting of *Cordyceps* involves the largest number of low-income, poor and working-class people in these countries. Based on the involvement of the rural community in its extraction and trading, this indicates that the caterpillar fungus is a symbol of poverty.

In the areas where nomadic communities participate in the fungus collection and trade, the grand influx of cash has profoundly impacted daily lives, changing livelihood systems, landscape and local economies.

The Chinese consumer driven market increased the *Cordyceps* value by 900% in the last 15 years, creating a globally unique rural fungal economy. In 1993 several marathon world records were beaten by female Chinese athletes, an achievement which was stated to be connected with a special diet that included the consumption of the fungus. However, unprecedented levels of collection, rising climate change and the recent economic dependence of local economies on caterpillar fungus, calls for sustainable forms of resource management.

Although the income derived from it has led to the empowerment of marginal communities, they now fight over access to caterpillar fungus resources and unfortunately some of these disputed turn violent and deadly every year.

People who depend on an ecosystem for their livelihood tend to be well attuned to these economic dynamics.

Anthropologist Anna Tsing mentioned above develops her narrative of collaborative survival by tracing stories of matsutake, another prized mushroom that is primarily foraged in forests that have sustained long-term damage from human impact. Tsing, introduces *collaborative survival* to recognize processes where multiple species rely on each other to survive within damaged landscapes. It is a narrative that accepts the damaging forces of humans and environments and sees the pathway towards preferable futures in recognizing and developing relationships with other species. I wanted to explore the idea of mutualism in more-than-human worlds and the different agents that play an important role in this economy.

*Cordyceps* is largely used in both Ayurvedic and Traditional Chinese medicine systems as a prime aphrodisiac with long-lasting effects in the crossover of emotional, neurological and vascular events that affect the libido. These type of holistic therapies recorded important oral histories and information about the healing properties of this fungus, especially among women. Healers and local communities prescribed the mushroom as a single drug or combined with other herbs. Some mushrooms have been used as food, medicine, poison and spiritual practices in religious rituals across the world. Ayurveda classifies these organisms as a medicine for enhancing vigor and vitality. Other people further claimed that it has aphrodisiac effects, and hence they used it as a gift to relatives and guests, business partners or as a form of currency in campsites during the harvesting period. Most healers use it to increase longevity and cure erectile dysfunction.

Marcel Mauss' and Michel Serres' theories about gift-economy and parasitic relationship with the host were also important references for this project. Mauss focused on the fact that exchanging gifts between groups builds relationships and always implies reciprocity. According to Mauss, the transactions between giver and receiver transcend the division between the spiritual and the material in a way that is almost "magical". The giver does not merely give an object but also a part of herself/himself, since the gift is indissolubly tied to the giver.

Eastern cultures, and now the rest of the world, moved into a sustained interest of consuming it to increase vitality and help with sexual disorders (also as a consequence of pollution). So the demand for this resource has skyrocketed, making it the most expensive biological medicine in the world. The majority of the hand picked fungus is taken illegally to Tibet and India, where it is illegal to sell any kind of wild fungus.

Women have a very important role in this economy because of their knowledge and skill to pick the caterpillar mushroom, which is seen as a sacred "soft gold". In recent years, they left their villages, fields and housework for the first time in centuries in order to forage, which secures a source of income for the family. As mentioned above, *Cordyceps* is now interwoven with local socio-economic processes, creating a dependency cycle for these communities whose income is generated by this medicinal fungus: it provides funds for healthcare, education,

transportation and a currency for sex work in the workers' camps, among other things.

Anna Tsing's descriptions of collaborative survival resonate with feminist scholar Donna Haraway's "Staying with the Trouble"- a call to look at, notice, and respond to destructive processes we may prefer to ignore. She argues that existential concerns necessitate the development of new sensitivities and vulnerabilities towards non-human worlds. To quote her: each time a story helps me to a new knowledge, a muscle critical for caring about flourishing gets some aerobic exercise". The narratives build around women's bodies and primitive accumulation are not excluded from this equation.

My main interest was to analyze the role of gender in this economy and to this its relation to the history of capital. I wanted to document and also create fiction from observing the workers' daily lives, sexual hierarchies and their hardships. This would not have been possible without mentioning the violence experienced by governmentality and religion. There are a lot of myth and taboos in the Hindu religion about hunting the caterpillar fungus in some regions of the sacred mountains. For example, some say it's a bad omen for business if women in the family or group are menstruating, conducting to a deregulation of synchronicity between the feminine cycles and the cycle of patriarchal business as usual. Menstruation is considered impure, dirty and even a curse or sickness in some places. When women menstruate, they are not allowed to work, to be at home, to cook or touch anything valuable or sacred, including the caterpillar mushrooms. I talked with few women in India and Nepal who experienced situations of shame or threat throughout their lives, especially in rural areas. They are excluded from the production cycles and sent away to live in a hut of in the forest, exposed to dangers until the period is over, relying often only on their family members for food provision. While over the last few decades, *Cordyceps* as a commodity began re-shaping both the household and community scale economies, female Hindu workers are still excluded from discussions and access to public, and private rights.

In *Death Grip*, the narratives are fragmented and circular. I tried to keep this temporal aspect present in the installation also through working with moving image, which is a recent development in my work. As mentioned above, I was collecting these stories while I was drawing, writing and composing during my artistic residency. The overlap of these technologies of register is essential in my practice and was very important for this work. The polyvocality of these (her)stories and the different rhythms present in these systems of capture was meaningful for the script and for the sound score.

Working with sound and moving image and engaging with the metaphor of collaborative survival adds attention to the ways how technologies can help humans looking beyond themselves into the world, seeking new forms of action, not only aesthetically, but also new forms of connection.

I worked with a group of researchers and with the help of my guide and botanist Giridhar Amatya. I was also in contact with the anthropologists and activists Kelly Hoping (who worked with the communities along the India-Nepal border), Tshiring Lama (who works with the harvesting communities in Dolpa and is

focused on the implications of snow leopard conservation) and Bandana Anawashti who developed research about how the economic benefit provided by Cordyceps in rural orthodox communities has facilitated addressing the menstrual taboo over time. I wanted to continue to move beyond the individual experience and explore collective forms of working with other professionals in the creative field as well. I spent my time during the residency collecting materials, articles, images, sounds and notes to share with my collaborator and writer Emmy Beber; Edward Simpson (sound design), Joao Caceres Costa (3D animator) and Brendan Feeney for audio post-production.

Thank you so much Shelagh Cluett Trust for giving me the opportunity to travel and make new work during my residency and special thanks to Harsha Vinay and everyone part of the Alice Boner Insitute family. I absolutely loved living there in such a beautiful house, the river, incredible soul food made for us everyday and for all the help and support I got from all of them. I daydream about going back there soon.

Diana Policarpo  
15/03/2021

#### References:

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