Arts of Scholaring on a Damaged Planet

A step towards building the academy we want in the Anthropocene

This story was co-created in the workshop ‘Arts of Scholaring on a Damaged Planet’, which took place on November 12 of 2024 at Solidaritetshuset (Södermalm, Stockholm).

We were aiming to share our concerns regarding the roles of academia in the current historical epoch – the Anthropocene – and to co-create some material artifacts which could help us move forward towards the horizons we are demanded to achieve as part of our wider struggles. If you want to read more, see the full comment on the Anthropocene History Centre website here.

You can access the rest of the stories and share them in order to spread initiatives and networks for another possible academia.

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Our story starts in a field. And crossing this field, dividing it in twain, is a large hedgerow, extremely tall hedgerow [‘huoooah’ says the audience], home to many beings; but also dividing these two fields, but connecting two pockets of woodland, one over here, and one far over there, up there, just at the toes.

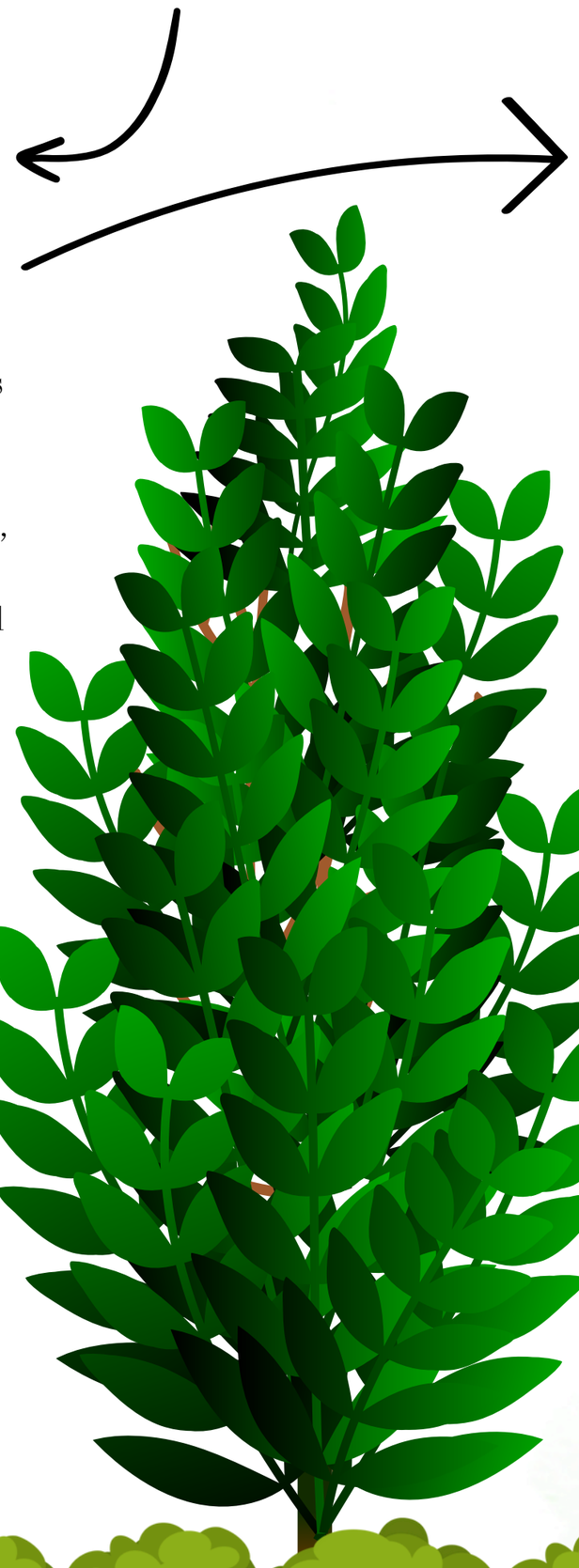
And living within this hedgerow, If you look very carefully, there's a small robin. [Silence and laughs]. No one turns to be the robin. I will be the robin. For the robin, this hedgerow is deeply entangled... it's its home. It's a source of food. There are insects living in the hedgerow, but there's also structure. There's twigs, and leaves, and the feathers of robin's past that have lived in the hedgerow, that it gathers together into the nest... and it's its home. But it's also not only its home, it also goes to acquire things from beyond the hedgerow. So the hedgerow provides a kind of a structure and a sense of familiarity, but it's also a kind of... it's a touchstone for the robin. And unlike the robin, just outside of the hedgerow, rarely going inside, is the goat. [The goat smiles]. Can you just describe the goat's life world?

I'm an animal who exists in this environment, who thrives in this environment... but at the same time perceives the hedgerow as an obstacle, an obstacle that impedes me to interact and build relationship with some other beings in this environment. But again, that benefits also from this environment and interacts with it.

So... one of the things that I forgot to mention about this hedgerow is that it's not clearly any hedgerow at all. It's in fact one of the most flourishing, thriving hedgerows in this entire agricultural forest patchwork landscape. And so the humans beholding this hedgerow wonder... they look at it from all these different angles and they're trying to understand, well, why is this particular hedgerow functioning so incredibly well and supporting such a lively ecosystem. So as humans these days want to do, they zoom out and they look to their trusty satellites in space, and they ask ‘ok well, what kind of data can we collect about the satellite from space in order to understand why it lives in the way that it does, and functions like it does’. And zooming out to see the hedgerow far, far from above, they notice that embedded in the structure of the hedge is in fact a fungus. And not just any fungus, but a red-listed fungus that allows the hedgerow to perform these miraculous feats of carbon capture that enable it to flourish.

Yeah, this is symbiotic [laughs]. Humans understand that I capture carbon, but I do a lot of more things with it. They're not so interested in that, but I have a great time here, actually. With the hedge. I love it.

But the humans maybe don't understand quite how much you love this hedge in this relational sense. But they do certainly understand the function that the fungus plays in carbon capture and in this symbiotic relationship. And they realize that perhaps, given the current climate crisis and the problems that they're facing, this fungus might be the answer to all of their problems. And so... after some time studying the fungus and its affordances, they realize that there are ways to increase its growth rapidly, exponentially, take it away from the hedgerow ecosystem into the woodland beyond, and into these other hedges that aren't doing so well in the landscape. So suddenly the fungus becomes enrolled in this particular form of governance that abstracts it from its ecological relations, and is based on the particular understanding of ecosystems in terms of carbon, let's say. But what happens when they try to focus purely on the fungus?



To them, I'm just data. And now they're trying to govern through data, but it doesn't really play out in practice as they have imagined. So I've actually become a threat, like invasive to other ecosystems.

So suddenly, all we have left is the fungus. The hedgerow itself begins to collapse and melt into the soil, and all of its beautiful ecosystems, the home for the robin, the occasional friend and barrier for the goat, it disappears. And all we sort of have left is this strange, gray, mycelial gloop that actually isn't very good at storing carbon anyway.

And so... that's where our story ends.