

AMARANTH AS POLITICAL AGENT



Image 1:
Fieldwork, Universidad Nacional del Litoral, Esperanza, Santa Fe Province, 2024

Text and images by Julia Mensch in the framework of the SNSF research project Plants_Intelligence. Learning Like a Plant (2022-25). This text appeared firstly under the title “Amarant als politischer Akteur”, in: exhibition magazine *Unter Pflanzen*, Museum Sinclair-Haus, edited by Kathrin Meyer and Yvonne Volkart, Bad Homburg 2025. ISBN 978-3-945674-15-4, 160 pages, approx. 75 illustrations, pp. 126-133.

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Over the course of these past few years, amaranth has become my companion, accomplice and guide, and from my position as an artist, I have sought to develop diverse strategies for getting to know her profoundly. I have carried her from continent to continent, I have planted her on my balcony, my urban garden and the sidewalk in front of my house. I have watched her grow, caressed her, eaten her, observed her dance in the currents of the breeze and tried to imitate her movements. By drawing her growth process, I have sought to slow down, to develop a different perceptiveness of her plant being, looking to recover the attention, the powers of observation and listening that many of us have lost due to contempo-

rary societies' alienated lifestyle. I have delved into the plant's history prior to the Conquest of the Americas, its permanence in the continent's popular culture, and its current condition as weed resistant to the herbicides utilized in GM (genetically modified) crop production. I have carried out interviews with countless figures who pertain to two worldviews: on the one hand, people who cultivate, conserve and reproduce her seeds in the realm of agroecology, family farming and Buen Vivir,¹ and on the other, those who want to eliminate what they see as a weed resistant to agrochemicals in the context of transgenic agriculture.

When the commercialization of glyphosate-resistant Roundup Ready 40-3-2 soy from Monsanto (now Bayer) was approved in 1996, Argentina became the first country in Latin America to open its doors to transgenic agriculture. From that moment on, agriculture that depends on GM seeds and poison would expand across territories, transforming them into an empty, homogeneous green stain. At the outset, the transgenic model promised that there would be no weeds resis-



Image 2:
Fieldwork, GM Soybeans Monoculture Field, Bolivar, Buenos Aires Province, 2025.

tant to glyphosate, but today there are 42 wild plants that resist the herbicide. Amaranth is the most widespread of these in Argentina, resistant not only to glyphosate, but to the majority of the agrotoxins utilized in GM crop production.

A plant native to the Americas, both Nature and the continent's first inhabitants conserved its seeds, even in spite of Spanish colonizers' prohibition to do so. Although produced by few people in this country, this rebellious and undisciplined plant grows in 25 million hectares of transgenic crops. It has many colors, nuances, and ways of adapting to the negative external conditions that



Image 3:
Familia de Amarantos II, Cultivation of Amaranth in the street where I live, Berlin Kreuzberg, 2024

the territories of the continent remembered as Abya Yala have gone through since 1492. They call it *yuyo colorado*, *kiwicha*, *aroma*, *ataco* and *amaranto*. Dr. Carrasco used to call it America's revenge ².

COLORADO KIWICHA AROMA. Learning that dance ³

The following words focus on the behavior and performance of wild amaranth species growing in two different geographies and contexts in Argentina. The first is the commonly named ***yuyo colorado***, ***Amaranthus palmeri*** and ***hybridus***, two vegetal species growing as resistant weeds to herbicides in GM crop soybeans fields. The second is commonly named ***kiwicha***, ***aroma*** and ***ataco***, growing in the North, particularly in the Province of Jujuy, situated at the northernmost tip of the country, bordering on the Plurinational State of Bolivia. The seeds of these wild species are black, unlike those of the cultivated amaranth varieties, which are white. The wild black seed species are the ancestors of the cultivated amaranth crops. Indigenous farmers of the Americas selected white seeds during the evolution of amaranth in ancient times.

1.

I met philosopher Noelia Billi in February 2023. In one conversation, she defined GM soy as a zombie plant, the corporate plant, and capital's ally par excellence. Looking out onto a leafy yard through her studio window, Billi proposed thinking about the scenario in Argentina from this plant's perspective: a being created in corporate laboratories which, in order to prosper, must control every being and all the systems of relationships and exchange that surround it. To develop, it needs a global

neo-extractivist and corporate market system, it needs the rural population to be expelled from the countryside, it needs there to be no people, plants or living beings in its vicinity, and if there are, they will succumb to illness or death.⁴ Its appearance is that of a soft, docile plant. It is medium in height, with rapid growth, a uniform green color, and high commercial value.

I visited several GM soybean plantations during the last few years—homogeneous green surfaces of the ‘green gold’ key to Argentina’s export economy. My last visit to one of them was in Carmen de Areco, in the Province of Buenos Aires, in May 2024. I arrived in this small fumigated town before daybreak, while it was still dark outside, and as the sun slowly rose, I saw homogeneous, empty, flat green fields along the way. I went there to meet a GM soy producer and to visit the fields he administers as an agronomical engineer. When I arrived, he picked me up at the gas station we had agreed upon, and in the glove compartment of his 4 x 4, there was a hat with the logo of the German multinational company BASF. The agro-industrial producer took me around two previously selected soy fields, where *yuyo colorado*, *Amaranthus hybridus*, and *palmeri*, the most widely spread agrochemical-resistant weed across the country, grow among the genetically modified crop.

After some time, the soy producer left me alone; with the horizon of *colorado* and soy everywhere around me, I paid even closer attention to the amaranth growing amidst the soy, already wilted and ochre-colored, ready to be harvested and transformed into an export commodity. I saw an infinite number of amaranth plants at different stages of growth, some small ones only 10 cm tall, others as tall as I am, with thick, solid

trunks and rough panicles that are prickly to the touch. I remembered that *Amaranthus hybridus* changed its visible aspect in recent decades with the advent of transgenic agriculture. While its panicles used to be soft before (as they still are in diverse species of cultivated amaranths), now they are rough and aggressive to the touch. I observed an endless range of tones—greens, magentas, and ochres—in the diverse amaranth plants surrounding me. Their phenotypic plasticity is evidence of their genetic variability.⁵ That is to say, its diverse appearance and ample color palette show its enormous genetic variability. It is her genetic variability that enables amaranth’s high capacity for adaptation and the development of resistance to the herbicides utilized in transgenic culture.

Thinking about the exercise that Billi proposed to me sometime before, I tried to think about the Argentine scenario from the perspective not of soy but of amaranth: a plant forbidden by the Spanish colonizers, now very scantily produced in the country as a cultivated crop (despite its nutrient value) but that instead spreads wildly and extensively in GM crop fields. It is a wild plant redennominated a resistant weed, emerging proudly amid the intended, but not fully achieved, monotony of green gold.

Surrounded by the polyculture field of GM soy and amaranth, I focused on observing the biodiversity created by amaranth in the pretended homogeneity of the zombie plant kingdom. And I wondered what alliances the transgenic crop and the wild plant might have underground. Could the zombie plant want something other than its lonely destiny created by corporate science?

The soy producer called amaranth “*colorado*”, and the nickname took me back to some old

Western movie, with typical background music. As I stood there, the *colorado* moved with the breeze, seeming to execute a dance whose steps I did not know but very much wanted to learn.

2.

As I had done many times before, last March 2024 I flew to Jujuy, the Argentinean province situated at the northern-most tip of the country. I returned there because I'd heard that during Holy Week, a Virgin descends from a mountain accompanied by amaranth plants. I traveled through the Quebrada, the valley of Humahuaca, until reaching Tilcara. Again, that foreign but familiar landscape embraced me; the forested mountains near the capital of Jujuy gradually became more arid and transformed into that mountainous landscape of infinite colors that is the Quebrada. Once in Tilcara, one *sikuri*⁶ band after the other welcomed me, still heading off to I didn't know where. Next to the church, I was received by a very purple *kiwicha aroma*, a wild amaranth typical in these parts. The *sikuri* music enveloped her, danced around her, and there she was, softly swaying in the breeze of Tilcara.

A few days later, I visited the Cauqueva farmers' cooperative⁷ in Maimará once again. With the palette of the mountains in the background, Javier Rodríguez, the agrobiologist and co-founder of the Cooperative, narrated a story to me:

In the late 19th or early 20th century, a shepherd who lived close to Punta Corral said he had seen the Virgin as a shining triangular stone and heard a voice. After he shared his experience with the priests, they arrested him for sacrilege. The stone remained in the church, and the following day, it disappeared. The priests went back to the place where the stone was originally found. There was the stone, at the highest point of the mountain, and that is where the story of the

Virgin of Punta Corral began. In the Andean worldview, there are sacred mountains which are the guardians of the territory; they are called Apus and that of Punta Corral is one of them. Since then, Catholic processions have taken place in the towns of Tumbaya and Tilcara, when dozens of *sikuri* bands climb up to the peak of the Apus, playing beautiful, strident music while walking from 8 to 16 hours (depending on their physical condition and speed) to get the Virgin and come back down again along the same route.

All along the road where the procession heads out and comes back, from the peak of the Apus to down below, there are *apachetas* (wayside shrines) that are on a par with the altars to the Virgin. The *apachetas* are like cairns made of many stones. They are altars, but made of little heaps of stones dedicated to the Pachamama. Javier explained that it is very significant that the processions take place precisely on the Apus. It shows the mestizo mix these peoples have achieved, managing to incorporate their beliefs hidden within Catholic symbolism. In the course of this history, conflicts, political and cultural contradictions are hardly lacking; everything is intermingled, and there, too, the stones and plants are present, the amaranth among them.⁸

A few days after the procession in Tumbaya, at midday, the town of Tilcara began to festoon itself in flowers, awaiting the thousands of people who will come down from the Apus with the Virgin de Abra de Punta Corral. I walked the streets from one end to the other several times; I saw groups of neighbor women decorating arches that cross from one side of the street to the other with plants and flowers, including the purple, deep red, almost maroon amaranth *aroma*. No one was able to

tell me what significance the presence of this plant, one prohibited by the Spanish after their conquest of the Americas,⁹ has in the procession. The only reason that someone came up with is that the *kiwicha* blooms at that time of year, and so is one of the plants available for use in ornamentation.¹⁰ Perhaps only the plant has the answer. She was the one who found a way not to disappear and to survive the prohibition for centuries, making her way silently into the pilgrimages and worship of the very religion that had prohibited and sought to banish her.

Amaranth was important in the Aztec and Inca empires, and not only as a ceremonial plant; it was also a fundamental source of food for both empires' armies. The Inca and Aztec armies were maintained with the food accumulated as different provinces' tributes to the emperor. Researcher Renata Kietz stated that lists that have been conserved have enabled knowing the inventory of the tributes the Aztec provinces made. It is known that almost all of the provinces would deliver amaranth grains to the Aztec emperor in quantities varying from 5,000 to 20,000 tons per year. Kietz's hypothesis is that this enormous quantity can only be understood if the grain was destined to feeding the empire's army. It is also because their nutrient content is very concentrated, and found in percentages that correspond directly to human needs, guaranteeing a balanced diet.¹¹ One could eat amaranth grains for a long period of time without combining them with other food and still have a healthy and excellent diet.

At the end of that day, I met with Javier in Tilcara, and we waited for the Virgin's arrival together. One *sikuri* band after the other came down the mountain, playing music that wrapped us up in a continual embrace. It was raining, and there we were, many human and plant beings waiting under the soft but persistent drizzle. The *sikuri* bands differed greatly from one to the next; some pertain to institutions, like a hospital or firefighting squad, others are made up entirely of women, some carry symbolic indigenous images as identification. When the bands arrived, the inhabitants of Tilcara drew near to offer them water, or sometimes sandwiches and little bags of candy for the children. In the midst of the *sikuri's* enveloping music, the Catholic church seemed to be diluted in this pilgrimage, serving only as an excuse to render homage to the earth in order to be able to carry on with their worship. After hours of waiting, the Virgin arrived with the final *sikuri* band, blessing everything that forms part of the decorated arches as she passed. People overcome with emotion tried to get close to her, and once she had passed, they took away the little bags of candy, the flowers, and the plants adorning the arches that her passing had blessed. Like the rest, I took amaranth plants from the arches, one for Javier and one for me. Mine will accompany me all the way to Berlin, and its seeds will sprout months later in front of my house along the sidewalk.



Image 4:
Fieldwork, Virgen de Abra de Punta Corral procession, where the street is decorated with Amaranth and other plants, Tilcara, Jujuy Province, 2025.

Notes

1 Good Living is an paradigm based on the indigenous concept of Sumac Kawsay. It is a concept in collective construction in Latin America that seeks alternatives to the Western idea of development, linking indigenous traditions and worldviews with critical ideas within Western modernity. *Buen vivir* proposes abandoning the idea of development as unlimited economic growth and substituting it for a supportive and sustainable economy, displacing the centrality of humans, recognizing the centrality and value of nonhumans, and the rights of Nature.

2 Andrés Carrasco was a renowned Argentinean molecular biologist who, in 2009, researched the impact of glyphosate on health, questioned the supposed neutrality of science, and scientifically supported what fumigated villages had been claiming for years.

3 The following text is based on the chronicles series *Notes from Amaranth Land*, written by the author during the fieldwork of this ongoing research project, 2023-2025. Accessed October 25, 2024. <https://plants-intelligence.ch/notes-from-amaranth-land/>

4 Noelia Billi, conversation with author, Buenos Aires, February 14, 2023.

5 During the project workshop *For Plant Intelligence*, which took place in October 2024 at the HGK Basel FHNW, I had an exchange with scientists Monika Messmer (project partner) and Paco Calvo regarding my research. Both scientists affirmed that the phenotypic plasticity of amaranth is evidence of the plant's genetic variability.

6 Traditional panpipe ensembles.

7 Cauqueva Farmers' Cooperative. Accessed November 30, 2024. <https://cauqueva.org.ar/>

8 Javier Rodríguez, conversation with author, Tilcara, March 26, 2024.

9 Renate Kietz, *Compendio del Amaranto* (ILDIS Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales, 1992), 42.

10 Celeste Goldberg, conversation with author, Hornillos, March 26, 2024.

11 Kietz, *Compendio*, 39.



Image 5-6-7:
Field Drawings, Kreuzberg, Amaranthus Caudatus (Rio Cuarto). Drawings, ink on paper, 17 × 24 cm, 2024







Image 8-9:
Field Drawings, Kreuzberg, Kiwicha Aroma (Tilcara). Drawings, ink on paper, 17 × 24 cm, 2024





Image 10:
Field Drawings, Kreuzberg, *Amaranthus Palmeri* (Carmen de Areco). Drawings, ink on paper, 17 × 24 cm, 2024