



# A Reminder to Let the Gaze Linger

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Miguel da Cruz holds a Bachelor in History from the University of Campinas, Brazil, and is a member of the Ekologos project, an international research team in Environmental Humanities situated in the network Brazil-Norway-India. In the text, he shares some personal impressions and reflections on participating as an exchange researcher at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø during the months of September and December of 2023.

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Mornings have always been my favourite. Of course, they got darker and colder as the weeks went by, but the excitement of getting to know a new corner of the globe with all its people and possibilities was able to make up for any vitamin deficiency – it should be noted that it was my first time away from my home country. It was in the mornings that I would open the door, listen to the birds, absorb the cold air into my lungs, eat the landscape with my eyes with absurd curiosity, crumble the earth and leaves in my hands, examine closely the stones and the logs, taste the seawater.

And on the mornings between September and October, my gaze was immediately drawn to a central element in Tromsø's landscape: Tromsdalstinden (Fig. 1), a mountain that is the highest point in the surroundings, and also the most striking and undoubtedly mysterious presence there. During this period, I watched with excitement (and also a small amount of fear) as the snow arrived, first at the top of the mountain and then gradually descending its slope. I soon discovered that what attracted me to the mountain was that it was also a living being in the Sami tradition, with a name, Sálašoaivi, and a story of its own.

As I watched it paint itself white day after day, I also became aware of the historical and social depth of the place I was standing on. The awareness that I was walking in someone else's ancient footsteps, those of a tenacious people who have resided in resistance there for thousands of years. It was then that I realized that my experience with the snow and this historical and social awareness happened in very similar ways. Curiously, it happened just like one falls asleep: slowly at first, and then all at once. One morning I woke up and found myself completely immersed – in snow and history.

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**Figure 1:** Tromsdalstinden, Tromsø, Norway, 2023 (photo: Michael T. Heneise)

Over the months, I've tried to draw connections between myself and this place, what links my life experience, the places I know and care about to this at first strange space? A wild, uncontrollable rush of questions invaded my mind. What is the state of the world that allows bananas, mangoes, kiwis and so many other fresh tropical produce to display their apparently freshly picked colours on the shelves of every market 10,000 km from the tropics? What is the state of alliances in this world we live in that makes it possible for Brazilian soy (and its many pesticides, which are a constituent part of the product) to be present in one of the pillars of Norwegian food: salmon? What is the state of things that justifies cities sleeping all lit up – a constellation of white and yellow lights amidst the darkness of the Arctic in mid-winter? What is the state of affairs that has accumulated so much money in the form of social security, public facilities, and investment funds in a country of 5.5 million people and has left so little for so many with stories similar to mine in Brazil? Above all, what is the state of things that often does not allow Norwegians to perceive and elaborate in a collective unconscious the scales of injustice and inequality intertwined with their own selves, both through their history, and also through their relationship with the world?

From where I come from, you have to be critical. Without that, you simply can't live. That's why an intriguing feeling of dismay reigned within me.

At the same time, I realized that the winter I had feared so much was no longer the same as it had been years ago. Less snow, less cold, more storms, all important, considerable changes. Right there and then I understood that we were suffering the impacts of the same diseases of the world that I knew well from home, social inequality, energy abuse, monoculture, and the obscene accumulation of wealth, all of which were urgent. Absolutely urgent.

Hence the importance of alliances, such as the Ekologos team. It's essential that we come together to think of ways out of a world that does not / cannot support us anymore and into a reality yet to be made. The problems have all been set on the table for a long time, we just need to know in what exactly to invest our time and focus – where and how to plant, so to say – and do it together!

As part of the Ekologos project, I attended classes and seminars, talked to professors at UiT, did a lot of reading, met artists and activists, and was able to do a number of things. One of them was to draw parallels between the situation of indigenous peoples in the Arctic and in Brazil, to learn important lessons from the struggle and political organization of the Sami peoples in Norway and to share some knowledge about the indigenous question in Brazil. In an attempt to introduce other colleagues to the topic, I presented a seminar with my exchange colleague Luiz Medina on 'Indigenous contemporary Brazilian Art', a time and space in which the specificities, possibilities, and limits of the artistic field were brought into focus for indigenous people in Brazil and Sápmi.

I was also able to present my experience of research and activism in Brazil, linked to collective gardens for food production in low-income communities in Campinas and the surrounding region (State of São Paulo). The presentation was titled '(In)Hospitable Landscapes: Weeds and People in the Midst of Urban Infrastructure' and set out to discuss, with a particular spin of mine, a topic already dear to History and Anthropology, our categories of thought on 'nature', 'culture' and 'infrastructure'.

Looking back at it now, I think it was a way of making sense of the whole exchange experience and, to glance at my own future, and the future of those that are dear to me, with hope and courage. In the face of the climate emergency, the global circulation of waste and toxins, and the state of ordinariness of planetary environmental risk, it is a daring and necessary act to choose to focus on the dynamics of life that stubbornly resists amidst ruins of many kinds on a disturbed planet. We are called to expose histories of damage, while at the same time exploring the cracks, gutters, potholes, and wastelands of the urban environment and learning to notice the unexpected neighbours that arise in the interstices.

In places such as the community gardens in Campinas (Fig. 2), the environmental regeneration of the land goes hand in hand with the social regeneration of people who have been subjugated by the forces of colonialism for centuries. The alliance between people who fight for their rights and plants that dig deep in the ground in some way confuses the ontological barriers between the agents.

Biosocial lifes. You can't mention one without talking about the other. In their unruliness, plant and human 'weeds' become allies through resurgence, both decomposing and living with urban waste, breaking up biological and social illnesses in the meantime.

On my last morning in Norway, a few hours before my return flight, I climbed to the foot of the mountain Sálašoivi. It had snowed a lot in the previous days, which had accumulated a lot of snow along the way, causing avalanche warnings in some sections. It was still snowing a little early in the morning when I left. To taste the icy air, to feel the cold breeze on my face, to look up and let the tears come. Oh, what a wonder, what an absolute wonder, to feel the pain and delight of living free from all the toxins.



**Figure 2:** Jardim Itatiaia's Community Garden, Campinas, Brazil, 2023. In the foreground, basil leaves; in the background, children and volunteers preparing the soil for sowing (photo: Miguel da Cruz)