

**Letter to the Villagers  
Earth Defenders  
Calling for Earthcare**

Sílvia das Fadas

»Stubbornly, I have started visiting and filming the commune, what is left of it, in search of auguries of a flourishing life.« Sílvia das Fadas returned to Portugal with her 16 mm film camera and a suitcase filled with film rolls, to come closer to the spirit of the legacy of the *Comuna da Luz* – the Commune of Light, near the country’s southern coast. Initiated in 1917 by the anarchist António Gonçalves Correia and nurtured by many, the community activism found in the rural world near the Commune was to be revitalized as a collective project to live with and learn the ways of the earth. Das Fadas has written a beautiful piece of advocacy for Earth Care, food sovereignty, and living with eco-feminist principles.

Dear Villagers of Troviscais,  
(from the bio-region of São Luís, Odemira, Alentejo),

I am writing this letter from Choupana (»the valley of the shelter«), at the end of the long dirt road, after which I like to imagine that there is only forest. I have been living and returning from many places, mostly cities, but filming has taken me into your company, and I dare to say that our encounter has changed the course of my life.

One hundred years ago an anarchist, bursting with love for the world and the happiness of all beings,<sup>1</sup> sent us a call. It was a call for living differently, a call for a communal, autonomous, and anti-authoritarian life. In Vale de Santiago, not far from our village, António Gonçalves Correia initiated a commune and named it *Comuna da Luz* – the Commune of Light. The social experiment lasted only two years, but its place is still remembered as »the Mount of the Commune.« Lest you may doubt, his call is still reaching us.

*Our anarchist* was a complex being: a dreamer, an incorrigible idealist, a civil activist, a traveling salesman, a vegetarian known for freeing animals from their cages screaming »Liberty!«; a Tolstoyan naturalist, adept of free love, a radical pedagogue, an earth defender... He founded his own newspaper – *A Questão Social* – and wrote passionately for other newspapers. Often, his texts took the shape of letters addressed to a woman, to an anarchist, to a banker. He used to ride his bicycle throughout the region, and it was clear to everyone that the coming Revolution was his sweetheart.

Several women and children lived in the Commune of Light. There they grew vegetables, shared meals in a communal kitchen, made shoes, and, significantly, they lived not in seclusion but on good terms with the surrounding villagers. One woman is mentioned to have been the soul of the commune: a professor inspired by the pedagogy of



A commune, a community, an uneven communion.

Francisco Ferrer's Modern School.<sup>2</sup> I wonder about her thoughts, her political imaginary, her name, but all I am able to find is her care for books. She, as the others, remain historically anonymous. (Which books were you reading, dear unknown woman? What life did you lead after the short-lived commune? How did commoning transformed you and the collectivity?) I can only fabulate.

Stubbornly, I have started visiting and filming the commune, what is left of it, in search of auguries of a flourishing life. Those unfamiliar with its history may only see a tiny fenced private property. But as Mikhail Bakunin in a letter to Élisée Réclus wrote: »nothing in the world is ever lost.« Believe it or not, dear villagers, this was the spark that led me toward you: *The dream of something*. And thinking of them, communards and commoners, while thinking of you/us, entangled as we are in the remaking of the rural, have impelled me to write to you.

The red and black thread of *our anarchist's* ideals made me stumble upon *Alambique*, a journal issued by a collective that many decades later, in the mining town of Aljustrel, honored his name – Colectivo Gonçalves Correia – and from there to the rousing critical media (of anarchist expression) currently at work within the Portuguese region.<sup>3</sup> One article by Sara Moreira for *Jornal Mapa* gathered the diversity of the life sustaining grassroots projects sprouting in the southwest of Alentejo, particularly in the town of São Luís. It was a network of networks called CooperAcção,<sup>4</sup> you may remember, a concoction of cooperation and action. That so much synergy and community activism was to be found in the rural world, in the proximity of the Commune of Light, was to be read as an augur.

I came to you with my 16 mm film camera, a suitcase filled with film rolls. First, I fell in love with the Mira river and a rammed earth house, then the light and the red dust, the swallows; *a community of rebels*. Since then, what I have been salvaging in



The Sea, the Sea

your company, in the place of Troviscais, is an insatiable curiosity toward the rural world. After a rural exodus, a failed agrarian reform, and the calculated breakdown of a way of life – (a peasant life or *via campesina*) – something else is germinating that carries the potency of forging relationality anew, in a more-than-just-human world. It may be that everything is tentative, but clearly life-affirming: We do with/ness the building of autonomy, free association, self-governing, and mutual aid at a local and regional scale in this insurgent geography.

The thread that I keep following and weaving – the thread of transmission and re-enchantment – has been guiding me toward you, dear villagers fighting for subsistence, far away from (but nevertheless affected by) Lisbon and Brussels, vassals and lords. It takes me to you too, dear new rurals, trying to shed the capitalist skin by learning the ways of the earth, amidst the numerous communities spread over these mounts and plains. Entangled together, you and you and you, keepers of the landscape, making kin and cooperation in place of competition and extraction.

The time of the village is enhanced and elemental. Its call is for care, that »enduring social capacity and practice involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of human and non-human life.«<sup>5</sup> Informally, so much is coming into being in everyday practices. Some are building co-ops; others call themselves a »healing biotope.« We are starting a collective, mutually thriving. We dream of a solar village. Don't you see? We gather to honor and care for the natural world and its cycles. Do you remember? A year ago, on Saint John's day, groups of people in five neighboring villages walked to honor the water sources, taking care of the springs, sharing stories and singing songs, reviving a tradition that was almost lost. A few months ago we were numerous, gathering in Vale de Santiago, learning from each other and exchanging seeds in conviviality. Now we are working toward a regional seed bank that



Fair of Joy

will preserve our local seeds and biodiversity, our roots and autonomous practices. In the future, it might become a center for rurality.

With you I have learned that food sovereignty<sup>6</sup> is at the core of the agrarian question: Food isn't a product but a common good. A group of producers and co-producers agreed to share the risks and benefits of a small-scale organic family farm (Monte Mimo), and, in the spirit of solidarity, have formed the *AMAP Sado e Alvalade*. Other producers have joined in to bring organic bread, cheese, honey, olive oil, natural cosmetics. In recognition, it is with utmost joy that we gather for joyful »ajudadas,« under the shade or the red sun, helping out in the fields when extra hands are needed. Collectively committed to agroecology, we are building a local and circular economy, while nurturing relations of proximity and reciprocity. Sociocracy is our system of governance, and we are organized as part of REGENERAR – Rede Portuguesa de Agroecologia Solidária, which in its turn is connected to the international network called Urgenci.<sup>7</sup> In the midst of the pandemic, self-organized food groups have sprouted regionally as the local markets and fairs were forced to close and the farmers couldn't distribute their edibles. Knowing we cannot rely on the global market to feed ourselves, our communities makes us wish this model of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) would spread like wildfire.

We want abundance for all, not scarcity. We may be flourishing, but we know we are under threat. We witness the intensification of extractive economies led by transnational agribusinesses and the patriarchal complex. Toward the interior of the country, huge farms with superintensive monocultures are increasing, responsible for environmental abuses and the destruction of the ecosystems; toward the sea the industrial greenhouses are spreading, owned by international corporations such as the Californian Maravilha Farms and Driscoll. Dispossessed migrant workers do the work



Maravilha Farms

refused by the locals, with the complicity of corrupt governments, whose red politics is merely outward appearance. This is not a new El Dorado.

It is not enough to feel indignant, to boycott, or to document the ecocide. What if we were to propose sabotage and direct action as a formalization of care? What sabotage theorist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn called »the fine thread of deviation,« the hidden script sustained by women, workers, peasants, and indigenous movements, and carried by the deep ecology movement with its practice of monkeywrenching.<sup>8</sup> Sabotage as Earthcare: Which shapes may a radical practice of caring for the world take?

The eco-feminist principle of searching for connections has led me to an encounter with GAIA Alentejo, a group of eco-activists taking responsibility for strengthening the rural life and fighting the ecological crisis, by way of reforesting, political agroecology, and education. We have the project of regenerating an invasive eucalyptus plantation into an agroforest, fostering reciprocity with the natural ecosystems. We are taking care of a communal tree nursery; we are studying and doing the work of anticipation.

For the call is still reaching us, dear commoners, *the dream of something*, and it is a call for collective self-sufficiency, degrowth, a nurturing and unhierarchical interspecies conviviality. In a nutshell: »The Happiness of All Beings in the Society of the Future,« as our beloved anarchist taught us. Care is at the heart of the re-enchantment, our politics of mutual support.

Filmmaking as a situated and relational practice is my action of care for this place and its beings. Here, in the place of Troviscais, all my sense organs are fully awakened: my eyes see further, my ears listen deeper, the local flora charms me with its fragrance, taking me by surprise, making me turn around, stop and smell, touch and caress, while the taste of the fruits and the vegetables we are growing is incomparable.



Fig Leaf

The sun burns, we are covered in red dust, the rain comes and the common roads get flooded, we practice the wild and embrace its encounters. To choose to be here is to be in a fragile copresence, engaged in earthcare.

The meaning of my name is forest and I am returning to the forest of my name.

Now I walk and ride my bicycle throughout the bio-region.

And now I am not only filming but living amidst you.

Breathing, flourishing.

»Film is the work of living beings,« Tsushimoto Noriaki says.

Can a letter, or a film-as-letter, be an act of care? Are our villages, our towns, our region, places of care and conviviality? As a cinema practitioner I am filming to conjure the auspices of the rural, our varied and mutable ways of living, the radical co-dependency that weave us together.

With soaring gratitude,

Sílvia das Fadas

Troviscais, in the month of May 2020

All images Sílvia das Fadas, film stills from *Light, Blaze, Fulgor – Auguries for a Non-hierarchical Framing and Flourishing*, 16 mm film, 2019 – ongoing, courtesy the artist.

**Sílvia das Fadas** (born as Sílvia Salgueiro) is a filmmaker, a researcher, a teacher, a wanderer. She studied cinema and aesthetics, committing herself to the material learning of film at The Portuguese Moving Image Archive (ANIM) and the Portuguese Cinematheque in Lisbon. Driven by a militant nostalgia, she moved to Los Angeles where she continued to craft her personal films in 16 mm at the California Institute of the Arts. Her 16 mm films have been shown at numerous festivals, cinematheques, and minor cinemas. She is interested in the politics intrinsic to cinematic practices and in cinema as a way of being together in restlessness and brokenness. Das Fadas was a cooperation fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in 2019.

1 »A Felicidade de Todos os Seres na Sociedade do Futuro« (»The Happiness of All Beings in the Society of the Future«) was a speech written by António Gonçalves Correia, and delivered at the Congress of Rural Workers, in Évora, December 16, 1922. Self-published in 1923 in an edition of 3,000.

2 Francisco Ferrer y Guardia was an anarchist pedagogue, the founder of the Barcelona Modern School.

3 Some of their titles are *A Ideia*, *Jornal Mapa*, *Flauta de Luz*, *Erva Rebelde*, *Guilhotina*, and the century-old newspaper *A Batalha*.

4 See <https://www.jornalmapa.pt/2018/09/25/cooperacao-ao-sul-de-portugal/>.

5 See The CARE COLLECTIVE: *Care Manifesto: The Politics of Compassion*. London/New York 2020. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4617-covid-19-pandemic-a-crisis-of-care> [accessed May 31, 2020].

6 »Food Sovereignty is the peoples' right to determine their food and agricultural systems and the right to produce and consume healthy and culturally appropriate food.« See <https://viacampesina.org/en/> and <http://www.navdanya.org/site/>.

7 See for AMAP: <https://amap.movingcause.org/>, and for Urgenci: <https://urgenci.net/>.

8 See D. Foreman and B. Haywood, *Ecodefense: A field guide to monkeywrenching*, Chico 2002. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/various-authors-ecodefense-a-field-guide-to-monkeywrenching> [accessed May 31, 2020].