

## The State of Vexation

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“How agitated I am in the garden, and how happy I am to be so agitated. How vexed I often am when I am in the garden, and how happy I am to be so vexed.”

Jamaica Kincaid, *My Garden*<sup>1</sup>

I have taken care of a small garden attached to my apartment since I moved in this year. As I always wanted to have my own garden, I approached it with enthusiasm, hoping to create a lush and thriving space. However, I quickly realized that gardening was more challenging than I anticipated. My plans for a vibrant garden did not come to fruition, and my initial excitement turned into frustration. The garden, perhaps a paradise, I envisioned remained out of reach, replaced by a persistent struggle against so many elements, such as light, water, coldness, soil, and my lack of experience.

During a visit to Villa Romana in Florence, I saw gardens that were the opposite of mine—well-maintained and full of life, especially the olive tree community and healing garden, which has a lot of pharmaceutical plants and herbs. I felt a mixture of admiration and envy. It was there that I met the gardener who takes care of the beautiful healing garden in Villa Romana. I told her of my desire to be a good gardener, and she responded, “Everyone can be a gardener, but gardening is always challenging for everyone.”

Her words and all my garden situation made me realize: garden-making is not determined exclusively by human desires, but is the endeavor of many different species. Gardening involves careful attention to the needs and desires of the many beings essential to its development. Even the most meticulously planned garden may not unfold according to human will. Through numerous failures, I have learned about companion planting and the intricate relationships between plants, humans, pollinators, and soil, and “gardens are as much about humble, sensitive, and agile response—and ‘response-ability’, in Donna Haraway’s term—as they are about even the most thoughtful human planning.”<sup>2</sup>

At Villa Romana, the artists' projects which were shown at *ECLITTICA: Exercise of Cosmic Attunement and Transitions*, engaged with the garden and also reflected this uncontrollable multispecies co-creation. They made their own small garden-world, collected sound from many beings in the garden, and performed with the beings. They had to compromise with the desires of multispecies—the individual participants—and the uncertain circumstances, and embrace the

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<sup>1</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *My Garden* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Catriona Sandilands, “Worlds,” in *On the Necessity of Gardening*, ed. Laurie Cluitmans (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), 180.

unexpected outcomes. Their disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration are important parts of their works, reminding us of more-than-human involvements in world-making beyond human intentions.

Some of the works did not disconnect the small garden-world from the larger sociopolitical worlds. The global movements of plants and the history of gardening itself implicate unbalanced and exploitive relationship intertwined with imperialism and colonialism. Gardens were often used as tools to impose order and control, transforming landscapes into spaces that reflected the colonizer's ideals of productivity, structure, and rationality. This history tells us that gardens are not merely spaces of beauty and purity but sites of discomfort and resistance.

In a time defined by climate crises, as a small garden-world maker, I know I cannot retreat from the larger worlds' issues. As I reflect on my journey with multispecies co-creation, I understand that being in the state of vexation is a fundamental part of world-making, whether it is small or large. Today, I am agitated again with the wilted petals and stubborn weed in the garden, but I am also happy to be agitated.