

What was the starting point of your research project?

My research on the subject of “natural imaginaries” started unintentionally when I moved to the Netherlands. To get to know the new place and kill time, I took weekend trips to national parks around the country and collected all sorts of natural samples, assembling them in a little cabinet of curiosities. Whenever I proudly showed it to someone, they would laugh at my piles of twigs, sand, and stones, saying that there is “No True Nature in the Netherlands.” That was the moment I started to use the term “nature blindness,” and began reading into the role of the human sense of sight and overseas colonial expeditions in shaping the perception of “nature” and “naturalness” in Europe. Through this research I discovered an amazing entry in *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (2009), edited by Derek Gregory, which was an article on what “Geographical Imaginary” is. Here are some fragments from that article:

Geographical Imaginary: A taken-for-granted spatial ordering of the world . . . In human geography, a ‘geographical imaginary’ is typically treated as a more or less unconscious and unreflective construction, but it is rarely given any formal theoretical inflection. It usually refers to a spatial ordering that is tied either to the collective object of a series of imaginative geographies (e.g. ‘the geographical imaginary of the Tropics’: see tropicality) or to their collective subject (e.g. ‘the imperial geographical imaginary’) . . . . Geographical imaginaries involve bordering as well as ordering: the hierarchical division of the globe into continents, states and other sub-categories (see scale), for example, and the oppositions between global north/south, urban/rural, inside/outside and culture/nature. These divisions also often act as tacit valorizations

The outcome of my fellowship is a foldable, illustrated publication which follows a group of people who scout the schizochronic premises of a post-apocalyptic world. They are in search of a better place to be, as the Garden they were living at was destroyed by a comet.

The events happening to its participants are loosely—or sometimes quite literally—based on the notes from and findings of seven research seminars which I conducted with the Sandberg Instituut students and alumni in 2022 and 2023. Collectively we mapped out and questioned the contours and layers of western ecological imaginaries, trying to answer a seemingly simple question: how do we imagine the world we live in? Based on the study and discussion of ecocritical theory and experimental, queer, and non-western cinema, the seminars touched upon the themes of multiple landscape temporalities, the connection between mental health and ecological crisis, time traveling, the end of the world(s), and the decolonization of deserts, among many others.

Built almost as a script for a theatrical play, the text invites the readers to a collective performative reading and reenactment. The text itself, when enlarged to four meters tall, becomes an adjustable decoration that allows performers and readers to walk through the text, to fold and unfold, and to skip the pages, while following the narration. The text is accompanied by an afterword kindly written by an artist, researcher, and my fellowship supervisor Rouzbeh Akhbari.

Fellowship supervisor: Rouzbeh Akhbari  
Text and illustrations: Olya Korsun  
Publication design: Anna Bierler and Alix Stria

('civilized'/'savage', for example, or 'wild'/'safe') that derive not only from the cognitive operations of reason but also from structures of feeling and the operation of affect. As such, geographical imaginaries are more than representations or constructions of the world: they are vitally implicated in a material, sensuous process of 'worlding'<sup>1</sup>

This little article instantly gave a framework to all my further research. I was excited to reveal the structure of imaginaries, to map them out, to challenge them, and to understand how they come into being, stick around, and shape our perception of reality, and even direct actions of individual people or whole states and governments. I am fascinated by the role of such intangible force as "imagination" in the formation of tangible relationships between humans and their environment.

What has been your approach for the fellowship research project and how does it relate to the role of research in your practice?

From the very beginning I was interested in organizing a research group that would "scout" with me "the periphery of imaginary." Imaginaries are, in a way, hard to grasp, as they are so dispersed and built into our perception, often to the extent we don't notice them and take them for granted, as Gregory suggested. So, I thought that assembling a collective of people with diverse backgrounds and origins would give us a bigger chance of mapping out and detecting the imaginaries, due to the differences and similarities of the way we "see" the world. I tried to make every seminar and gathering a chance to talk to each other, to be honest and critical of our own ecological bias. This approach led to something that I value most: the research that crosses the borders of academic or scholarly thinking and instead unravels freely in the territory of emotional, intimate, and bizarre ways of thinking and learning. This approach fitted in just right in my ongoing practice, as I usually conduct my investigations using a multitude of sources, trying to avoid any hierarchies in sourcing

knowledge. I strive to decenter myself as an author and allow for a polyphony of voices to be heard through my projects. The notes and doodles produced during the seminars became an integral part to my work on the final publication, and I am very grateful to all the participants, recurring and one-time visitors, as there was not a single person who remained silent: everyone shared their stories and thoughts, joining the ongoing expedition to the periphery of our shared imaginaries.

One of the observations that guided your research project was that contemporary ecological imaginaries tend to prioritize a specific mode of speculation, namely science fiction. Your research project took the form of a series of seminars in which you explored divergent approaches over the course of the year. Could you explain how this played out, what other modalities appeared, and how the seminars stimulated these discoveries?

Indeed, one of the departure points for this project was my desire to "stay with the trouble" of the present, the reality of today. When it comes to ecological crises, art often comes up with tempting alternatives to the depressing reality of now, presenting us with intricate speculations of the future or nostalgic digressions to the unpolluted past. Numerous strategies of escape, detox, and withdrawal from modernity make us even more separate from the immediate habitats of our living and propose "imagination" as a sort of magical time-machine that can carry us somewhere else, far from the crises and drama. However, the political, social, and historical aspects of imagination cannot be disregarded; the way we imagine the world shapes the way we interact with it. So, instead of focusing on alternative visions of ecology and humanity's place in it, I wanted to stay in the eye of the storm, looking at the most painful and disturbing elements that lie in the heart of ecological imaginaries of "westernized modernity." Together with the research group we discussed topics such as the end of the world, the connection between mental health and environment, deserts and death, and fears and loneliness—always trying to find where we stand in relation to these events. Are we participants or are we observers? Can we look at these painful subjects from a critical distance? Instead of thinking of alternative visions we

<sup>1</sup> Gregory, D., Johnson, R., Pratt, G., and Michael Watts, eds. 2009. *The Dictionary of Human Geography 5th Edition*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

thought of counterstrategies and interventions:  
How do we befriend mental illness? How do we celebrate the desert? How do we utilize the opportunities that the ends of the world brings us? My hope is that this sort of approach could help us reconcile with the reality of the present and learn to live in it rather than endlessly fight it or escape from it.