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**‘I - rubber plant’: house plants and gardens in narratives of displacement  
from Donbas, Ukraine \***

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## **‘I - rubber plant’: house plants and gardens in narratives of displacement from Donbas, Ukraine**

On one of the drawings made for the *Donbas Odyssey* art project, a woman drew a rubber plant and on the flower pot she wrote: ‘I am a rubber plant’. In Russian the verb to be (in the present tense) is omitted and substituted by a dash: ‘Я - фикус’ (*[Ya – fikus], I – rubber plant*), which positions the “I” and the “rubber plant” as equal subjects, allowing for recognition of one in the other and identification with the other. What do a rubber plant and a displaced Ukrainian woman have in common: a plant, sessile in nature and a human, who can move anywhere?

With the outbreak of the conflict, Olga had to move to Odesa. When I interviewed her, she was taking care of a woman recovering after a surgery in exchange for a place to live and a small stipend. It was unclear how long she would stay there, as that depended on the state of health of the apartment owner. Rubber plants originally come from Asia, from the East. Olga came to Odesa from Donbas, the Ukrainian East, which is often internally orientalised (later more on this). In their natural habitat wild rubber plants are trees, often banyan trees that form extended root systems growing from the branches towards the ground and in this way establish multiple trunks. The rubber plant which can be found in many homes in Ukraine could never grow into a tree inside. Multiple factors such as social, cultural and material capital, housing and job markets condition one’s integration into new communities as a displaced person, and in this way an image of pot which both allows the rubber plant to be transported and limits it in its growth might not be accidental in this drawing.

As surprising as it seems, a rubber plant has already established its presence in cultural studies of Eastern Europe. In her book *Common Places. Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* Svetlana Boym discusses a depiction of a rubber plant on a painting *The New Apartment* by Laktionov. She writes about the piece being censored for ‘celebrating the petty bourgeois values of philistinism and banality embodied in the rubber plant’. Svetlana Boym explores the banal in relation to bigger social and historical contexts and the way mundane objects manifest these contexts. Following Boym, I, too, focus on mundane and often unnoticeable objects and elements, such as gardens and houseplants, in order to find ways of narrating experience of displacement differently. On this I will reflect later, but for now let’s focus on the rubber plant drawing again.

The rubber plant inscription ‘Я - фикус’ (*[Ya – fikus], I – rubber plant*), where, as I have already mentioned, “I” and the “rubber plant” are positioned as equal subjects, summarises one of the key questions raised by displacement and migration: the question of the other. In his article “*Donbas*” as the Other [“*Donbas*” kak Drugoy] Andrii Portnov discusses internal orientalisation of Donbas in the intellectual discourse of Ukraine. Portnov writes that in the popular idea of the existence of “two Ukraines”, Eastern and Western, the East is not only represented as Russian-speaking and having a different history, but as an inferior one among the two. In Ukraine the othering of people coming from Donbas takes place both on the institutional level and in a person to person interaction. For example, in 2018 people holding an internally displaced person status were not allowed to vote at local elections. According to International Organisation for

Migration 2018 report 11% of IDPs experienced discrimination because of their IDP status. In one of the 2018 Hromadske Radio podcasts, journalist Ostap Yarysh called several numbers of apartment for rent announcements in Lviv, introduced himself in Russian and said he was from Makiivka, Donetsk oblast. He then called the same numbers, spoke Ukrainian and said he was from Ternopil, which is a city in the Western part of Ukraine. Out of 20 numbers, 12 claimed the apartments had already been rented out when the caller's identity was from Donbas, and out of those 12 apartments, half was already free couple a minutes after, when the caller was presumably coming from the Western part of the country. Yarysh claimed that this discrimination is not only specific to Lviv, and similar rejections took place in other cities in Ukraine. This experiment proves that there is prejudice among landlords and estate agents against people who come from Donbas.

These examples show perception of Donbas within contemporary Ukrainian society and people who live or lived there as the other. However, Olga's drawing: 'Я - фікус' ([Ya – fikus], I – rubber plant) invites us to reflect on our relation to the other, where the other is not human, but a plant.

Why would one be interested in the other as a plant while studying displacement from Donbas? Studies of displacement are closely linked to identity studies and cultural memory studies, where the primary focus lies on the human experience, since they closely rely on abilities to narrate, which in turn are seen as uniquely human characteristics. This assumption is however questioned by Erin James with a reference to Gerald Prince, when she asks: 'If the basic definition of a narrative is a representation of a sequence of events, what simpler narrative can we identify than a series of tree rings? Are tree rings in and of themselves narratives?'

While humans remain a primary focus in my research is well, I am interested in looking at narratives about plants and gardening practices, as well as the way the conflict affects ecosystems. To explore displacement as a complex phenomenon that extends beyond a fact of forced relocation, I shift the focus from human subjectivity to the interconnectivity and interdependency of critters and their environments, and the way war brings abrupt changes to them. I believe it is necessary to challenge our anthropocentric understanding of displacement and war and to look beyond the human, just like many other works have done it already, among which is Claire Colebrook's contribution to cultural memory, Eduardo Kohn's to anthropology and Eran Picherksy's to history.

For example, questioning the anthropocentric nature of memory studies, Claire Colebrook explores the connection between memory and the Anthropocene. In *The Intensity of the Archive* she argues that if inscriptions and their maintenance in a form of an archive 'is what makes the flow of conscious time and memory possible' and if stratifications of the Earth are a type of an inscription just like texts and audio recordings of oral histories, then is it possible to claim that the Earth has memory? And if so, where does human memory overlap with geological memory? This, in turn, makes us question our understanding of memory and remembering, as well as the anthropocentric nature of cultural memory studies and their relevance to the Anthropocene.

When thinking about Donbas and the Anthropocene, it is impossible to overlook the central place that mining industries occupy in the formation and development of the region. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stroermer, who defined Anthropocene as a 'geological epoch' in which humans are 'a major geological force', argue that the Anthropocene started in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the invention of the steam engine in 1784 and Industrial Revolution. Donbas is a product of industrialisation, as the first major settlements appear in the region with the rise of metal and coal industries. Even the name Donbas itself is a short version for the Donets coal

basin. The decline of coal-industry which began before the military conflict and in some ways contributed to it, are symptomatic of post-industrial hangover, where we now face the challenges of global warming and economic depression on a planetary scale and identity crisis on the regional level. Contextualising Donbas within global processes helps us to identify deeper causes of the outbreak of the conflict, which go beyond current political discourses and call for reconsidering industrialisation and its legacies, by which I do not just mean material heritage, such as monotowns, mines and factories, and ecological damage, but more importantly ways of conceptualising nature as a separate and independently existing entity to humans and the concept of culture, as well as our continuous instrumental treatment of “nature” as a resource. One of the examples of an exploration of the relationship between geological history and industrialisation in Donbas is a piece by a British artist Paul Chaney called *Donetsk Syndrome Diagrammatic* (2017), which the artist describes as ‘a large scale hand-produced diagram notionalising the Carboniferous Period as a biotic insurgency against the Sun, and revealing the sociological, geo-political and geological factors underlying the dramatic rise of the industrial city of Donetsk and its repeated rupture into violence’. Chaney started working on the piece in 2012 in Donetsk where he lived until the outbreak of the conflict. The diagram takes over the whole room, and a viewer is invited to walk along the drawing and “experience” geological time in this condensed visual version. The scale is 1 metre per 100 million years and the human time takes up only 0,1 mm of the diagram. In the artist talk, Chaney states that ‘geology has an agency of its own’. He, therefore, critiques the idea of Anthropocene that still positions humans as the centre of the world. Chaney’s piece could, however, be also interpreted as a commentary on the rapid extraction of coal, which took much less time than the years that went into its formation. No matter in which way one understands *Donetsk Syndrome Diagrammatic*, it is an interesting contextualisation of Donetsk within geological time, and a reflection upon the tension between human and non-human forces in the formation of the city.

**If, following Colebrook’s argument, stratifications of the Earth are a type of memory, so is coal then a memory of the carboniferous period: of forests that once populated territories of contemporary Donbas? This assumption makes coal into both a mnemonic object on a planetary level and on the level of intimate oral histories. For example, one of my interviewees with the internally displaced, Svetlana, answering the question about an object she would bring with her hometown if she could, named coal:**

*Interviewer: Do you have any objects here that remind you of home?*

*Svitlana: No... I really want [to get] a piece of coal... I really want it for some reason... But I want it myself, in a kind of jar... (unclear). I keep wanting to come back to creativity, to make something myself, maybe... (Commenting the map) Because Snizhne – it is snowflakes [snizhne literally means “snowy” in Ukrainian], there are always snowflakes and a slag heap...*

*Interviewer: And does coal have a special meaning for you?*

*Svitlana: Coal for me, as a symbol of my home region, because Luhansk, in general, is a*

*Интервьюер: А вот есть у Вас какие-то предметы тут, которые напоминают Вам о доме?*

*Светлана.: Нет...Я очень хочу кусочек угля... Что-то мне так хочется... Но я хочу его сама только, в какую-то баночку.. (невнятно) Тяготею все опять вернуться к какому-то творчеству, делать что-то свое, возможно... (Комментирует карту) Так как Снежное – снежинки, там всегда снежинка и террикон...*

*Интервьюер: А уголь имеет какое-то определенное значение?*

*Светлана: Уголь для меня, как символ моего края родного, потому что Луганск, в*

*mining town... (unclear) mines... But in Snizhne there are many mines... And my childhood memories... is when my grandma would scold us... "Don't go to "shurf" ... Then we could not get it... what was this shurf... And it turned out ... it is an abandoned mine, and there is a shaft, which (unclear) a mine, and it is called shurf... So you can fall into it... yes... It was covered... and there was an entrance... An old covered mine... and because tunnels remain, you could fall into them... We could not understand it... we were drawn to it... and it turned out it was a mine shaft... we could have simply died... But still we were drawn to it... We used to climb slag heaps...*

*принципе, это шахтерский город, (невнятно) шахты...Но в с Снежном просто очень много шахт...И мои воспоминания детства - это когда бабушка нас ругала "Не ходите на шурф"...Вот мы тогда не могли понять, что это за шурф...А это оказалось, это заброшенная шахта, и там вот этот ствол, который (невнятно) шахта, называется шурф ...То есть туда можно провалиться...да...Ну, оно было завалено...и там вход... Старая шахта заваленная, и так как остаются туннели, то можно было провалиться... Мы не могли понять, нас туда тянуло, а оказалось, что это там...шахтный этот ствол...мы могли просто погибнуть... Но все равно нас туда тянуло... На терриконы лазили...*

**In Svetlana's narrative coal is thus both a symbol of Donbas as an industrial region and a memory of her childhood adventures, during which she used to go to abandoned mines to play. Svetlana's story is an indirect comment on a decline of coal industry and the challenges of post-industrial monotowns, where old mines remain dangerously accessible even to children. The danger in Svetlana's story is obscured by the language: the kids do not know what the word 'shurf' mean and therefore are not capable of realising how dangerous it is. Indeed, 'shurf' is not a word I, as an interviewer, knew either. Svetlana does not explain the meaning of it the first time she mentions it, and therefore the listener learns the definition "together with the children": 'it turned out' says Svetlana and together with her we find ourselves on an abandoned mine. Svetlana's playful and tender frame of a childhood story adds an intimate layer to the grave issues of post-industrial spaces. Svetlana stories thus moves between the personal and communal, the playful and the dangerous, simultaneously problematising these contexts and representing them as liveable and dynamic – an ecosystem one inhabits.**

**Just like Svetlana and her piece of coal, I keep in mind the carboniferous period as one of the starting points, and move from the intimate to the industrial, to the symbolic and to the temporary, contextualising the very personal oral histories of displacement within a bigger frame of the conflict, post-Soviet spaces and post-industrial environments, where the mining, made possible by the carboniferous period, has lost its romantic progress-oriented image. I believe that narratives about plants and gardens in oral histories of displacement, gardening practices employed before and after displacement and the state of ecosystems in the times of war allow me to move between these seemingly different contexts, as they encourage one to look at a space of interaction between critters and between disciplines, a liminal space where these contexts connect and overlap. However, is it even possible to study displacement from a non-liminal space? Displacement itself is a process of movement, of shifting, of being in two places at once and more? Studying displacement**

**requires a researcher to take on a nomadic approach, crossing and transgressing unknown territories.**

In times of war the talk about plants often seems to be irrelevant. The focus is on human lives, which from a human point of view are the most valuable. In *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler looks at the way media frames portray certain lives as less valuable and therefore less grievable than ours. In the introduction to her book Butler states: ‘...specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense.’ However, here Butler is focusing on human lives only. What is there to say about thousands of lives of other critters which are lost in conflicts?

If deaths of soldiers are often mourned publicly in Ukraine, both during the funerals which are attended by people who had not known the person before and came to pay tributes to their martyr and online by people reposting and commenting on the news about a death of a particular soldier, civilian victims rarely receive such public attention. State keeps count of soldiers who died in combat, but no unified state register exists for civilian victims. Instead, this job has been done by a human rights coalition Justice for Peace in Donbas. If the civilian losses are not counted in the hierarchy of valuable lives, the loss of other critters receive even less attention. When it comes to the Ukrainian state budget, the biggest, after Ministry of Finances, share in 2019 is allocated to the security establishment – approximately 200 billion Ukrainian hryvnia. In contrast to that, Ministry of Ecology received only 9 billion hryvnias, from which almost a third is allocated to the Management agency of the Chernobyl exclusion zone. More so, there have been instances when nature reserves in the non-conflict regions of Ukraine have been damaged in the course of military training, in the regions where the actual fighting does not take place. For example, in 2015 Armed Forces of Ukraine illegally took over the territory of Oleshky Sands national park for the purposes of military training. In another instance, in 2017 a new missile has been tested on the territory of the Black Sea biosphere reserve. The reserve is protected by UNESCO and the testing was observed by the president of the country himself.

Similar situation can be observed in the media. Results of the Ministry of Information Policy’s monitoring of Ukrainian TV channels with regards to the conflict in Donbas which were published on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2018, show that in 2018 information channels dedicated 5,9% and entertainment channels 2,8% of their time to the events in Donbas. The report presents several thematic subcategories that covered different aspects of the Donbas situation, and among these subcategories none is dedicated to environmental damage caused by the military action. The only subcategory in which questions related to ecology could be possibly mentioned is the ‘current situation on temporary occupied and uncontrolled territories’, which takes up 23% and 12% on entertainment and informational channels respectively. Informational channels also feature a subcategory called ‘other things’, which takes up 4% of their time. It is therefore unclear of what percentage of TV coverage is dedicated to questions of environment, but it is obvious that damage brought to ecosystems by war is not a primary concern for most TV channels.

Both the most thorough documentation of the effect of war on ecosystems and event coverage have been done by an independent environmental law organisation Environment, People, Law. It is clear though that war and ecology are seen as separate categories in the public consciousness of Ukraine. Nonetheless, destruction of ecosystems and displacement are closely linked in the modern imaginary of the country. The biggest displacement in the modern history of Ukraine before displacements from Crimea and Donbas is the displacement from the Chernobyl exclusion

zone after the 1986 nuclear disaster. In 1986 alone, 115 thousand people were forcefully resettled from the zone. In 2017, I was involved in a research project *Vilcha – the resettled village*, which focused on the memories of Vilcha residents who were displaced to a “new” Vilcha in Kharkiv region of Ukraine. Most of my interviewees were in their 50s, direct witnesses of the disaster, active participants of the socio-political life of the country and bearers of displacement experience that proves to be very relevant to the current Ukrainian context. One of the researchers involved in the project Maria Franovska interviewed women displaced from Donbas in the Centre for mother and child, established in Vilcha. The centre provides food and shelter for single mothers with children. In conversation with Franovska one of the young single mothers from Donbas said that Vilcha residents were more understanding to her than other people, because they had a similar experience. Franovska also mentions that many displaced from the Chernobyl zone often related their own experiences to the experiences of the displaced from Donbas, and emphasised trying to help them by sharing fruits and vegetables from their gardens.

One of the evenings in Vilcha, the family who hosted me showed me photos from their most recent trip to the original Vilcha. On the photos the streets and houses were completely overgrown. Each year the family goes back, more and more details are reclaimed by plants. This is one of the most striking characteristics of the Chernobyl displacement – the creation of an exclusion zone, where the environment is contaminated to such an extent that it is considered to be unsuitable for humans and therefore caused displacement of thousands of people. Even though humans were not the only victims and witnesses of the catastrophe, they were the only once to leave. Many other critters, however, remained and took over in abundance. In projects about displacement such as *Vilcha – the resettled village* we interview people as witnesses, but they were not the only witnesses of the explosion. Anaïs Tondeur and Michael Marder reflect on plants as witnesses in their book *Chernobyl Herbarium. Fragments of an Exploded Consciousness*, thus expanding the category of a testimony to non-human critters. In the same book, just like in his other works, Marder also critiques ‘the pernicious ubiquity of an instrumental handling of nature’, which had led to the disaster. Even though Donbas displacement seems to be caused by a different reason – military conflict, a careful examination of a longer history of the region and the state of its ecology throughout it allow one to claim that both the Chernobyl displacement and the Donbas displacement are consequences of the ideology of exploitation and domination.

Stories about plants and gardening practices present a stark contrast to this attitude towards the world as a resource. For many of my narrators, plants are not just providers of necessary nutrients and symbols they use to narrate a certain experience, they are also and foremost companions. Kenneth Helphand underlines the artificial nature of gardens, which have to be constantly tended and maintained. The same could be said about houseplants. Gardens exist exactly at the space of an intersection of critters, a temporary and liminal space, which disappears as soon as the connection is disrupted. Helphand provides an example of gardens in the Japanese American Internment camps in 1942-1945, which vanished almost right after the camps closed down: even before they were demolished, the desert claimed the space. Thus, plant narratives make us acutely aware of the networks that exist between a person and a place and the importance of time that goes into constructing these networks.

These networks, as well as plants as companions, are featured in one of the stories I recorded, and which was narrated by Valentina.

*And Donetsk comes to me every night in my dreams... The airport, office, our roses... A neighbour has called me... They are renting an apartment in another district, a quiet one... She says: 'Val' [Valentina], how much you loved flowers... Everything got burned down, but a pot bent down, and a flower keeps standing in your room". Can you imagine it?*

*А Донецк мне каждую ночь снится. Аэропорт, кабинет, наши розы... Соседка звонила. Они снимают квартиру в другом районе, спокойном. Она говорит: «Валь, как ты любила цветы. Сгорело всё, а горшок наклонился, и так цветок в твоей комнате и стоит». Представляете?*

Valentina got severely injured in the conflict and lost all her property: her house was shelled while she was inside with her daughter. She ends her story with the image of the plant which I quoted above. In the story the plant appears as the only living being that keeps waiting for her in her hometown. It is important to note that Valentina found the integration process into her new community very difficult. She moved from one of the biggest cities in Ukraine to a small village, and, in addition to that, to a different climate. She also lost her job, at which she was employed all her life and which therefore constituted a significant part of her identity. Finally, she suffers from both physical and mental traumas, which do not receive adequate treatment. Among the few activities that help Valentina to find peace and connect to her new neighbours and surroundings are gardening and taking care of her cats. In Donetsk she used to have a big garden, and her love for plants is one of the few parts of her identity that she was able to integrate into her life after displacement. The plant featured in a story could be read as Valentina's self-portrait: bent down (injured) but still alive. Or it could be read as a companion with whom she shared the same home, with whom she is now separated and who also suffered in this war just like her. More importantly this connection to a plant is part of a bigger network of connections: the story of the plant is told to Valentina through her neighbours. It therefore underlines the lasting nature of networks of care and support and the power of them in the face of destruction caused by the war. Moreover, the story allows Valentina to talk about her relationship with a neighbour without assigning a political category to them and a judgement of this category. The neighbour remained living in the occupied Donetsk, and in Ukraine would be considered a separatist and thus a traitor of the country.

While I am looking at the relationship between humans and plants before and after displacement, cases of gardening during the war have been explored by other people. In his book *Defiant Gardens. Making Gardens in Wartime* Kenneth Helphand studies gardens in the trenches in First World War, Jewish ghettos in Second World War, POW camps, Japanese American Internment camps and other places affected by war. In her book *War Gardens. A Journey Through Conflict in Search of Calm* photojournalist Lalage Snow explores gardens of Kabul, Gaza, Donbas and other places both through the medium of photography and memoir. Both Helphand and Snow emphasise their own surprise of discovering gardens in contexts and places they did not expect, as well as create a stark contrast between the worlds of gardening and the worlds of war, where war represents destruction and gardens represent escape from it: peace, calmness and hope. Gardening practice therefore suggests an alternative way of engaging with the world: not through ruining and exploiting, but through sharing, tending and co-existing.

Just like time is a key element for the existence of any of the gardens, development of human identity is inseparable from time. It is over time that humans build connections and attachments to a certain place. Displacement either breaks or transplants these connections. Having moved to

a new place one does not only face challenges of finding an apartment, a job, a kindergarten, but also of constructing new ecologies of one's everyday life, which consist of family, friends, parks, streets, houseplants, etc. It is not, however, enough to just find a park you like, buy a houseplant and learn the streets in order to feel at home in a new place. The experience of settling down is not about certain attributes as objects which you collect and own, it is about developing a relationship with friends, with plants, with *and* in the ecosystem.

More so, relationships established before the conflict become displaced together with the people. Relatives and friends end up living in different places, some constantly return to the non-government controlled territories to take care of their homes and gardens. The experience of displacement turns one into "a travelling self", described by Trinh Minh-ha as the self that moves physically from place to another, 'following "public routes and beaten tracks" within a mapped movement; and, the self that embarks on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, *and* an elsewhere.'

Displacement and migration are however at the heart of the Donbas region. At its very origin Donbas was established as a migrant's region. Before the Industrial Revolution Donbas was very scarcely populated, and its territories were often called 'the wild field', referring to the vast open spaces of steppe. The new rapidly growing coal and metal industries needed a lot of labour force, which attracted a high number of migrants moving into the region. Volodymyr Kulikov writes that the first census showed that '75 percent of the urban population in the Ekaterinoslav Province – were born outside the territory of the province', and Donbas was a part of Ekaterinoslav province at that time. Rapid migration also caused a change in relationship between people and plants. In the beginning majority of the workers were yesterday's peasants for whom gardening was a vital element of their identity. Many of the workers tended to return to their villages with the beginning of the agricultural season in spring. In order to prevent this seasonal migration and to break peasant's attachment to the soil, some managers forbade gardening, as this was the case at the Hughesovka metal plant. Could the love for houseplants so spread in Ukraine now be a result of this quick and often forceful urbanisation and the rapid migration of people from villages to cities?

Migration did not stop in the times of the Russian Empire and continued during the Soviet Union, with big waves in 1920s-1930 and 1950. Many of my interviewees tell stories of their grandparents and great grandparents moving from other regions of the Soviet Union to Donbas. Moreover, in the past 30 years parts of Donbas have belonged to three different political unities: Soviet Union, independent Ukraine, self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic or Luhansk People's Republic, which means people who have never left their hometowns and are old enough to remember Soviet Union, have lived in three different political unities. Has the succession of ideologies made them feel displaced from their own hometowns? Disintegration of the Soviet Union brought about disappearance of common practices and certain places, such as popular Soviet café in Donetsk called Kulinariya, which after the fall of the USSR was turned into one of the first brand clothing shops Domino. Many places suffered the same fate in the new unrecognised republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. For example, a popular café and concert venue in Donetsk called Liverpool is now a prison and a place of torture. New political regimes reshape cities, where disappearance of popular places reflects arrival of new values and tendencies. So even if after the outbreak of the conflict one did not move anywhere from parts of Donbas which are now non-government controlled, one still began a life in a new, even if unrecognised, republic – in a new space, with new meanings.

Moreover, war and occupation have not only reshaped cities, they have also metaphorically and physically changed landscapes and created new borders. Agricultural fields have been turned into battlefields, the end of streets or villages have been marked by checkpoints. In one of the interviews conducted by Yulia Kishenko for the project *Vostok-Dom*, a woman called Lilia draws a map of her house and a garden that surrounds it. She mentions tanks having been stationed in her garden: ‘And here we have trenches, there are two caponiers (this is a huge pit for the tanks to enter), we had tanks here, so you see, we are fully protected by the Ukrainian army.’

In *War Gardens. A Journey Through Conflict in Search of Calm* Lalage’s Snow recalls a woman and her strawberry patch turned life-threatening:

Her garden is nothing but loose earth and splinters of red bricks. The displaced soil from a shell crater is piled next to the house like a slag heap. A few wild flowers are beginning to sprout and there are a few rows of strawberries just visible. I take a few steps towards them.

‘Stop!’ she shouts. ‘Stop!’

I turn to her and she shouts something at Artem who in turn shouts that there are still unexploded shells and ordnance lying beneath the earth’s new surface.

Familiar and safe places turn into dangerous places, and often remain this way long after the end of the conflict.

To conclude, plants are part of the history of Donbas just as much as people. The very establishment of Donbas region and its identity as a mining region is possible due to coal reserves, which are a legacy of abundant forests that existed in the carboniferous period. Throughout the history of Donbas, plants have been used by people for constructing region’s identities, whether it is an image of a ‘wild field’ populated only by steppe herbs or the famous Donetsk roses and image of Donetsk as the greenest industrial city in the world. Coal extraction and plant symbolism are examples of instrumental uses of plants for the anthropocentric purposes. In contrast, plants and gardens featured in many of my interviewees are discussed in the context that goes beyond plants as metaphors and nourishment, they present plants as companions, separation with whom was as equally emotionally difficult as with human companions. Finally, displacement is not only a human experience, it is a multispecies experience, during which military conflict causes death and displacement of animals, plants and other critters.

For example, in an interview to *Tyzhden* Kateryna Norenko, an environmentalist at Environment, People, Law stated that from June to September 2014 alone 14% of all flora of the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) Zone has been destroyed by fire. Environment, People, Law report that in Donetsk oblast 40 natural reserves are now part of non-government controlled territories, among which 96,4% have been damaged in fighting. 45,5% percent of the reserves that remain on the government-controlled territories have also been damaged in fighting.

Meotida national nature park is an example of a park, which has been divided between government-controlled and non-government controlled territories. There were reports of nesting grounds of Sandwich terns, Pallas’s gulls and Dalmatian pelicans completely disappearing on the territory of the non-government controlled part of the park in 2015. This happened after the newly appointed director of the Donetsk People’s Republic’s part of Meotida, Aleksandr Mikheev, who allegedly had no experience in ecology, took over under the new regime. At the same time, with the outbreak of the war, the government-controlled part of Meotida has been

protected by the border guard service, which forbade tourists and fishermen from entering the territory of the park. This has led to the increase in bird populations and even a return of great white pelicans, who had not been seen in the park for the last 250 years. The situation of the conflict has thus brought both negative and positive changes to Meotida, but it is unclear for how long the effect of the positive changes would last: what will happen to the birds if the border moves again and border guard service moves together with it?

There is no statistics for the number of non-human critters that got damaged as a result of the war, and even the cases we hear about in the media or through such organisations as

Environment, People, Law are cases of big institutions: nature reserves, national parks, etc.

There is almost no discussion about plants and animals that live outside of the national parks. A loss of an individual tree could sometimes be as traumatic as a loss of a human. I would like to conclude by a story recorded by the *Donbas Odyssey* project, in which a displaced woman from Luhansk recalls her apple tree:

*There is my apple tree [in Russian the word used is a hypocorism, yablon'ka] in the yard... I mean, mine?... It is ours.. It's just it is 60 years old... My grandfather planted it... We had a table under this apple tree... We used to have breakfast there in summer... Whole family could have breakfast there before everyone would leave for work or school... That is why I have this association with home... What else is wonderful, is that it always covered us from the sun, this apple tree... Both in the morning and in the evening... There was always a shade beneath it... When there is summer heat all around, +30, you can just sit in the shade... When my child was born, I was not doing much for my business... All the time I was sitting with him [the child] in the yard under this tree... We felt very comfortable, cosy... Maybe this sounds too pompous but it was a family nest... The house was built by my grandfather... I grew up there since my childhood... And everything there is my inner world... And many important moments are connected to the house... We always had many guests... All our holidays we celebrated in the yard... It was my favourite spot... I remember when I was going to school grandma used to put one apple from it [the apple tree] into my schoolbag... Every morning... So several generations grew up with these apples: my mother, me, and my child started to grow up there... It's as if it is alive for me, I speak to it, I talk to it... We had many trees, a whole orchard, but this is a special tree... Because my grandfather planted it, and because it is more than 60 years old... We*

*Во дворе моя яблонька. Ну как она моя? — Она наша. Ей уже просто 60 лет. Ее сажал мой дедушка. У нас под этой яблоней находится стол. Мы там завтракали летом. Там можно позавтракать всей семьей до того момента пока все не ушли на работу или в школу. Поэтому у меня такая ассоциация с домом. Что ещё хорошо, она всегда нас закрывала от солнышка эта яблонька. Хоть утром, хоть вечером. Под ней всегда была тень. Когда вокруг жара в +30° ты можешь посидеть спокойно в тенёчке. Когда у меня родился ребенок я своим бизнесом почти не занималась. Мы с ним сидели во дворе все время под этой яблоней. Мне там было очень уютно, комфортно. Может это очень громко звучит, но для меня это было как родовое гнездо. Дом строил еще мой дедушка. Я выросла там с детства. И для меня вся та обстановка — это мой внутренний мир. И многие важные моменты в моей жизни были связаны с моим домом. У нас всегда было много гостей. Все праздники мы проводили во дворе. Это было самое мое любимое место. Помню ещё когда я в школу ходила бабушка давала мне одно яблоко большое с нее [этой яблони] в портфель. Каждое утро. Получается несколько поколений выросло на этих яблоках: моя мама, потом я, теперь мой ребенок начал расти. Она для меня как живая, я с ней общаюсь, разговариваю. У нас было много деревьев, целый сад. Но*

*never used to sit under other trees... It is more than a tree...*

*это особенное дерево. Потому что его высадил дедушка, и ей там более 60 лет. Под другими деревьями мы не сидели. Это больше чем дерево.*

The apple tree in Natalia's story is truly a companion and a member of the family, which shares intimate history with three generations of the family. Natalia refers to a tree using a hypocorism – *yablon'ka* [яблонька], just like she uses a hypocorism for her grandfather – *dedushka* [дедушка], both are equally loved and are companions between themselves, as it was the grandfather who planted the tree. The tree for Natalia is not a resource, an object, but a living being, a friend who took care of her by covering her from the sun and sharing apples, someone she could talk to. She recognises the tree's individuality – it is the only tree like that in the whole orchard. The apple tree story is one of the longest stories in Natalia's interview on her experience of displacement. The tree also occupies one of the central spaces in her map of the city.

Just like in the drawing, in the story the apple tree is featured as a part of a network of family connections, and when recalled, it releases multiple memories associated with this network. With displacement this network got disrupted: the tree stayed in the non-government controlled Luhansk, Natalia moved to Lviv, we do not know where do other relatives or friends live now. What Natalia's story allows us to do is to look at displacement as a complex event which affects not only humans, but a shift that disrupts established ecosystems, where some connections cease to exist and new are created, a transplantation of memories and practices. Looking at displacement with a focus on plants thus allows us to explore this phenomenon in a more nuanced and complex way, stepping away from victimisation discourse of the displaced persons and creating more room for a variety of emotions and tonalities expressed in narratives of displacement.

It also gives us an opportunity to think more broadly of the reasons of the displacement and ways of reintegration after it. If the reasons of Donbas displacement go beyond the military conflict, and include not only propaganda, economic and identity crisis, but the legacy of Donbas as an industrial region and lasting attitudes of exploitation that were at the heart of its development, then reintegration of Donbas should begin with a critique of the instrumental use of human and non-human critters and non-living matter. In her article *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationcene, Chthulucene: Making Kin* Donna Haraway defines Anthropocene as a boundary event and writes that 'our job is to make Anthropocene as short/thin as possible, and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge'. Haraway calls for making kin with others, where 'kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans'. From this perspective, Olga's, Natalia's and Valentina's stories are examples of kin-making. They offer us not only alternative ways of engaging with the other, of becoming with the other, but also ways of thinking about displacement differently, about relationship to the ecosystems we all inhabit, disruptions of them caused by continuous exploitation and military action, as well as ideas for their reconstruction.

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