

collectorspace
presents:

La Vigie
(extrait 6)

Jean-Luc Moulène

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毛泡桐/桐/ *Paulownia* *tomentosa*/ Princess Tree/ *La Vigie*

Aslıhan Demirtaş

In Jean-Luc Moulène's photographic essay *La Vigie*, a minuscule weed sprouts through the cracks of the sidewalk in the neighborhood of the French Ministry for the Economy and Finance in urban Paris. The subject in the series is a 毛泡桐 (*mao pao tong*), a tree native to China. An influential Chinese philosopher, Zhuang Zhou, who lived around 4th century BC recounts that the Phoenix flew from the South Sea to the North Sea, perching only on these trees. In Japan, the same plant appears in Dairi's coat of arms around the 1700s and is still the central symbol in the seal of the Office of the Prime Minister. 毛泡桐 or 桐 (*kiri* in Japanese) continues to have a specific symbolic value in China and Japan today, connoting longevity and the cycle of birth and death. When a daughter is born, this precious and rapidly growing tree is planted to eventually build a wedding chest from its wood when she gets married. Another tradition associated with birth is amulets made from this tree for newborn babies.

When the tree is introduced to Europe in the 19th century by Philipp Franz von Siebold, a botanist at Dutch East India Company, 桐 is christened as Paulownia dedicated to Anna Paulowna, Princess of Orange and queen consort of The Netherlands. The plant is thereby referred to as the Princess tree. Today, in North America and Europe, where Moulène's *La Vigie* is documented, the Princess tree is considered a weed and an invasive species, an alien which "grows and produces seeds rapidly and displaces native species in disturbed areas."¹ A native to Asia, 毛泡桐 or 桐 displaces other natives by allegedly growing too fast—the same quality that would render the tree valuable back at home so much so that coffins or dowry chests would be made of it, commemorating birth and death.

Princess tree is a foreigner, an outsider, an alien, and an immigrant when outside of Asia. Online searches for <princess tree> lead to sites such as invasive.org and to instructions on how to control, or in other words, on how to kill the plant. Groups such as the Nature Conservancy Wildland Invasive Species Team advise that one needs to cut the Paulownia trees right when they are flowering² or in other words, before they seduce one with their beauty and productivity. Young

¹ "National Invasive Species Information Center," last modified February 9, 2017,

<https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov>.

² Mandy Tu, "Weed notes: Paulownia tomentosa," *The Nature Conservancy, Global Invasive Species Team*, last modified December 2002,

<https://www.invasive.org/gist/moredocs/pautom01.pdf>.

seedlings of Paulownia can be plucked manually but one needs to be careful to not to leave any root fragments. After all, as documented in *La Vigie*, Paulownia resprouts immediately.

The denominations used for invasive species, such as non-native, alien, non-indigenous, exotic, and aggressive not only refer to the plant world. Any refugee who is a valued individual, a citizen with privileges in their native country of origin, can be an invader where they seek asylum. Immigrants may be said to be a burden on the economy, aliens who cannot adapt to their new habitats, likened to invasive species, which adversely affect the habitats and bioregions they allegedly invade economically, environmentally, or ecologically: They take jobs, change the cultural environment by or without assimilating. Anti-immigrant statesmen often use the verb “to weed out” for illegal immigrants.

The relative idea of “weed-ness”—the state of being a valued plant or human in your native geography but the opposite elsewhere—begs for a larger framework for contemplation: Are humans altogether an invasive species on earth? Paleontologist David Jablonski would say yes.³ According to him, we, as humans, fit perfectly the description of invasive species: We are all over the planet, spread and sprawling everywhere; we reproduce at a remarkable speed; we co-opt and monopolize resources; and it is

3 David Quammen, “Planet of weeds: Tallying the losses of Earth’s animals and plants,” *Harper’s Magazine*, October 1998, accessed March 23, 2017 <http://harpers.org/archive/1998/10/planet-of-weeds>.

relatively difficult for the rest of the species on the planet to get rid of us, manually or chemically. Depending on where we are looking from, the weed may be the host and we may be the invaders. The Princess tree may be looking at the the Ministry for the Economy and Finance and thinking, “What a bunch of weeds.”

Moulène witnessed the Princess tree patiently and curiously for seven consecutive years and kindly laid it in front of our eyes. Cut month after month, the tree came back and resprouted from its remaining roots. Growing in between the concrete pavement, regardless of every intervention and threat on its existence, the Princess tree is a resilient witness: It always grows back and watches the constructed world unfold, day after day, in front of it.

Rooted in ancient philosophy, mathematics, and engineering, the term “resilience” was appropriated by ecological sciences in the 1970s to define and develop the concept of “ecological resilience” by C. S. Holling.⁴ For him, resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks. He argues that resilience has four crucial aspects:

1. Latitude: the maximum amount a system can be changed before losing its ability to recover (before crossing a threshold which, if

4 C. S. Holling, “Resilience and stability of ecological systems,” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 4 (1973): 1–23.

breached, makes recovery difficult or impossible).

2. Resistance: the ease or difficulty of changing the system; how “resistant” it is to being changed.

3. Precariousness: how close the current state of the system is to a limit or “threshold.”

4. Panarchy: because of cross-scale interactions, the resilience of a system at a particular focal scale will depend on the influences from states and dynamics at scales above and below. For example, external oppressive politics, invasions, market shifts, or global climate change can trigger local surprises and regime shifts.⁵

In case of the Princess tree, resilience lies in its capacity to grow back after it is cut off. *La Vigie* shows that the plant grows back as a tree, keeping its structure and identity for seven years and maybe more. The tree grows back because it has a wide latitude, high resistance, and apparently precariousness is not the state it is in—at least for now. Do not cry after it, thinking it is dead, or shed tears for lost landscapes, ecosystems: It is not just black or white, dead or alive. A system has its ups and downs, it evolves—it is a process, not a state.

As for panarchy, it is a term originally coined by philosopher, economist, and botanist Paul Émile de Puydt in 1860 as a political term, developed

5 B. Walker, C. S. Holling, S. R. Carpenter, and A. Kinzig, “Resilience, adaptability and transformability in social-ecological systems,” *Ecology and Society* 9(2) (2004): 5, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol9/iss2/art5>.

as an alternative to hierarchy, which literally translates as “sacred rules,” “rules of the high priest.” Panarchy stands for “others’ rule,” pointing to governances that encompass all others—all-ruling. In its coopted meaning in ecological resilience, panarchy is a framework of nature’s rules, hinted at by the name of the Greek god of nature, Pan. Panarchy dreams of a world where the point of view of the Princess tree, or 毛泡桐 to use its original name, has equal value as humans or goats or rivers and mountains. When panarchy prevails, humans are not the only species making decisions on behalf of the rest, and the world as a resource is not at the disposal of one species.

The weed is vigilant. It is vigilant of the political world, of the constructed and material world. Moulène watches the weed, while all else mind their humanly business, involved in fights and conflicts over money, work, and power. To me, Moulène resembles Hasan in Yaşar Kemal’s *Iron Earth, Copper Sky*. In the novel, Hasan is a boy about ten years old, living in a village in Turkey. He constantly observes a particular stone, taking trips out of his village with his sister—they are peers. There is a beautiful ending to the book: While the entire village is fighting over money, jealousy, property, and power, two kids pay a visit to a stone. Hasan has been watching the stone patiently for months, seeing something that no one else could see:

He ran, slipping in and out of the boulders, and came to the great

rock that was set like an island among the pines. He found his stone and gazed at it, hope and reverence in his eyes. Then he stroked it gently once or twice and lifted it up. It was as though he had been struck by lightning. He stared at the open space under the stone, unable to take his eyes off it. Slowly, his face lit up, and the mountains, the rocks, the trees, the earth seemed to light up too.

'Ummahan!' he shouted. 'Come here! Come, quick...'

His voice was triumphant.

Ummahan rushed up, excited, and looked where he was pointing. They held their breaths.

Where the stone had lain there were three freshly blooming flowers, their long stalks trailing over the black earth. One was red, a brilliant crystal red like a flame, the other yellow, yellow as the corn, the sun, a crystal yellow, and the third blue, the blue of the thistle, the sky, the sea, a crystal blue.

Hasan looked into the Ummahan's eyes. 'You see?'

'Oh yes, I do!'

'The three of them?'

'I see them all.'"⁶

6 Yaşar Kemal, *Iron Earth, Copper Sky*, trans. Thilda Kemal (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1974), 220.

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