

Isabelle Fremeaux & Jay Jordan. 2022. *We are 'Nature' defending itself: Entangling art, activism and autonomous zones*. London, Pluto Press. 138 pp. + Endnotes and Index. £14.99(Paperback), ISBN 978-0-7453-4587-1

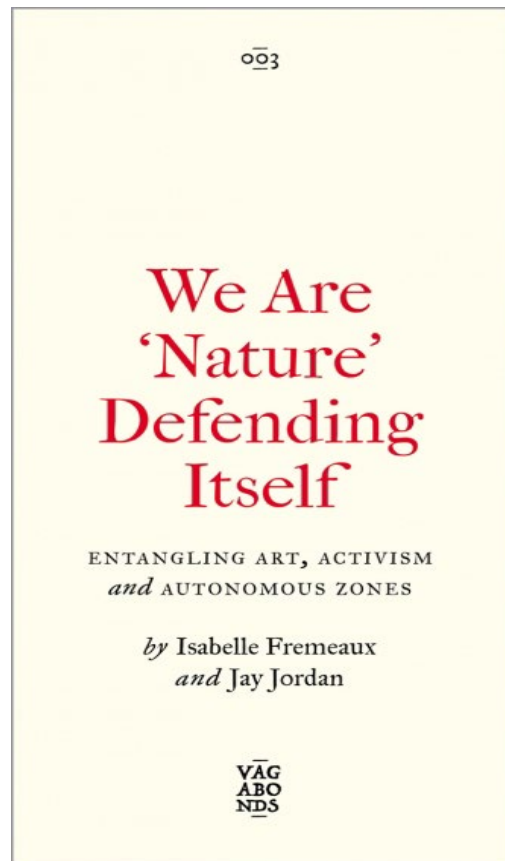
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"Against the Airport and its World!!" was the Zone-to-Defend (ZAD, *Zones d'Aménagement Différé* [deferred development zones] or just *Zones à défendre*) slogan that rattled central-west France (Brittany), outside Nantes, for over a decade. A proposed airport here faced resistance beginning in the 1970s, which was later resurrected in the mid-2000s. By 2010, the site became one of political rupture, land defense and anti-capitalist living. *We are 'Nature' defending itself: Entangling art, activism and autonomous zones* by Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, is the second book in English about the ZAD after *The ZAD and NoTAV* by the Mauvaise Troupe Collective (MTC, 2018). This time, however, long-time organizers and self-defined activists Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan embed the story within their own political lives, living in the Notre-Dame-des-Landes Zone-to-Defend (ZAD), also referred to as the Zone. *We are 'Nature' defending itself* offers a glimpse into what remains of the territory after the cancellation of the airport project, and remains one of the most important stories in insurrectionary political ecology in Europe.

The book's forward, introduction and first chapter situate the initiatives and struggles of the authors, offering a bit of an activist curriculum vitae, which contextualizes their political development, praxis and arrival to the Zone. "When you become attached to somewhere, when you realize that you can become territory, freedom no longer floats in the air but lives in the relationships and the ties of need and desire that you build," they write (p. 24).

Delving into the politics of territoriality and inhabiting, the first chapter elegantly weaves a damning criticism of the art industry (and specific artists), demonstrating how this artistic practice typically reaffirms nature/culture dualisms, class structures (and inequality), business as usual and, most of all, "representing the world rather than transforming it" (p. 20). This includes reviewing direct action and connecting this to the lessons the authors have gain from seeing swallows on the ZAD and drawing metaphors with struggle and their existence—"We know the birds will return in spring, but in their departure is a shadow of a deathly future, a prefigurative feeling of this world if they went extinct" (p. 26). The authors, in discussing the beauty of swallows and the ZAD, also reveal the horrors of industrial life, detailing the life—and existences—that are lost with urban sprawl and the construction of the airport, although it was eventually defeated.

Further detailing their life and political struggle, Fremeaux and Jordan narrate their existential dissatisfaction and political self-critiques, which eventually led to them moving to the ZAD. This entails a reflection on their activism, and their inherent urbanized disconnection from the land. "We are split from our food sources, from our soil, from our plants, from our weather and water" (41), *We are 'Nature' defending itself* then delves into the history of the ZAD, and how they first arrived there during Operation



Caesar, the first large-scale eviction attempt by the French state in 2012. Detailing this struggle, the "extraordinary diversity of complementary tactics" (p. 57)—from Molotov cocktails and barricades to singing songs—they recall the over 100 solidarity actions took place across France (and more internationally) and how 40,000 people came to help rebuild what the police had destroyed in 2012 (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The infamous D281 intersection and barricades, May 4, 2013. Source: NDDL - Notre Dame des Landes Flicker

Fremaux and Jordan narrate how the good/bad protestor dichotomy was dissolved, how "[t]here were no binaries of spectator and actor" (p. 59) and the importance of including destructive—"no"—and constructive—"yes"—to defending habitats and fracturing capitalism. "Utopias without resistance become laboratories for the new spirit of capitalism", explain Fremaux and Jordan (p. 63). Humans are nature defending itself, according to the authors, who underscore this reflection by considering Alzheimer's disease as "a mirror image of the ravages of capitalism" (p. 69). Continuing into the trials and tribulations facing the Zone in 2016, *We are 'Nature' defending itself* discusses the projects, actions and turmoil at the ZAD until 2019. This entails conjuring "everyday magic" and "acting as if" the desired future already exists (p. 76), but also of the "composition"—diversity of actors—on the ZAD and how "political purity" was eroded and turned into "compost" (p. 80-83).

This discussion on composition in the ZAD largely avoids discussing the internal political tensions, discord and events that took place in 2017. Instead, the authors explain the highly controversial period that

preceded the government's cancellation of the airport project in January 2018. The authors discuss their experience with the government's counterinsurgency strategies, the application of coercive force to the Zone and the government's proposed land regularization schemes. The cancellation of the airport project reads like a means for crushing the ZAD, which raises the question of what happens after the cancellation of the project? The French Government proposed a legalization scheme for some occupants of the Zone, which consisted of mapping the land, registering land plots to legal names, drawing tax lines and subjecting and enforcing zoning laws on the territory. In short, laying out the grid of state visibility and pre-emptive control (see Scott, 1998; Vidalou, 2017), which would allow the state greater knowledge of the terrain, its inhabitants and serving to divide people who would then cooperate with the French government's territorial control schemes. Land registration threatened the existing housing constructions and anonymity of the ZAD, but also the autonomous commons so many had struggled to create with everything they had. Fremeaux and Jordan recognize that accepting any type of land registration and state regularization scheme was hotly debated and viewed by many militant inhabitants in the Zone as "an act of dishonorable surrender" (p. 95).

Fremeaux and Jordan, however, disagree with this view of "dishonorable surrender." This surrender, instead, took the form in their mind as a collectively devised "elaborate gamble" and to transform "the odious [land regularization] document meant to be a trap" which "would be hacked" (p. 96). Select Zadists altered or "hacked" the proposed land legalization proposal from the government. This was accomplished by select Zadists creating "The Administrative Self-Defense Bureau", which did everything they could to bend the regularization scheme to their will: and "...the portfolio [handed to the government] presented a more realistic picture of our complex entanglements," the authors write (p. 97). While the word "hack" might be a polished term for 'negotiations', the authors justify their decision as follows:

The 'gamble of the forms' was a ploy that aimed to prevent the zad from becoming just another flash in the pan of history, another free commune shining briefly but ending in bloodshed, a martyred experiment scarified on the altar of radical purity. If all had refused to sign the forms, we have no doubt that all the zadists would have been evicted, dispersed back to the four corners of the world. (p. 99-100).

We are 'Nature' defending itself thus nods to the ever-present contentious tensions within the Zone, yet employs fear of eviction and territoriality—and the connection to land—as a justification for renovating and complying with the land legalization deal.

The book goes on to discuss convivial agroforestry processes, rooted in the understanding that "we are not in the forest, we are part of it and it is part of us" (p. 107). Inhabiting the Zone and connecting with seasonal cycles and nonhuman inhabitants, as well as dissolving the gaze of the technocratic manager or "surveyors and eye-in-the-sky paper maps" is instrumental for constructing commons and re-enchanting a world disenchanted by genocide (e.g. wars, witch-hunts), enclosure and eradication of knowledges (p. 112). This continues today with some regularized farms and projects still in the Zone, but navigating the terms and conditions of the legalization process has imposed on what remains of the ZAD a process of constant negotiation and circumvention.

The European experience of development, according to Fremeaux and Jordan, "is no different from the violence of the colonizers around the world who outlawed Indigenous peoples' ceremonies so as to steal their land and the ritual objects that linked them to it" (p. 112). This relates to Ward Churchill's (2003) critical understanding of colonialism: colonial powers first had to colonize and consolidate within, establishing centralized state powers, before they could outwardly colonize elsewhere and abroad. Acknowledging the government's attempt to eradicate the Zone, *We are 'Nature' defending itself* discusses trauma, learning to heal, the necessity to reinvigorate the ritual of magic—the real art—and "replace extractivism with care, representation with reciprocity" (p. 117). Revisiting the problem of "art-as-we-know-it", embedded in anthropocentrism and colonial dualisms (e.g. mind-body, sentient/non-sentient, male/female, straight/gay) and its connection to biology, the book approaches the harms of objectification

and separating ourselves from our habitats, thus affirming the necessity of rejecting the objectification and separation of lifeways.

We are 'Nature' defending itself brilliantly weaves art, activism and autonomous zones. The authors thread together struggles, lives and the authors' own developmental praxis magnificently, offering a rich narrative immersing the reader into the feelings and sensations of repression, becoming 'nature' and feeling life in struggle. Displaying committed "stages of activism," moving from mainstream social protest, innovating it, and moving toward combative immersion into the Zone over a span of thirty years, the authors include critiques of art, anti-authoritarian politics and autonomist living into a cogent and enriching narrative.

The beautiful wordsmithing, threading of themes, flow and content of this book is truly impressive, a work of art to admire. My familiarity with the Zone makes me feel concern about the textual magic and beauty of this book, which applies a beautiful veneer over a highly contested and heartbreaking ending to the Zone. To the authors' credit, they are clear: "...it is just one version of that [ZAD] story, and others who lived through it would tell it radically differently" (p. 14).

The ZAD story presented in the book is consistent with earlier Mauvaise Troupe Collective (2018; see Dunlap, 2018), whose accounts were repeatedly critiqued for painting a rosy and misleading narrative (Anonymous, 2018). Weaving—instead of revealing entanglements—misleads readers by omitting important aspects of the story, normalizing the highly contested left-wing strategy employed by liberal and dominant factions associated with the Committee for Maintenance and Defense of Occupations (CMDO). The references to proliferating committees and bureaucratizing within *We are 'Nature' defending itself* hints at what is downplayed within the narrative. The suppression of internal dissent (for political unity), censorship practices and presenting the land legalization scheme as a spontaneous "hacking" remain controversial features of this book. By other accounts (see Anonymous 2018, 2021; Crimethinc, 2019), this "spontaneous hacking" was not so spontaneous but has been a vision in the Zone since 2017, and possibly much earlier (see Anonymous 2018, 2021; Crimethinc, 2019).

The imposition of a left reformist strategy, naturalized and justified by Fremeaux and Jordan's narrative, was experienced differently by other Anonymous (2019: 18) inhabitants residing on the Zone, who felt the process "drained the life out of a thriving community, leaving behind some state-sanctioned agricultural project." "We were not here," an Anonymous (2019: 17) *communiqué* explained,

...to save a couple acres for a sustainable eco-friendly agriculture project, nor to add some weight to the balance of a process of negotiations with the state. We were here, we were here [sic], to try to defend the possibility of creating our own spaces, geographic and temporal, outside of the framework imposed by capital and the state" (see also Anonymous 2018).

Said simply, the version of the ZAD story presented in *We are 'Nature' defending itself* is highly contested, and meanwhile oppositional voices are absent within the book.

This book, however, is Fremeaux and Jordan's story, their projection and setting an intention in the late 2010s to repair (or naturalize) the internal trauma and salvage what remained after an intense state-led counterinsurgency strategy to take the ZAD and build the airport. The process narrated by Fremeaux and Jordan omits the level of internal violence, betrayals and internal politicking within the Zone, instead writing off legitimate political concerns as "toxic individualism" (p. 91) and "narrow mindedness" (p. 96). The dreams and lifeways crushed by the political strategy glossed over by Fremeaux and Jordan have generated an enormous amount of pain and hatred in so many, which I have repeatedly seen and tasted personally (Figure 2). This pain and anger have resulted in actions against those who legalized the Zone—or the "victors." On July 5-6, ex-inhabitants burned down the Salamander's School (École des tritons) under construction. "[T]he action," according to the Anonymous (2021) *communiqué*, was dedicated "to all the people who have suffered from the noxious and repressive logic imposed by the CMDO and its world."



Figure 2: The same main intersection as in Figure 1, arriving at D281, the road once closed by the ZAD, November 2022. Source: Author.

We are 'Nature' defending itself extends the CMDO's vision, attempting to refute the critiques of the *communiqués*, sometimes successfully, but mostly unsuccessfully through the reification of the collectivity, the commune and omitting the finer insurrectionary political ecology discussions within these terms: or

relying on the Zapatistas as their reference point. Fremeaux and Jordan's position exemplifies criticisms that political divisions on the Zone largely operate along class lines between the so-called "east" and the "west" (see Anonymous, 2018; Crimethinc, 2019). The authors offer important lessons through their reoccurring life narrative, but the level of societal adjustment and material status achieved roughly 20 years before living on the ZAD, with tenured academic jobs and a mortgage (p. 40) is jarring. The early societal success, and presumably subsequent adjustment the authors had relates to their subjectivity and politics, which is illuminated by one separation, or binary symbolized with the term "activism" placed in the book's subtitle. Despite (rightfully) chastising binaries throughout the book, the term "activism" is still preserved, even though it is a term that separates political activity from life in permanent conflict—which ironically was the whole purpose of the book!

The critique of activism—as separating life, tokenizing political activity and mimicking market processes—was initially made as a result of the Reclaim the Streets demonstrations co-organized by Jordan in 1999 in the UK (as explained in the book), in Andrew X's famous text "Give up activism" (2009 [1999]). The emergence of activism, in addition to the divisions of labor celebrated by the authors (e.g. the press group, etc.), reveals a political subjectivity distant from the non-compromising people who lambast the "despicable betrayal, which took place behind the backs of those who confronted the police on the barricades" (Anonymous, 2021). A betrayal that is rationalized and justified by Fremeaux and Jordan in this book. Separations appear tolerable when they support the divisions of labor common to traditional forms of organizational politics with which social movements are most familiar.

We are 'Nature' defending itself, in all of its eloquence (and truly important messages), demonstrates again how the romanticism of collectivity—often reinforced through reference to the Zapatistas and other Indigenous led struggles in the Americas—can be used as a weapon. Fremeaux and Jordan, after justifying the land regularization scheme with the government, explain:

We who signed could not just let go of the ties we had built here to the locals, farmers, pensioners, city works, and wanderers of all sorts. We could not leave the owls, the black and yellow squirming salamanders, the gnarly oak trees, the mud, and the swallows.... A community is always more than the sum of its parts, more than its political ideal (p. 100).

Territoriality, and connection to land, while often related to militant land defense can, in the end, play into government divide-and-conquer counterinsurgency strategies and potentially betray that land, and the autonomous and self-determined political tensions attached to it.

This story of the ZAD remains highly contested, conditioned by fear and omitting an enormous number of political perspectives and contentions. Yes, the CMDO engaged in typical leftist authoritarian maneuvering to control irreconcilables or the "others" or "a sort of 'zone in the zone' called the east" (Anonymous, 2018: 53). Yet, these irreconcilables—or the "pirate party" as my friend calls them—played into the political traps of the CMDO and their associates. In simplistic terms, both sides are responsible and together created a tragedy that does not appear in Fremeaux and Jordan's narrative. Leftists employed a predictable organizational strategy, and "the pirate party" let it happen through their exposition of anarchist identity and anti-politics (not to be confused with being apolitical) being in permanent conflict. *We are 'Nature' defending itself* is a belated attempt to hold to a legalized territory on the ZAD, but this space is built on the hopes, struggles and political corpses sacrificed to regularize the Zone to a process still being negotiated and under bureaucratic attack in the early 2020s.

Overall, *We are 'Nature' defending itself* triggers a deep tear. In one sense, it is eloquent, sensitive and educational, revealing political strategies, stages of activist development and the tensions and feelings mainstream "climate youth", "concerned citizens", disillusioned Extinction Rebellion members and confused academics would be wise to feel and tap into. On the other hand, the book pushes a nuanced (decentralized) eco-Leninist strategy against the lesser-known voices and stories at the ZAD, notably the less eloquent, non-academic, traumatized, drug friendly people and (rightfully) hate filled anarchist combatants in the Zone. As an observer of the Zone since 2010, visiting it and sporadically living in another

ZAD in southern France (see Dunlap, 2020), this book invites heartbreak and internal discord. This review, I hope, alludes to the contestation and complexity largely omitted in *We are 'Nature' defending itself*, which are tensions and struggles people should anticipate as part of their own participation within autonomous projects and political struggles.

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