Epilogue

In early November 2019, I traveled to Brazil for another field research trip to study the causes of deforestation in the Amazon. Landing in Rio de Janeiro felt wonderful. Rio was my former hometown where I lived for years and immersed myself in the Brazilian culture and lifestyle. The city surprised me again with its beauty and life: from the lovely beaches and mountains with lush green plant life everywhere, to meeting again old friends and colleagues and having deep and important conservations. Clouds covered the many hills at dusk as I wandered on the shoreline of Flamengo with two friends, looking at the cloud-covered top of the Sugar Loaf and wondering with them what the fate of the world will be.

From Rio's rather chilly weather I traveled next to the hot furnace of Brasília, the capital city. When I flew into the city, for a long time I could see from the plane's window soybean fields that had ravaged forest areas: red and yellow fields with red roads that ran between circle-shaped plantations. There were numerous ravines whose edges had been licked bare of trees, sometimes with just a thin line of forest running along the shore of the river. These areas had also been burned, as the Bolsonaro supporters have set fires here as in other places across the country. My colleague living in Brasília came to pick me up and pondered that maybe the fires lit by Bolsonaro supporters – that had grown scandalously large – had caused the delay of rains. I have no proper words to describe how hot it felt when I stepped into the Brasília air. It felt like some god, spirit, or spirits were taking revenge on the capital for setting the fires and the increases in activist murders and rural violence that had skyrocketed in an unforeseen way in 2019. The general atmosphere was one of lawlessness, reflecting the speeches of Bolsonaro urging the populace to deforest. The air and energy were heavy, thirsty. I stayed overnight in the middle of the downtown, between skyscrapers, with concrete walls as my scenery. The atmosphere was negative, completely different from a year ago, when Bolsonaro was not yet in power. Something bad seemed to hang in the air and all I wanted was to get away from downtown. I craved to be in a smaller village – closer to nature and greenery. In this post-apocalyptic,

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post-nature environment there was only glass, cement, and steel, as if highlighting the direction in which we were headed.

I went to Brazil's Congress house to do interviews with politicians and was greeted after the scanners by men who looked like soldiers, wearing military pants, and distributing tracts of God to everyone passing by. My colleague explained to me that these evangelists, including politicians who were part of the phenomenon, used Christianity as a smokescreen for unscrupulous businesses and to increase power, with the aim being to forbid critical thinking and collect money for the leaders of these new churches. Their speeches on television echoed and felt full of hate, lies and slander, fearmongering, and revenge, misleading the people and trying to root out independent thinking and education. This was a big, fast-moving cultural change and it was not only taking place in Brazil. The whole experience of arriving in this city of money and devastation, the visit to Congress, and the Bible, bullet, and bull-touting evangelists' presence set the mood for the forthcoming trip from Cuiaba to Santarém by car.

When leaving Brasília, I had gotten food poisoning and stayed in bed for two days with a high fever; however, after fasting I was feeling better – calmer. Perhaps the food poisoning was a way of expelling all the bad energy that had collected in the city. A storm wind was rising, even though the rains were also late here and coming more feebly. The drought was even worse down south in Pantanal, with massive fires. Still, farmers were waiting for the situation to somehow normalize – as if climate change did not exist and their nature-ravaging actions would not have any impacts. The wind buffeted the trees so that they were bending and sighing, the air was filled with all sorts of loose debris, the sky was cloudy and pink, and there was a rainbow in the distance although there had not been rain. It was 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit). Amid this scene, I observed a line of cars, studded with the flags of Brazil, which drove past honking, playing Brazil's national anthem loudly. Some cars were also playing a parody of "YMCA" by The Village People, whose lyrics mocked the Supreme Court and the left. The message of this car cavalcade made up of rich soybean farmers was that the Supreme Court judges should be removed and the court dismantled. After the long line had passed, night was setting in Cuiaba, but despite the strong winds, no rain came. It had been like that for weeks I heard and heavy rain should have already come. Outside, it constantly looked as if it would rain, but then it did not rain, at most just a little sprinkling.

I pondered if this was what the beginning of the end looks like. The areas north and south of here had been poisoned by large amounts of agrotoxics, which were found even in mothers' milk. The water was depleted, as springs and the beginnings of rivers had been destroyed. Toward the south the destruction was even worse, as before they could get rain it needed to rain here. Yet, a full 24 hours a day television channels were screening videos and commercials on soybean cultivation

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Figure EP.1 A soybean farmholder eyeing his crop at dusk in the endless fields that used to have tall forests. Nova Mutum, Mato Grosso. November 2019. Photo by author.

and ranching, an endless message of continued growth. Canal de Boi, the Channel of Bull, was showing a live auction of bulls, advertising Ruminar, a powder to make cattle grow better. I thought that there is not much space for the Amazon or other forests and life-worlds within that space.

On our way north to visit soybean farmers in Nova Mutum, we drove past endless soybean fields (see Figure EP.1). The lines of soybean trucks we passed on the highway were like trains, carrying away the Amazon and Cerrado to be fed to animals to support meat production in distant places. The landscape was soybean plantations, huge silo complexes, large agribusiness storage facilities, sales points for Bayer agrotoxics, large machinery shops – one after another in seemingly endless succession. The whole BR-163 was filled with this monotonous, repeatitive landscape for hundreds of kilometers in northern Mato Grosso. Like carbon copies, there were corn ethanol plants, soybean silos, tractor sales points on roadsides. It seemed almost as if they were reproducing themselves; as if it was an artificial intelligence that had become blind to its own productivity. I thought that this system is so powerful that it is the real reason behind deforestation and will drag down all that tries to stand against it: As long as there is growth in the demand of feed for meat production genetically modified soy and poisons will travel from these fields of death to a useless protein overload.

In Sinop, the town with the most sawmills in Brazil, over 400 running at any given time, we visited huge piles of logs. Dust hung in the air at sawmills, as fresh

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Figure EP.2 A Munduruku man looking at a bird on a tree at the perimeter they created around their territory in Sawré Muybu, Pará, Brazil. November 2019. Photo by author.

tropical wood was cut into blanks. Large machines moved loads back and forth. We talked for a long time to the municipal environmental director, who told how heart-breaking it was to see the illegal logging of large trees, but also that further away in the Amazon there was still a tree that took 20 people holding hands to fully circle. As I listened, the sun scorched the ground and sweat pearled on my forehead. In the muddy yard of the sawmill the owner told me his story, of how he had arrived at a forest and it was just gone, every last tree. Shortly after this encounter, we visited a protected city forest, which was our first contact with an Amazon forest on this trip. In contrast to the sunblasted sawmill yard, here the air was cooler – the surroundings were green, there were still thick, old trees, and here the forest spirit was still alive.

After several visits to gold-mining areas and burning forests, we also visited an Indigenous village of the Munduruku by the Tapajós River. We drove on the Transamazônica until Bubure port and from there took a boat driven by a young Munduruku man. We stopped after some rapids and gorgeous tall trees on the riversides to the place where the Munduruku had recently marked the borders of their territory by signs and cutting a patrolling route. To walk the length of the route through the forest took three days (see Figure EP.2). The sign showed a

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Munduruku holding a human head, with the text in Munduruku and Portuguese saying, "Mother Earth we have respect [for]," which sent a clear message to trespassers. Our Munduruku guide was standing attentively and silently, being present, in the woods. It was a distinct sight of another time-space, after the business of the city of Itaituba and gold-diggers' hastiness. He pointed to a large bird in the canopy that I had not seen before. We continued the boat ride. A heavy rain and thunderstorm followed us, leaving us completely soaked. The skipper was excellent; I do not know how he managed with the boat, as I could not see much at all. The rain was pouring so hard that it felt like being in a hailstorm. This was a dramatic arrival to the Sawré Muybu village, which rose up on a steep hill among vegetation. I was happy, the rain felt purifying, and it was energizing to walk up the hill carrying our gear amid the thunder strikes and heavy rain.

We stayed for two nights in hammocks in the village. I walked into the forest alone at the end of each day. It was magical, hearing monkeys and feeling the presence of something even bigger than the big trees next to the swidden cultivation areas. The sunset was beautiful and the villagers were playing football, with kids running and playing on the field. Earlier we had swum in the Igarapé, a serene, tranquil stream down in a gorge in the middle of the trees. The Cacique and other villagers gave beautiful interviews on what the Amazon and its forests mean to them, revealing how different their way of relating with and being in the world is in comparison to most people. The Cacique explained that they are the trees, the animals, and the food because everything needs everything else to continue to exist. Visiting this home of the original people of the Amazon was a striking contrast to the scenes of colonization on all the roadsides on the way here. Luckily, there are still many places in the Amazon and elsewhere in the world where reciprocal, respectful ways of living in the web of life are upheld and perpetuated, offering a good life not only for those safeguarding these lifeways by their daily acts, but to all around the planet enjoying of the benefits of forests near and far.

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