Saving Precarious Seeds: Visualisations of Care and Control in Global Seed Banking

'The seeds that could save a post-apocalyptic world'

We are witness to a violent loss of biodiversity globally and experience the impacts of anthropogenic climate change on food security. Undeniably the Global South, home to most of the planet’s biodiversity, is more vulnerable to this. Seed banks as a comforting ‘solution’ have captured imaginations since the launch of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in the Arctic in 2008. ‘Norway’s gift to the world’, functions as a cryopolitical insurance system - or rather an ‘ideological mechanism of reassurance’ (Demos, 2017)? - housing security deposits from a global network of seed banks.

Rooted in the symbolic optimism of the seed, seed banks are an affective ‘doomsday’ metaphor, both for the dystopian potential of a derailed neoliberal future as well as humanity’s domination of ‘nature’. Three case studies of seed banking practices offer divergent imaginaries of control, care and vulnerability from anti-capitalist sites of resistance to seminomadic precarious collections and bureaucratic risk managers.

To analyse the precarity that seed banks instrumentalise and are exposed to, I draw from a biopolitical reading of slow violence - ‘a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space’ (Nixon, 2011:2) as the context from which to investigate the roles of seed banks vis-à-vis inequalities produced by climate change, war or neoliberal capitalism. On this basis I consider how seed banks respond to this through the affective imaging of temporality, vulnerability and care.

Methodology

Image and discourse analysis: I investigate visual artefacts produced on and by selected seed banking practices - the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard, the displaced ICARDA dry lands seed bank, originally in Aleppo, Syria, and the Navdanya grassroots seed-saving movement in India. Bringing together post- and decolonial theory, feminist Science and Technology Studies and affect theory in an iconographic and discursive analysis, I analyse how e.g. image material of the Global Seed Vault (above, left; top, right) reveals a techno-determinist, resilience-driven approach to care and labour in the depiction of workers and architectural spaces, rather than the focus on fragility, nurturing and co-dependency emphasised in the other practices (above, middle and right).

Research Question & Hypotheses

The challenges for seed banks lie in developing (1) an affective (image) politics to express the banks’ claims to territory, visual representation and sovereignty/heritage, and (2) a double temporality of both potential infinity in their capacity for care and control, and urgency in response to the vulnerabilities they face. How are seed banks participating in and objects of visual and theoretical discourses around anthropogenic violence and inequality through the careful performance of vulnerability and control?

→ Seed banks are actively contributing to the iconography and temporalities of the Anthropocene and its affective politics.

→ They make scientific and political claims on the control of ‘nature’, knowledge and future scenarios whilst feeding into discourses of vulnerability and violence.

References