

Halloween, the Earth and the Dead. What Remains Beyond Commodification

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From the rhythms of farming life to pumpkins carved with Rural Hack's international young researchers. A reflection on memory, the limits of our world, and the possibility of learning to live together.

By Alex Giordano

Before plastic witches, costumes ordered online, and pumpkins turned into decorative accessories, there were farmers. Above all, there was the land. And there was a way of inhabiting the world in which time was measured not only by calendars, but by the availability of food, the fertility of the soil, the hours of daylight, and the life and death of animals. If we want to understand something about Halloween beyond its commodification, I

believe this is where we must begin. Not with some supposedly pure origin of the celebration, which never existed, but with the material conditions in which some of its traditions took shape.

Farmers Lived by a Different Sense of Time

An important part of Halloween's roots can be traced to *Samhain*, the festival that marked the transition into the cold season among ancient Celtic communities. It was a decisive moment in the agricultural and pastoral calendar. Much of the harvest was complete, livestock returned from summer pastures, and people took stock of their provisions and what they would need to survive the winter. This was not a seasonal change to be contemplated through a window. It could be a matter of survival. For those communities, the land was not a backdrop against which human existence unfolded. It was a web of relationships, constraints, knowledge, and uncertainties on which existence itself depended.

Halloween is not an unchanged reproduction of Samhain. Centuries of cultural encounters and transformations have brought together Celtic beliefs, the Christian calendar of All Saints' Day and the commemoration of the dead, local customs, and, more recently, the Anglo-American culture industry. Yet the agricultural core of this history deserves our attention. The end of the harvest demanded an acknowledgement of limits. What had been produced did not depend on human will alone. Rainfall, insects, frost, seeds, animals, and the characteristics of the soil all mattered. Through their work, farmers knew something we struggle to recognise today, even when we speak of sustainability. **Nothing makes itself. Not even our food.**

And perhaps it is precisely this **sense of limits** that we have lost most profoundly. I find myself thinking about it these days, when, quite apart from Halloween, the world itself is frightening. Wars are frightening, as is the ease with which destruction has once again become part of ordinary political language. The climate crisis is frightening, no longer merely a forecast but an everyday experience. So is our growing difficulty in imagining a future that amounts to anything more than an endless succession of emergencies. I do not think we are simply afraid of what lies ahead. We are also becoming increasingly aware that much of what threatens us has been produced by our own way of inhabiting the planet. We have called it progress whenever we have managed to push the boundaries of appropriation, extraction, and consumption a little further. We have treated ecological limits as technical

obstacles, social relationships as economic variables, and life itself as a resource at our disposal. Now we are beginning to confront the consequences of that presumption.

The word *collapse* has entered our vocabulary, and I no longer think it can be dismissed as an exaggeration. It does not necessarily describe a single, sudden event affecting everyone in the same way. Some territories and populations are already experiencing the breakdown of the conditions that once made a dignified life possible, while others continue consuming as though those conditions were inexhaustible. Fear, too, is profoundly unequal in its distribution. This is why recovering a sense of limits cannot mean delivering a generic sermon about restraint, especially to those who already have far too little. **Recognising the Earth's limits means confronting power, the distribution of resources, privilege, and the responsibilities of those who have built a model of development on the assumption that growth would never encounter a threshold.** Ancient farming communities were not ideal societies. They knew inequalities and forms of violence we have no reason to romanticise. But their relationship with time reminds us of something we have suppressed. The material conditions of life cannot be negotiated away indefinitely.





Darkness, Soil, and the Memory of the Dead

By the end of October, at our latitudes, the days have already grown noticeably shorter. The autumn equinox passed several weeks earlier, and as the Earth continues its orbit around the Sun, the tilt of its axis brings progressively fewer hours of daylight to the Northern Hemisphere. There is no mysterious cosmic alignment on the night of October 31, nor does Halloween necessarily coincide with a full moon. What happens is more tangible. Trees shed their leaves, some organisms slow their activity, animals change their habits, and fields enter another phase of agricultural work. While the Southern Hemisphere experiences a different season, here the landscape is changing before our eyes.

We have learned to describe all this as the death of nature, but that is only a partial image. Decomposition returns organic matter to the soil, seeds preserve future possibilities, and beneath fallen leaves a vast amount of life continues beyond our sight. This does not entitle us to turn individual death into a comforting promise of rebirth. Rather, it reminds us that in living systems, the end of one form does not mean the end of every relationship that form made possible. Farming communities worked through this experience with rituals, fires,

stories, masks, and practices of remembrance. The boundary between the living and the dead became symbolically more permeable just as the visible world was changing around them. **Ritual did not erase fear. It gave fear a shared language.**

Not all festivals honouring ancestors descend from the same tradition, and not all take place in autumn. Mexico's *Día de los Muertos* brings together Indigenous and Catholic histories; Japan's *Obon* is generally celebrated in summer; Korea's *Chuseok* is associated with both the harvest and family remembrance. Bringing these traditions into conversation does not mean erasing their differences. It means recognising a question that returns across human cultures. How do we make room in the lives of those who remain for those who are no longer here? Memory has never been merely a private exercise. It is also how a community recognises that it has been shaped by people, labour, knowledge, and wounds that came before it.

The Coccozza, My Father, and a Small Flame



I knew illuminated pumpkins long before I knew Halloween.

As a child, I would go with my father into the countryside and ask a farmer for a *coccozza*, as

we called a pumpkin in our local dialect. We would take it home, cut it open, hollow it out, and turn it into a *capa di morte*, a death's head. Eyes, nose, mouth, and a candle inside. I remember the work of our hands, the concentration needed not to ruin everything, and the satisfaction of watching a frightening face light up from within. It was a small domestic marvel, made from a vegetable, a knife, and time spent together. I cannot say exactly what historical path that particular custom had followed. I know it belongs to my memory, and that even today my father is the first person I think of whenever I see a carved pumpkin.

Halloween entered my imagination later, through American television. I believe I first heard about it in an episode of *Happy Days*. It seemed exotic, something belonging to a distant world, and I did not realise that I had already practised a remarkably similar gesture during my childhood in Southern Italy. Traditions do not need to be identical in order to meet. *Jack-o'-lanterns* have a history that includes carved turnips in Ireland and, later, pumpkins that became common in North America. My *capa di morte* had another history, or at least another route by which it reached me. What brings these practices together is their capacity to turn something grown in the soil into an object that tells a story, and a manual activity into a relationship between generations.

Commodification becomes a problem when it does more than sell the objects associated with a celebration. It begins to replace the experience those objects once made possible. We buy a pumpkin that has already been decorated and lose the time it takes to carve one. We purchase a mask and give up the possibility of inventing it ourselves. We consume representations of fear without asking what truly frightens us in our own lives. I am not troubled by Halloween travelling across borders, changing languages, mingling with other cultures, or becoming an occasion for enjoyment. The Mediterranean, after all, should have taught us that cultures live through encounters and crossings. What interests me is who still has the possibility of producing meaning, and who is reduced to consuming meanings manufactured elsewhere.

Pumpkins at Societing Lab, and Lives in Transformation



This is also why, every year, I dedicate a small Halloween gathering and playful workshop to Rural Hack's young researchers and fellows, who have arrived in Naples from different parts of the world and become part of the Societing Lab community. We gather around a table, choose our pumpkins, cut them open, carve or paint them, laugh at the results, and get our hands dirty. The photographs will probably show funny faces, concentration, smiles, and pumpkins turned into the most improbable characters. What interests me most, however, is what photographs cannot fully reveal. People with different languages, educational backgrounds, memories, and expectations who, for a few hours, are no longer simply international students, researchers, guests, or foreigners. They become people making something together.

For many of them, arriving in Italy has meant leaving behind a home, a family, friendships, habits, and a familiar way of understanding the world. Studying in a new country is not simply a matter of moving from one university to another. It means crossing a discontinuity, losing some points of reference, discovering that even the most ordinary gestures require a new kind of learning. There is something here that recalls the symbolic structure of rites of passage, without our gathering claiming, of course, to be an initiation ritual. **Part of one's previous identity must find another way of existing, while a new one gradually takes shape.** When I think of their death and rebirth as scholars, I mean this transformation, which does not erase their origins but brings them into new relationships with people, questions, and possibilities. No transformation is painless, and no rebirth is guaranteed. That is precisely why I believe places are needed where these transitions can be accompanied without anyone claiming the right to direct them.

I travelled extensively when I was young, and I often experienced what it meant to be a stranger. Yet I also met people who made room for me in their lives, allowing me to feel at home in places where I had only just arrived. Today I try to give something of that generosity back. But it would be wrong to describe this as a one-way gesture of hospitality. Listening to the stories of our young researchers, to their interpretations of the countries they come from, to the contradictions and hopes they carry with them, is an extraordinary opportunity for us to learn as well. It helps us escape, if only a little, the comfort of stereotypes and the simplifications through which the world is so often presented to us. A gathering cannot, by itself, build peace or overcome inequality. But without places of proximity, without bodies meeting and learning to recognise one another, even the word peace risks becoming an

abstraction.

And at a time when the world seems increasingly organised around separation, borders, opposing identities, and new forms of hostility, this proximity also carries political meaning. Not because a pumpkin-carving workshop can stop a war, but because **the possibility of imagining a peaceful future also depends on our ability to free people from the simplified identities through which they are represented and, all too often, set against one another.** When we listen to a story told by someone from another country, we discover how little we actually know about the lives on which we are constantly ready to pronounce judgement. And how necessary it is to learn to listen again.

Learning to Make-With, Even as the World Changes





In this small convivial practice, I also recognise a much broader question about our times. We speak endlessly of digital transformation and artificial intelligence, almost as though changing our tools were equivalent to changing how we understand the world. Yet the transformation ahead of us is also, and perhaps above all, cognitive. We will have to let certain categories that sustained industrial modernity die, beginning with the illusion of the self-sufficient individual and the reduction of nature to a stockpile of resources. *Sympoiesis*, as developed by Donna Haraway from the work of M. Beth Dempster, suggests another grammar. **We do not make ourselves alone. We become who we are by making-with others**, human and nonhuman, within relationships that change us and for which we bear responsibility. This is not a promise of harmony. It is a more demanding way of recognising dependencies, conflicts, and responsibilities.

There is also something profoundly hacker-like about opening a pumpkin rather than simply buying one that has already been prepared. We take an ordinary object, discover its interior, change its function, and return it to a use invented together. This is not, by itself, an adequate metaphor for understanding technological infrastructures, but it recalls a disposition I consider indispensable. Opening black boxes, understanding apparatuses,

questioning who sets their rules and who extracts value from their operation. The *profanation* discussed by Giorgio Agamben is not simply an act of destruction. It is the possibility of restoring to common use what has been separated from us and withdrawn from our reach. In a world governed by platforms, data, and opaque systems, that disposition bears directly on our freedom to know and to act.

The Light That Cannot Be Bought

I have no desire to recover an authentic Halloween and set it against a supposedly false one. Cultures are not immovable objects to be preserved under glass. What I want is for us not to stop questioning the relationships a celebration can generate. That is why we continue carving pumpkins together. Because play makes possible conversations that would hardly arise during an institutional presentation; because a research community does not grow only by publishing papers, but by learning to share time, gestures, and uncertainty; because the knowledge we try to produce at Rural Hack matters if it also helps us inhabit the world differently alongside one another.





I think back to the candle my father used to light inside our capa di morte. Its light shone through the cuts we had made together. I do not believe every wound produces knowledge, or that every loss makes us better. But I continue to believe that our ability to inhabit change depends on how we choose to move through it with others. The land, the dead, seeds kept for the following season, young people arriving in an unfamiliar city, hands carving a pumpkin. They are not the same thing. Yet they bring us back to a common question. What conditions are we willing to create so that something, and someone, may continue to live and transform?

The problem, in the end, is not that we have begun celebrating Halloween. It is that we risk no longer knowing what we are celebrating.

Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/halloween-the-earth-and-the-dead-what-remains-beyond-commodification/>