

Jumana Manna  
**Where Nature  
Ends and  
Settlements  
Begin**

01/16

### Lockdown

I came back home in spring to shoot a film about foraging wild food. At its heart, it is a chase film between the Israeli Nature Patrol and elderly Palestinians who gather plants listed as protected species, particularly the wild-growing, artichoke-like tumble thistle 'akkoub, aka "green gold." Still in the making, this film is ultimately concerned with what is made extinct and what gets to live on; who gets to decide the fate of herb-picking cultures, and the options that remain for those who don't. Food manifests as a container for family and community histories tied to land – traditions that face suppression encoded into the legal dynamic of nature protection. The shoot has been cancelled due to the Covid-19 lockdown, and instead I find myself quarantined with my parents in Shu'fat, East Jerusalem.



Asim Abu Shakra, *Cactus*, 1986. Gouache on paper. 15 × 15 cm.  
Courtesy of Gallery One.

My daily activities are like that of a preteen or pensioner. They feature small adventures like foraging, collecting miscellaneous objects around the neighborhood, home-improvement projects, reading, drawing, watching films, and writing. Having slowly accepted the serendipitous gifts offered by the virus, I begin enjoying my exilic nostalgia, a new-old way of being present in Jerusalem after having lived abroad for over a decade. In years past, I remember lamenting not spending enough time here, popping in for a few weeks at a time to shoot and gather my cultural caché, only to exit before the weight of this place could get to me. Lingering fears of having become a cultural



Goats and sheep in the valley. Shu'fat, East Jerusalem. Courtesy of the author.

tourist in my hometown are now, thankfully, relieved.

I go walking in the neighborhood every day. I cross paths with animals, plants, and piles of scrap. I look at the neighbors looking at me, and get déjà vu of lethargic summer days, when school was out and there was time – lots of time. Helicopters watch us from above, and soundscapes from construction sites continue despite the strict curfew measures. As expected, Israel responds to the virus with a militarization of medical discourse. It fills the streets with the army, police, and border control, and it bypasses a Knesset vote and authorizes Shin Bet<sup>1</sup> tracking technologies to enforce social distancing. In one joint private-public effort, an Israeli tech company samples the voices of coronavirus patients, searching for clues about the illness in a person's voice and breathing patterns. A dataset of people gasping for breath.<sup>2</sup>

While picking wild edibles under quarantine, I've been thinking about the paradoxes inherent in the act of preservation – the politics behind the civilizational mask of a settler-colonial context. Red-listing nonhuman life to shield it from human damage on the one hand, and protecting populations from the nonhuman threat of an illness on the other, are not quite comparable activities. Yet the pandemic has highlighted varying governance structures and the intertwined politics of care all over the world. Within the immediate surroundings to which I have been confined, walking and writing have become the mediums through which to think about the militarization of biological survival, as it gets pitted against other sociopolitical rights. This text, and eventually the film, are exercises in imagining alternative, affirmative care structures that remain, within and beyond the current reality, aligned towards plant and human life alike.

### Shu'fat

I grew up in Shu'fat, a Palestinian neighborhood located on the historic Jerusalem-Ramallah road, about three kilometers north of the Old City of Jerusalem. Throughout the Ottoman Empire, it was one of many villages in Liwa al-Quds (the district of Jerusalem) that grew to be an extension of the city from the first half of the twentieth century onwards. At the time of East Jerusalem's annexation by Israel in 1967, Shu'fat had some three thousand inhabitants. By the time my parents built a house there in the early 1990s, that number had grown to fifteen thousand. Today, Shu'fat has about thirty-five thousand residents.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s and '80s, few other Arab villages and neighborhoods around Jerusalem, including Beit Hanina and Beit Safafa, still had available and affordable land.

This availability and proximity weaved a new urban fabric made of growing Jerusalemite families, and early waves of Palestinian citizens of Israel arriving to the city from their villages for study and work.<sup>4</sup>

The heart of old Shu'fat maintains certain traditional architectural characteristics: domed roofs, thick one-to-two-story stone buildings, gardens with fruit trees, and *sanasel* – stone walls demarcating cultivated lands. These charming rural qualities did not always emerge out of the residing families' desire or choice, but rather out of a sustained strategy encoded into Israeli zoning laws. The strategy consisted in limiting the construction volume within a plot of land, in order to restrict Palestinian residents and manage the Arab "demographic time bomb." This racist phrase is often used to refer to the growing Arab population under Israeli jurisdiction, particularly in Jerusalem, where all means are deployed to maintain a Jewish majority.<sup>5</sup>

On the eastern side of the neighborhood is Shu'fat refugee camp, the only Palestinian camp located inside Jerusalem's municipal borders. As a teenager, I spent a few summers training in the local pool there. It was a concrete hole with water so brown that it was impossible to see further than a meter through our Swedish goggles. Today my parents buy their fruits and vegetables there. The camp is frequently referenced in the media as a pocket of lawlessness, with high rates of hard drug use and trafficking. The Israeli settlements that surround our neighborhood and the camp are many, and are all built on expropriated land to ensure that there is no territorial and social continuity between the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. Instead, marginalized communities encircle the separation wall with unstable, rapidly built high-rises that house families desperately trying to hold onto their Jerusalem residence status.<sup>6</sup>

To the west of us is Shu'fat Ridge, a hillside that runs along the highway exiting the city. The hill used to be a planted pine forest, and up until the 1990s it was marked as a public green space to improve the air and quality of life for nearby residents. My brothers and I used to play there as kids. But as former Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek confessed after this area was "unfrozen" and earmarked for the construction of the Ramat Shlomo settlement in the early nineties, the primary purpose of defining Shu'fat Ridge as a green area was in fact to prevent Arabs from building there, until it was time to build a new Jewish neighborhood.<sup>7</sup>

Today all that separates Shu'fat from Ramat Shlomo is a two-lane road, beneath which our sewage flows in unison.



A construction site in Shu'fat. Courtesy of the author.



The valley, Shu'fat, and the Ramat Shlomo settlement straight ahead. Courtesy Aline Khoury.

## The Valley

I step outside my parents' house and walk westwards to the *sahel* (flat plane), through the old village, towards what remains of the olive groves that run beneath the bridges and alongside the highways exiting the city. Here, at the edges of the neighborhood, I become acquainted with a valley that kept me close to the magic of spring and allowed me to live through what I could not film. I look at the limestone rocks peppered across the hills. They are inhabited by various growths, and marked by signs of former lives. Two palm-sized depressions are carved into a bed of limestone – ancient basins to collect rainwater for animals. There are rocks that indicate cave openings. Some contain signs of an oil or wine press, while others serve as habitats for plants, snails, the pods of microorganisms, and suntanning beds for lizards. To my surprise, gazelles regularly visit this valley, leaving little excretion pellets behind on their paths. We often meet and stop to exchange looks. I move closer; they run away.

A multitude of edible plants grow in this valley, as in much of the hilly landscape of Palestine/Israel. My parents, who forage frequently, both rave and complain about how quickly the fridge gets filled with greens that they have to wash, chop, and cook – before even going to the market. Between the months of February and May, they collect the following plants: *khubeizeh* (mallow), *shomar* (fennel), *za'tar* (thyme), *'elt* or *hindbeh* (dandelion), *hummeid* (bitter dock), *loof* (black calla), *wara' zquqiah* or *tutu* (ivy-leaved cyclamen), *halayoon* (wild asparagus), and the much-celebrated *'akkoub* (gundelia). It is indeed possible to live off of these wild leaves and vegetables in the springtime and only go to the grocer for a bag of onions, salt, olive oil, and perhaps some grains. This novelty is particularly poignant in times like these, where supermarket racks and trollies are not only potential virus transmitters, but also a symbol of the world's agricultural and ecological imbalance.

Many of the plants that grow in the region, once known as the Fertile Crescent, are wild relatives of the cultivated legumes that are sold in supermarkets today. The seasonal foraging practices here, as elsewhere, predate the rhythms of agricultural cultivation and state-imposed commercial and sovereign interests. Collecting wild-growing food was the backbone of human survival for millennia, and continued to be a daily practice alongside agriculture for just as long. In recent years, foraging has seen a resurgence of popularity across much of the world: for some it's a leisurely weekend activity, a way of being close to nature, and for others, a

means of survival – a safety net in precarious times. Inheriting knowledge about plants from my mother brought little moments of happiness, accompanied by the joy of witnessing the transformations of spring, the growths and disappearances of flowers, smells and changes in light quality from week to week. I felt so fortunate to live this magic again. Throughout the quarantine, foraging became a hybrid performance of food sovereignty as well as culinary delight; it is for me an intimate practice that strengthened my sense of belonging and connection to the landscape.

Out of this plethora of forageable food growing in Palestine/Israel, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) has listed three varieties as protected species: *'akkoub* (*Gundelia tournefortii*), *za'atar* (*Majorana syriaca*), and *miramiyyeh* (*Salvia tribola*). These are considered hard to find, as they grow in limited microclimates and are indeed often over-foraged. On my daily walks in the valley, I have made a new acquaintance, a shepherd named Abu Said. He has shared his knowledge of the area with me – a veritable embodied map of what edible food grows where. Most importantly, he's pointed me to where *'akkoub* grows in large quantities, and so my mother and I equip ourselves with thick gloves, knives, and bags, and get ready for our excursion.

*'Akkoub* tastes like a cross between asparagus and artichoke. It is a culinary obsession for many Palestinians, the utmost delicacy. For those who did not grow up eating it, however, it is simply an irrelevant thistle. Botanists have recorded the wide-ranging uses of this plant, and judging from its traces found at Neolithic sites in the region, its consumption dates back at least ten thousand years.<sup>8</sup> They say that *'akkoub* was mainly cooked like a vegetable, very much like we eat it today.<sup>9</sup> It is very rarely cultivated, and grows wildly on open limestone slopes and in reddish soil, from early February to early May, depending on elevation and rain patterns. It does not like turned-over soil, and wherever there are spills from construction sites or marks from screeching jeep tires, *'akkoub* is nowhere to be found. It is known for its wide range of health benefits: it can treat diabetes, liver diseases, chest pain, heart problems, stroke, gastric pain, diarrhea, and bronchitis. It is antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and anticarcinogenic. By the summer, the *'akkoub* dries and tumbles through the hills, spreading its seeds, and only goats are left chewing through its parched leaves.

On our *'akkoub* hunt, my mother and I clip the thistle at its base, slightly below soil level. We strip away the thorny leaves, and once we make it home, we meticulously shave off the

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A sack full of foraged 'akkoub in the Golan Heights. This quantity can take up to two hours for one person to collect. Once the thorns are cleaned, it will make a meal for a small family. Courtesy of the author.

remaining spikes before cooking. Our fingers turn black during this process of getting to the edible heart of the plant. The heart, along with the thicker stems, gets sautéed with onions and olive oil, or cooked with pieces of meat, sometimes covered with a yogurt sauce. For me, 'akkoub foraging and peeling is a Corona activity: a prickly passing of the time.

For as long as I can remember, we would get 'akkoub from my aunts in the Upper Galilee. They would have already generously done the hard labor of cleaning the plant of its thorns, and we would prepare it for cooking. My aunts still live within the routines and time-space of rural life, wherein picking and peeling 'akkoub is not considered time wasted. The plant also happens to be much more plentiful in the north, in Nablus, the Galilee, and most of all in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. Only as an adult did I understand that my aunts, now in their seventies and eighties, are perpetual scofflaws. Picking 'akkoub has been deemed illegal by the Israeli authorities since 2005, and if you ask Palestinians why that is, many would say that it is "because Arabs like it very much."

### The Law

Za'atar, the most widely used herb in any Palestinian (or Levantine) kitchen, was the first edible plant to be red-listed in Israeli law books. It was 1977 when Israel's then minister of agriculture, Ariel Sharon, declared it a protected species, effectively placing a total ban on the tradition of collection, punishable by hefty fines and up to three years in prison. There were no official scientific studies published to legitimize the ban; rather, it was presented as a "gut" decision. Rumor has it that Sharon caught onto the symbolic value of za'atar after the 1976 siege of Tel al-Za'atar, Arabic for "thyme hill."<sup>10</sup> This Palestinian refugee camp, established north of Beirut in 1948, suffered one of the worst massacres of the Lebanese Civil War in a battle fought between the armed factions of the PLO and the Christian Lebanese Militia – the very same phalangist militia with whom Sharon would form an alliance in the 1982 massacre of Sabra and Shatila. Soon after the za'atar ban, a kibbutz in the Galilee started cultivating the herb and selling it en masse back to Palestinians, as well as exporting it to Arab countries, disguised by its packaging as a Palestinian product. The initiators of this project were the former governor of agriculture in the West Bank, Ze'ev Ben Herut, and his son, Yoram Ben Herut. Through extensive time spent with Palestinians, Ze'ev was able to gather the best recipes for za'atar mixes (various quantities of thyme, sumac, sesame seeds, and salt) from his Arab friends, catering to their tastes and market demands. This early example

of food appropriation, a well-publicized and widespread strategy today (humus, falafel, etc.), is one of many reminders of the occupation as an investment project, a military and technologically driven testing ground that services Israel's multilayered economies of extraction.

Nearly three decades after the za'atar ban, miramiyyeh, a sage variety primarily used for tea, and 'akkoub were also added to the list of protected species. This law amendment was supported by *science*, in the form of a 1995 research paper by Didi Kaplan, Israeli botanist and employee of the INPA. Kaplan and his colleagues' research showed that over-foraging of 'akkoub causes dwindling growth in the wild, as it has a negative effect on the flowering and rejuvenation of the plant. Kaplan, however, was against a total ban, recommending "to restrict harvesting for domestic purposes only," and was adamant about preventing commercial exports to neighboring countries.<sup>11</sup> Yet, due to the difficulty of enforcement and the slippage of scientific authority into the legal-political complex, the Ministry of Environment ended up passing a total ban instead of adopting a more nuanced approach. A common argument that INPA employees voiced to me during my field research was: "How can we know whether these ten women in the valley all work for one man who goes to sell them in the market, or whether they are just picking a basket to feed their family?" Since Kaplan's paper, there has not been a single study following up on the impacts of the protection law on the plant's status in the wild.<sup>12</sup> And yet hundreds of people – exclusively Arabs – have been fined and gone to trial over the collection of 'akkoub and za'atar.<sup>13</sup> These preservation laws constitute a thin ecological veil for racist legislation designed to further alienate Palestinians and Syrians in the occupied Golan Heights from their lands.<sup>14</sup> This is land that, in many cases, has been expropriated by the Israeli state and administered as Jewish towns, settlements, nature reserves, military training areas, and other forms of "state land."

### Preservation under Zionism

Preservation measures have always been a double-edged sword. As our quarantine experience reminds us, every act of protection is accompanied by an erasure of another kind. The key question is often not whether to safeguard, but how and at what cost. In colonial contexts in particular, preservation laws have come as top-down decisions, imposed by the colonizer, armed with a claim to scientific expertise, and restricting the "destructive tendencies" of the "ignorant natives." This dynamic has been particularly consistent in the national Zionist

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e-flux journal #113 — november 2020 Jumana Manna  
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My mother, Aziza, sorting her foraged goods. Courtesy of the author.

project, which has worked against the potential of a reciprocal exchange with the enemy other. Zionism has developed into an apartheid apparatus, a world cut in two, where the sovereign is in antagonism and vertical superiority vis-à-vis the Palestinian Arabs. Frantz Fanon likened master-subject relations in such colonial worlds to animal life where relations never lead to an affective community or common realm.<sup>15</sup> The master relegates his subjects to the category of lesser-than-human, thereby remaining forever untouched by their speech and subjecthood. In this symbolic structure, Palestinians are always on the receiving end, subjected to the law rather than subjects of its making. This sort of preservation impulse is particularly ironic in the case of the ‘akkoub ban, where a plant which is essential to northern Palestinian cuisine, and unheard of by most Israelis, is protected from the threat of Palestinians. Yet again, Israeli officials have forgotten to ask us what we think.

To restore a site or an object to its assumed and ultimately imagined original state often entails a preservation effort that severs the thing from its living environment. National Zionism constitutes a restoration event, a Judeo-Christian messianic effort to selectively *return*

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what is believed to be the original, or “natural,” state of the land to Jewish hands, excluding others’, through the idealized modern configuration of being-in-common: the nation-state. In this ever-extending frontier – literally and conceptually, and along the lines of modernity at large – history-making has been a secularized version of messianic time.<sup>16</sup> Zionism did not stop at uncovering an archaeological site, locating the travelling sound waves of the music of the Second Temple, or speculating about the mentioning of ‘akkoub and za’atar in the Old Testament. This teleological construct of a state has historically used preservation and protection measures to further legitimize its claims to the land and reinforce its self-image by all means and in all fields, not least through conceptions of “nature.”

The best-known example of a nationalized landscape – a reconfigured landscape designed to mirror the state’s image – is the extensive monocultural planting of pine trees funded by the Jewish National Fund (JNF). This practice grew commonplace when Palestine/Israel gradually became the homeland of Ashkenazi Jews, and Europe the object of nostalgia. “Making the desert bloom” was not a mere metaphor for the Zionist project; rather, by



Aziza smelling Syrian catnip.  
Courtesy of the author.

planting hundreds of man-made forests, Ashkenazis could imagine being back in Leipzig while living in Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup> The majority of afforestation projects were intended not only to make the “primitive,” semi-arid hills of Palestine look more “civilized” according to European eyes, but also to erase the traces of the over four hundred Palestinian villages that were destroyed during the Nakba of 1948, after their inhabitants were forced into exile.

With the rise of environmentalism in the 1990s, the JNF realized that it was not just the Palestinians who were erased; much of the flora and fauna of these lands was decimated along with them.<sup>18</sup> The intrusive acidity of the pine trees prevented other vegetation from growing back, and the over-prevalence of the pines increased the frequency and force of wildfires. This echoes disasters in Australia, North and South America, Portugal, and elsewhere. In California in particular, the erasure of indigenous American traditions of managed burning has caused an overgrowth of shrubbery, which, along with the spiking rates of global warming, has resulted in chronically uncontrollable fires. Today, Native American communities have partnered with the US Forest Service to steward land for traditional values and wildfire management.<sup>19</sup> In a similarly revisionist vein, environmentalists realized that draining the swamplands of Hula, in Galilee, in the 1950s damaged the migration routes of millions of birds flying between Europe and Africa. So in the mid-nineties it was partially re-flooded in an effort to bring them back. The past century has seen many examples of this kind of “misjudgment” and attempted repair: from desertification in the south – the Naqab/Negev – due to the depletion of ground water resulting from the displacement of Bedouin populations, to grazing limitations that have affected Arab herders. Yet unlike other settler-colonial contexts such as the United States, Canada, or Australia, when the paradigmatic shift towards the politics of sustainability began to take root in Israel, it was not accompanied by an official apology or acknowledgement of historical crimes committed. As slim and ineffectual as these utterances have been in the West, Israel has not yet admitted that the displacement of a people went hand in hand with violence committed against the land. Instead, the new “green” measures since the nineties have been co-opted into the historical rhetoric of protection, where the binary relations of power continue to be reinforced to this day.

Despite the above-mentioned environmental “mistakes,” there is some ecological basis to the fear that ‘akkoub, miramiyyeh, and za’atar may be going extinct in

the wild, well beyond the specifics of Israel/Palestine. Elderly people throughout the country and in neighboring Jordan and Lebanon attest that these plants are much harder to find than they used to be. This new scarcity is also felt throughout Iran’s Isfahani province, where it has already become common to intentionally plant ‘akkoub because the market demand is higher than what wild growth can provide.<sup>20</sup> Yet like most looming extinctions of biological life, the driving factors are damage to habitat, population growth, urbanization, and climate change. When it comes to plant foraging, increased demand and unsustainable overharvesting are contributing factors, but are rarely primary causes. Professor Nativ Dudai, a botanist who has researched za’atar, confirms this in an interview:

No one talks about the fact that we, the Jewish [Israelis], destroy much more za’atar than the Arabs pick. Do you know how many great za’atar populations were uprooted by bulldozers? In Har Adar or Elyaqim interchange – locations with beautiful amounts of za’atar, and all of it is now gone. But the Arab? He picks five kilograms and gets a fine.<sup>21</sup>

Negotiating the politics of plant extinction with an occupier is always complicated, especially in the context of Palestine, where over the past seventy years Palestinians themselves have been treated as an invasive species in urgent need of elimination and control. The protection of one form of life – nonhuman life – has been used as an extra tool to suffocate a people who have survived attempts at cultural erasure and ethnic cleansing.

This is an ontological paradox: the same state that creates security lists, kill lists, terrorist lists, and other databases to “identify humans who risk to threaten” also establishes lists of nonhumans identified as threatened species, elevated to the political status of being in need of rescue.<sup>22</sup> The necropolitical state of Israel builds illusions of freedom and democracy through enmity and destruction, through a will to kill, while simultaneously adopting environmental rhetoric that claims to protect nature as virgin land, conveniently failing to recognize Palestinians’ right to the land and self-determination. Instead, ancient Palestinian land practices are framed as an inherent threat to nature, and thus the right of Palestinians to access that nature is revoked. In the contested landscape of Palestine/Israel, then, the continued collection of ‘akkoub and za’atar in the wild, despite and in spite of the ban, is an act of both survival and anti-colonial resistance.



Tell el-Ful, overlooking East Jerusalem and the West Bank neighborhoods of Shu'fat, Beit Hanina, Bir Nabal, Nabi Samuil, Al-Jib, and Qalandia, and the settlements of Ramot and Giva't Ze'ev. Courtesy of the author.

Foraging these plants is part of a bid to hold on to forms of memory and know-how that are fast eroding.

### Court Battles

An Israeli preservation law called the “National Parks, Natural Reserves, and National and Memorial Sites Law of 1998” has been more like a pharmakon: a remedy and a poison at once. Many foragers claim that the law itself acts to propel commercial foraging. At times, in their haste and fear of being caught, foragers, especially those less familiar with the tradition, uproot the plant rather than cutting it at its base, thus depriving it of the possibility of regrowth. Others get a kick out of the illicit trade and enjoy putting up a defiant middle finger to Israel’s unjust laws.

Over the past decade, Adalah, a legal center for Arab rights in Israel, has demanded the decriminalization of collecting za’atar, ‘akkoub, and miramiyyeh. The attorney and scholar Rabea Eghbarieh has been at the forefront of both Arab and Hebrew media campaigns, contributing to debates and publications on the topic. In a letter he wrote to Israel’s state attorney and minister of environmental protection, Eghbarieh argued that “the prohibition on gathering these herbal plants is not based on a reliable factual basis, does not serve the purpose of the law, and disproportionately harms the Arab population that has used these herbs for hundreds of years, particularly for cooking needs.” Eghbarieh has often highlighted the gap in logic and rhetoric that arises during trials. The state representatives and judges perpetuate the expertise of the INPA and its scientific community, as well as the supposedly destructive tendencies of the Arabs. Meanwhile, the accused often state that they are simply out collecting food as they have done for generations. Moreover, indigenous knowledge and care around foraging practices is often dismissed: clipping the tops of za’atar and miramiyyeh stems in fact encourages fresh growth, and ‘akkoub will regrow the following year and sometimes within the same season, so long as it is clipped at its base. The judicial system willfully ignores this expertise, the status of the plant as food, as well as the socioeconomic needs of those accused. Many who forage generally need to feed large families and can’t always make ends meet. Instead they are met with exorbitant fines, which, if not paid, result in jail sentences.

Adalah’s persistence yielded results in late February 2020, when the INPA announced that enforcement measures would be softened. For a trial period of two years, everyone is now permitted to collect up to five kilograms of

‘akkoub for personal consumption. It is unclear whether the trial period is a commitment towards a lasting change of the law, or just a way to momentarily deflate what has become a topic of great sensitivity in the Arab sector inside Israel – and dodge Adalah’s threat to petition the Higher Court.

Since February, nature patrollers have expressed their continued struggle to detect whether the collection is indeed only for personal consumption, or is rather for commercial sale in local markets. With a fast-growing, increasingly urbanized population, many want to eat ‘akkoub but few are willing to go out and put in the hard work. In response, the prevalent model has become so-called commercial foraging, where a small group picks between thirty and a hundred kilograms a day to sell their harvest in the local market.

The real difficulty in enforcement clarifies the core of the problem: approaching conservation and preservation through criminalization, supported by a bureaucratic system of law enforcement, is a strategy bound to fail. Criminalization reinforces oppressive power relations, which, as with most societal challenges, rarely succeeds as a tool for structural and sustainable change. It is a monoculture and a mono-technology, a techno-fix – like pesticides, like antibacterial vaccines, like seeking a vaccine for Covid-19 while simultaneously leaving intact the faulty health structures, food industries, and globalized markets of the world. A new pandemic will only be a matter of time.

### A Pause for Cat Orgasms

My mother and I walk eastwards this time, towards a wild hillside, hidden beneath a bridge that separates Shu’fat the neighborhood and the camp from another settlement. On our way, a kid asks my mother and me if we’re looking for someone. I say yes, the valley. This valley, too, is full of birds, stones, plants, and bushy trees. We assume it is expropriated land, given the massive concrete bridge that runs through it. But when we look below us, traces of plowing suggest that the original landowners seasonally come back to collect what is left of their fruit trees. The hill on the Shu’fat side is full of wild edibles and other kinds of native spring plants. The hill on the settlement side, however, is bland, covered mostly by grasses, with upturned soil to create a clean and orderly slope. Needless to say, there is nothing edible here. Back on our side of the hill, behind an old dilapidated metal fence, we find so many za’atar “homes” that we can barely believe our eyes. By the look of it, no one has foraged here for years. So we do. Indulging in the process, we find another kind of thyme, one that

is not illegal to pick: *za'atar al-bisas*, literally “cat za’atar” (its Latin name is *Nepeta curviflora*). This type of thyme is also known as “Syrian catnip” because of the pleasure cats get from licking it. Adorned with a substance that mimics their feline sexual pheromones, cats gets high and euphoric from za’atar al-bisas. In effect, it gives them an orgasm. The cat begins licking the plant and then leaps around in it and purrs loudly. This lasts for a few minutes before the cat loses interest, potentially to return two hours later for another go.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the months of lockdown, my mother and I have returned frequently for new batches of ‘akkoub and za’atar, feeling like defiant mavericks, stealing moments of pleasure as we pick the plants that we love.

### Decolonizing Extinction Listings

When studying anthropogenic extinction, climate-justice researchers essentially seek to answer two central questions: Which forms of human life are driving processes of catastrophic loss? And what are the diverse ways in which humans and nonhumans have resisted this loss? The challenge is to move away from failed policing tactics to create a life-affirming culture of preservation and sustainability. What’s sorely needed is an epistemological change that decolonizes extinction and fundamentally reorients our relation towards each other and our surroundings. According to scholar Juno Salazar Parreñas, this decolonization must be “oriented towards process and experimentation and not toward foregone conclusion, except for the need to care enough about others, including and in particular, non-human others.”<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, most people today – and Palestinians are no exception – do not lead a life guided by cross-species care. Palestinian society at large is now detached from its historical intimacy with the land, which only two or three generations ago was a central part of Palestinian life. A seldom-discussed transformation caused by the Nakba of 1947–49 – along with the massive expropriation of land that continued well afterwards – was the process of turning peasants (that is, historically speaking, the overwhelming majority of Palestinian society) into unskilled construction workers. This intentional and systemic transformation of an entire society is manifest today. One only has drive through the West Bank to see the mutations of architecture and landscape brought about by private owners and the Palestinian Authority alike. My grandfather, who was illiterate and who himself ended up a construction worker, learned lessons the hard way and repeatedly told my father to get a good education. “They can take your land and house

away from you, but knowledge is yours to keep.”

The disregard for agrarian life was underway well before 1948. It began in the final decades of the dying Ottoman Empire, and it continued to spread under the British Mandate and the implantation of capitalist ideals of modern life that we have come to call “progress.” This “progress” slowly transformed land from something embedded in the sociopolitical fabric of a community, into an extractable commodity. These ideals are still hard at work across an increasingly decaying planet.

Foraging, meanwhile, is an ancient method for recognizing and learning about the abundance of one’s surroundings. Since 9500–8000 BC, farmers have been selecting seeds from their favorite wild plants, planting them, and repeating the process until both seeds and humans were thoroughly domesticated. Over millennia, this grooming gradually changed the genetic makeup of both partners into the tastes, shapes, and faces that are familiar to us today. The wild relatives, or “weeds,” that live near fields where their cultivated descendants grow play time-travel games. Genetically speaking, these relatives are many thousands of years apart. We need to foster an imaginary that understands the depths of time embodied in these plants, an imaginary that is outside the logic of origins and the oppressive boundaries of the state. This imaginary would include a multitude of approaches to biodiversity: rewilding alongside “zoning,” with the aim of educating, building agency, and encouraging responsible – and joyful – foraging.<sup>25</sup>

We know that abolishing the police frees up massive amounts of public funding for implementing real structural change and building community strength through education, rehabilitation, and social support. In a similar vein, reallocating funds from law-enforcement bureaucracies and military forces towards education and biodiversity can support the changes necessary to disseminate plant-related knowledge and practices. This reallocation can also contribute to cross-border conservation strategies in regions where certain species are native. After all, seeds have always defied modern ideas of order, law, and borders.

This is one path towards a planetary democracy, or a democracy of the species – a possibility for freedom that breaks from slavery and colonialism in all their historical and contemporary forms. In this process, ecologies must be rebuilt and re-symbolized, so they are geared towards mutuality and affirmation, not exclusion. Only with this profound shift can preservation measures translate into a real

attempt to protect life, rather than preserving  
the necropolitical regime already in place.

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e-flux journal #113 — november 2020 Jumana Manna  
**Where Nature Ends and Settlements Begin**

15/16

**Jumana Manna** is a visual artist working primarily with film and sculpture. Her work explores how power is articulated through relationships, often focusing on the body and on materiality in relation to narratives of nationalism and histories of place.

1  
Israel's domestic intelligence agency.

2  
This sentence is paraphrased from a comment Amal Issa wrote on my Facebook wall, March 25, 2020.

3  
This number does not include the refugee camp, which is inhabited by at least another thirty thousand.

4  
Primarily from towns and villages of the Galilee, also referred to as *a-shamaal*, or "the north."

5  
After the occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem, the municipality passed a law limiting construction volume within a plot of land known as the "floor area ratio" (FAR) to merely 25 percent. By comparison, Jewish neighborhoods were built with high-rises, in order to exhaust the maximum capacity of the building area and to overlook the Arab neighborhoods. As the decades passed, the FAR increased in East Jerusalem as the Israeli state realized that Arabs had run out of land. For further reading: Eyal Weizman, "Jerusalem: Petrifying the Holy City," chap. 1 in *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (Verso Books, 2007), 25–57.

6  
At the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, Israeli authorities threatened to shut the checkpoint and wall off the residents entirely, in a vague attempt to protect Jerusalemites from each other.

7  
Sarah Kaminker, "For Arabs Only: Building Restrictions in East Jerusalem," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26, no. 4 (1997): 15.

8  
Nicholas Hind, "Gundelia Tournefortii: Compositae," *Curtis Botanical Magazine* 30, no. 2 (July 2013): 114–38.

9  
A lone German man travelling through the Levant is the first known Westerner to have illustrated and described the 'akkoub, scientifically known as *Gundelia tournefortii*. In November 1573, Leonhart Rauwolf (*lion heart, rough wolf*) left Bavaria to begin his search for herbal medicine supplies in Tripoli, modern-day Lebanon. He continued from there to the "mighty city" of Aleppo, then to Baghdad and Mosul, before ending with a trip to Jerusalem. Rauwolf, relying on a description by the ancient Greek physician Discorides, mistook the *Gundelia* for milk thistle. A forgivable mistake really, as even locals today who eat 'akkoub but aren't

involved in its collection commonly confuse it with other similar-looking thistles. Prussian and other European botanists built on Rauwolf's *Aigentliche Beschreibung der Reise in die Morgenländerin* (A true account of a voyage to the Levant). They noted how in the old Baghdad markets, the mature and hardened heads were eaten like nuts, and in some parts of Turkey and Iraq were used as a source of oil and gum.

10  
Rabea Eghbarieh, *Limatha Takhsa Israeel al-za'atar w'al-'akkoub? (Why does Israel fear 'akkoub and za'atar?)*, *Fusha*, May 8, 2017 <https://www.arab48.com/%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A9/%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%82/%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1/2017/08/06/%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B4%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%83%D9%88%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B1>.

11  
Didi Kaplan, Dror Pevzner, Moshe Galilee, and Mario Gutman, "Traditional Selective Harvesting Effects on Occurrence and Reproductive Growth of *Gundelia Tounfortii* in Israel Grasslands," *Israel Journal of Plant Sciences*, no. 43 (1995).

12  
As Kaplan told me in an interview in March 2019.

13  
Very few cases have been tried for the collecting of miramiyyeh, which is used mainly as an herb and not as food, and is therefore collected in lesser quantities.

14  
'Akkoub is bountiful in many parts of the Golan Heights – Galileans forage most of their 'akkoub from this region.

15  
Achille Mbembe, "Fanon's Pharmacy," chap. 5 in *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019), esp. 153.

16  
For more on the critique of techno-optimistic efforts enmeshed in Western end-time thinking, see Deborah Bird Rose, "Reflections on the Zone of the Incomplete," in *Cryopreservation*, ed. Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal (MIT press, 2017).

17  
Paraphrased from Carol Bardenstein, "Threads of Memory in Discourses of Rootedness: Of Trees, Oranges and Prickly-Pear Cactus in Palestine/Israel," *Edebiyat: A Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures* 8, no. 1 (1998).

Bardenstein is quoted in Irus Braverman, "Planting the Promised Landscape: Zionism, Nature, and Resistance in Israel/Palestine," *Natural Resources Journal* 49, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 343.

18  
Natalia Gutkowski, "Governing through Timescape: Israeli Sustainable Agriculture Policy and the Palestinian-Arab Citizens," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 3 (2018).

19  
Laren Sommer, "To Manage Wildfire, California Looks To What Tribes Have Known All Along," NPR, August 24, 2020 <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/24/899422710/to-manage-wildfire-california-looks-to-what-tribes-have-known-all-along>.

20  
Habib Yazdanehnas, Ali Tavili, Hossein Arzani, and Hossein Azarnivand, "Traditional *Gundelia tournefortii* Usage and its Habitat Destruction in Tiran va Karvan District in Iran's Isfahan Province," *Science Alert*, June 15, 2016 <https://scialert.net/fulltextmobile/?doi=ecologia.2016.19.25>.

21  
Quoted in Rabea Eghbarieh, "The Struggle for Za'atar and 'Akkoub: Israeli Nature Protection Laws and the Criminalization of Palestinian Herb-Picking culture," Oxford Food Symposium on Food and Cookery 2020, forthcoming.

22  
Irus Braverman, "The Regulatory Life of Threatened Species Lists," in *Animals, Biopolitics, Law: Lively Legalities*, ed. I. Braverman (Routledge, 2016), 20.

23  
At the end of the spring, this plant blossoms with "inverted" blue flowers. The leaves are heart-shaped and their scent is incredibly beautiful. Locally, it is traditionally used to calm nerves and as a pain relief for toothaches. It also repels cockroaches and mosquitoes.

24  
Juno Salazar Parreñas, *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation* (Duke University Press, 2018).

25  
Restricting how much of certain plants can be foraged is both difficult to monitor and arbitrary, as the number of foragers visiting particular sites varies greatly. A more effective approach might be to designate certain areas for foraging for limited periods – say, one to five years – while closing off others to allow plants to rejuvenate and multiply. This is rewilding alongside zoning.

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