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# Notes on plant companionship: from Rosa Luxemburg's herbarium to Jumana Manna's *Foragers*

Agata Lisiak

**Abstract.** In this article, the author proposes thinking of Rosa Luxemburg's herbarium as a manifestation of plant companionship, a term she uses to describe the practice of noticing plant life and acknowledging it for what it is, caring for and about it, protecting and defending it, and remaining humbly open to what we do not (yet) know about it. She traces an ecofeminist genealogy of plant companionship by gleaning connections between Luxemburg's political ecology and the work of contemporary women artists who engage with the politics of human relationships with plants – Milena Bonilla, Marwa Arsanios and Jumana Manna – as well as John Berger's writings and drawings that highlight the epistemic and ontological openness that is required of humans in life-affirming engagements with the nonhuman. Relationally thinking about struggles from different geographies and temporalities, the author believes, can draw together the two most pressing causes of our time – human liberation and earth liberation.

**Keywords.** art • ecofeminism • land • nature • nonhuman • plants • resistance • violence

In May 1913, socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) started collecting plants in the suburbs of Berlin. As she later confessed in a letter to a friend, she loved 'to be outdoors roaming about in the springtime fields, to gather plants until [her] arms were full, and then at home to put them in order, identify them, and put them between the pages of a scrapbook to dry' (Luxemburg, 2013a[1891–1919]): 386). She plunged into this activity 'with all [her] fire and passion, with [her] entire being', shortly after completing her economic treatise *The Accumulation of Capital* (2003[1913]). Though her groundbreaking theorization of imperialism may seem worlds away from the low-key study of botany, both actually manifest and emerge from Luxemburg's political commitment to understanding the world in all its complexity. Her critiques of capitalism, militarism and colonialism draw attention to the

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catastrophic ecological damage they produce, as well as to the large-scale suffering and loss of life (Luxemburg, 2003[1913], 2004[1915]). Luxemburg's recurrent acknowledgment of kinship with the nonhuman (1946[1922], 2013a[1891–1919]) generated further reflections on the interconnectivity of systems of oppression and their rootedness in capitalism (see Luxemburg in Hudis, 2024). As she was filling in the pages of her botanical notebooks, Luxemburg deepened her relationship with plants and reflected on her own positionality vis-à-vis species other than human.

In this light, I propose thinking of Luxemburg's herbarium (2016[1913–1918) as a manifestation of *plant companionship*, a term I use to describe the practice of noticing plant life and acknowledging it for what it is (Kimmerer, 2013), caring for and about it (Fisher and Tronto, 1990), protecting and defending it (Dirik, 2022; Tolhildan, 2018) and remaining humbly open to what we do not (yet) know about it (Berger, 2007; Massey, 2005). Plant companionship requires 'maintenance and care' (Mattern, 2018) always, but especially in dire conditions. Despite its similar terminology, it differs from 'companion plants' – plants cultivated together for mutual benefits – and 'companion species' – the concept Donna Haraway (2008) developed to theorize the millennia-old relationship between humans and dogs – in that it focuses more on the activity (companionship) than the subject (a specific species). While acknowledging the immense contributions to our understanding of plants made by Indigenous and Western sciences alike (Kimmerer, 2013), plant companionship challenges the idea of expert knowledge and recognizes the human limitations to knowing the nonhuman. Beyond centring the inherent multidimensional relationality of humans and nonhumans, plant companionship calls for a human commitment to caring for and politicizing our relations with plants.

My reflections on Luxemburg's herbarium serve as a point of departure for a discussion on plant companionship under the conditions of occupation, war, land grabbing and ecological destruction. Inspired by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's (2015) 'arts of noticing', I comb through Luxemburg's herbarium, letters, and political and economic writings to reveal the ongoing relevance of her political ecology (see Schwöbel-Patel, 2024). To tease out plant companionship's politics of affirming life, I turn to contemporary artist–researchers who have been engaging with plants in formally inventive, careful and participatory ways. I discuss Milena Bonilla's *Dark Fading Chlorophyll (Luxemburg)* (2019–2021) and *I Am Life and Life Is Beautiful* (2020–2022) and Marwa Arsanios's *Who's Afraid of Ideology?* (2017–) before moving on to Jumana Manna's film *Foragers* (2022). In the process, I draw connections between struggles for justice from an internationalist perspective and propose an extended notion of companionship – or comradeship (see also Lisiak, 2022) – that includes caring relations with the vegetal world. Finally, I bring in John Berger's writings and drawings to reflect on the limitations of any visual and

verbal representation of plants, and highlight the epistemic and ontological openness that is required of humans in life-affirming engagements with the nonhuman.

## Perfectly ordinary: notes on Rosa Luxemburg's herbarium

Luxemburg studied botany and zoology in Zurich before switching to politics and economics and, although the latter two famously dominated her professional life, her interest in natural sciences – and nature – never disappeared. By the time she took up botany again two decades later, she was an accomplished theoretician of capitalism and imperialism, a leading figure in German and Polish social democratic parties, and a prolific political commentator. Now in her early 40s, she settled in the neighbourhood of Südende, which she appreciated for its suburban languidness and proximity to nature (Luxemburg, 2013a[1891–1919]).

Luxemburg's interest in botany was not unusual for a woman of her social standing. In late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe and North America, it was quite fashionable for white upper- and middle-class women to pursue botany (Flannery, 2023; Rudolph, 1982). Keeping a herbarium – especially one with flowering plants – was coded feminine as long as it was done on an amateur level; despite their indisputable contributions to the discipline (Rudolph, 1982), women botanists were actively discouraged or even formally barred from academic careers. As only a few were admitted to universities to begin with, women's pursuit of botanical knowledge was sustained by popular botanical books, albums and atlases. The practice required not only ample time (Flannery, 2023), but also space. The book Luxemburg consulted, for example, Moritz Fünfstück's *Plant Kingdom: Large Plant Atlas for School and Home* takes up half of the desk when I open its (1900) edition at Berlin's modernist State Library. After leafing through page upon page of dense explanations of classification and systematization interspersed with meticulous black-and-white drawings of seeds, leaves and flowers, I arrive at over 2,000 spectacular illustrations (for example, see Figure 1).

Over the course of several years, Luxemburg filled 18 notebooks with dried flowers, leaves, drawings and notes. The collection includes hundreds of specimens from different locations: pansies from her Berlin balcony, a willow herb picked in the outskirts of Stuttgart, powerful medicinal herbs like St John's Wort (see Figure 2), flowers gifted by friends and those she bought – Mrs Dalloway-style – herself, a robust radish leaf found in a prison garden, an oak leaf blown into her cell through an open window, and more. As biologist Maura Flannery (2023: 3) notes, each herbarium is 'a reflection of who created it'. What is striking about Luxemburg's collection is that the plants she included are perfectly ordinary, not endangered or exotic

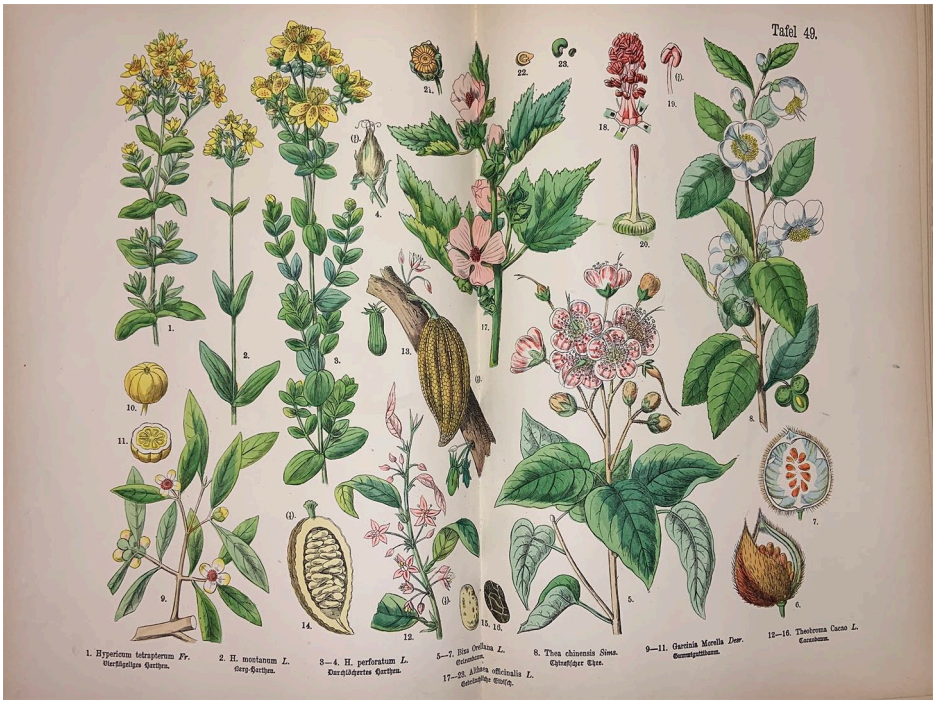



**Figure 1.** Illustrations in Fünfstück's *Pflanzenreich: Großer Pflanzenatlas für Schule und Haus* (1900), the botany book Rosa Luxemburg consulted for her herbarium.

species. Her interest in *every* plant, regardless of its position within human-made hierarchies, calls to mind Shannon Mattern's (2018: np) poignant observation that 'we care for things not because they produce value, but because they already have value.' Luxemburg's embrace of the commonplace is life affirming: she holds *everything* dear (see Berger, 2007). In addition to the obvious convenience of collecting what was around her, her focus on the ordinary can also be interpreted as a refusal to entertain the popular colonialist and racist discourses of her time. Botany as a discipline, herbaria as its popular genre and botanical gardens – including the one Luxemburg frequently visited in Berlin – as the sites of its celebration and display were deeply enmeshed in extractivist colonial and imperialist practices (Baber, 2016; Brockway, 1979; Cittadino, 1990). Rather than being a 'plant hunter' (*Pflanzenjägerin*, as the then-popular moniker had it) stalking rare specimens, Luxemburg appears to have been much more of an appreciator of all plants, and – as her acknowledgement of cross-species reciprocity indicates (Luxemburg, 2013a[1891–1919]) – a *plant companion*.

The notebooks Luxemburg used to record her plants were ordinary too. The first 10 were purchased at a Südende stationery store, as the small print on the identical covers reveals. Luxemburg went through them quickly. Between May and July 1913, she filled up nine 20-page albums, some of them over




**Figure 2.** St John's Wort in Rosa Luxemburg's herbarium (1913–1918). Digital scan obtained by Milena Bonilla from the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw. Reproduced with artist's permission.

just a few days. Her enthusiasm is palpable in the abundance of specimens (sometimes three different plants on one page), the drawings (deemed 'detailed and accurate' by present-day botanists who analysed her herbarium, see Zych et al., 2023: 854), the botanical notes in German and Latin, and her comments about the circumstances in which she gathered the plants. That collecting rush came to a halt in the late summer of 1913; she would add only two more plants in May 1914, before picking up the practice again the following spring. During those years Luxemburg was tirelessly involved in anti-war advocacy, giving powerful speeches across Germany urging the working classes to refuse to take up arms, and arguing with her SPD colleagues who, to her dismay, eventually ended up supporting the war, thus betraying the Second International's key tenet of proletarian solidarity across borders.

In 1914, Luxemburg was sentenced to prison for incitement to disobedience and slander of the German army.[1] Starting in early 1915, she would stay imprisoned for most of World War I: first in Berlin, then Wronke (today Wronki in Poland) and eventually Breslau (Wrocław), where she remained until November 1918. The botanical notebooks she completed in prison have a slower, less regular pace, reflecting Luxemburg's work schedule (she continued to write in prison) and mental-health struggles. Though some scholars suggest the herbarium was 'a method of auto-therapy and an escape from the prison's harsh reality' (Zych et al., 2023: 855), Luxemburg herself stated that nature was *not* her refuge, and she refused to romanticize or idealize it (Luxemburg, 1946[1922]: 24), so I regard her botanizing as one way she continued to interact with her surroundings *on her own terms*. Her pronounced interest in botany notwithstanding, Luxemburg's collecting practice was not only about categorizing, but also, or maybe even primarily, 'a way of engaging with the world' (Starzmann, 2021: 166). In fact, as her letters show, botany enhanced Luxemburg's experiences of her immediate environs and strengthened her embeddedness in the world – in *life* – in defiance first of the threats to her freedom and later of her prolonged imprisonment.

It also amplified her experience of plant companionship. As I argue elsewhere (Lisiak, 2022), Luxemburg's careful relations with the nonhuman aptly fit Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto's (1990: 40–) definition of care as

> a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, *life-sustaining* web. (emphasis added)

Also, as Maria Theresia Starzmann (2021: 166–167) notes in her paper on Luxemburg's herbarium, 'collecting is a careful, painstaking, and sometimes tedious practice that requires attention to detail and care for the seemingly insignificant aspects of the material world.' It was through her careful observation and regular engagement with the nonhuman – plants, but also birds, insects and other animals – that Luxemburg acknowledged their profound importance and reflected humbly on her own. Luxemburg's practice can thus be described as one of attunement, which, as Anja Kanngieser and Zoe Todd (2020: 387) argue, is 'predicated on cultivating a close and generous attention' to the world. Not all of this can be deduced from the herbarium alone, but Luxemburg's correspondence offers multiple glimpses of her joyful wonder at the interactions with species other than her own. In one of her upbeat letters from prison – after another dark winter spent in seclusion, spring was, at long last, in the air – she wrote:

> I am enjoying life so much, every morning I thoroughly inspect the condition of the buds on all my bushes, and every day I visit a little red ladybug with

> two black spots on its back, which in spite of the wind and the cold, I have been keeping alive for a week on a little bough warmly surrounded by cotton wool, and I observe the clouds, how they are constantly being renewed and becoming ever more beautiful, and – on the whole I feel that I am no more important than the ladybug and I am inexpressibly happy with this sense of my insignificance. (Luxemburg, 2013a[1891–1919]: 393)

Being 'no more important' than another creature, however, does not mean *unimportant*. Luxemburg was taking a life-affirming stance against the constraints of imprisonment and the ongoing war; she thought of herself – in that moment at least – as part of a wider world in which *all* life matters. The insignificance she mentions needs to be understood as relational, decentring humans as the most – or the *only* – significant species. Luxemburg's confession reveals what we today regard as an ecofeminist sensibility, as it asserts 'the special strength and integrity of *every* living thing' (Mies and Shiva, 1993: 14, emphasis added).

Long before ecofeminism became a recognized area of practice and theory, Luxemburg (2003[1913]: 350) made explicit connections between capital's colonial expansion and 'the systemic destruction and annihilation of all the non-capitalist social units which obstruct its development', including subsistence farming (see Mies and Shiva, 1993). Luxemburg (2003[1913]: 338) analysed capital's reliance on the 'unrestricted utilization of all substances and facilities afforded by nature and soil' and understood that any restriction thereupon would be 'contrary to the very essence of capital'. In her discussion of the calamitous famines in India (1866) and Algeria (1867) caused by colonial exploitation and deliberate mismanagement, Luxemburg clearly saw capital's violence against human and nonhuman species as inherently intertwined. Her analysis of how the environment and workers alike are 'exploited to the limit of endurance and beyond' (p. 415) by capitalism in its imperialist guise foreshadows Maria Mies's (1993: 59) observation that 'both nature and the future have been colonized for the short-term profit motives of affluent societies and classes.'

Luxemburg's aversion to hierarchies, so clearly evident in her prison garden, was also reflected in her critique of various group-based expressions of solidarity. Attentive to the terrors of antisemitic pogroms and show trials on the European continent (e.g. Luxemburg, 2014a, 2014b) *and* the horrors of European colonial violence overseas (Luxemburg, 2003[1913], 2004[1915], 2013b) alike, Luxemburg wrote in a letter to her dear friend, the social worker and socialist politician Mathilde Wurm: 'I am just as much concerned with the poor victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the Blacks in Africa with whose corpses the Europeans play catch' (2013a[1891–1919]: 375). Committed to naming and fighting antisemitism in all its guises (Luxemburg, 2014b, 1910; see also Castle Jones, 2012; Rose, 2014), she saw the persecution of Jews as innately

connected to other forms of systemic oppression. Luxemburg's adamant refusal to rally behind only *one* ethnic group, nation, or gender did not stop her from fighting for the rights of minorities, including those she embodied as a Jewish Polish woman living in Germany. As she explains to Wurm, her rejection of essentialism was rooted in her sense of connection with *all* things human and nonhuman: 'I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears' (Luxemburg, 2013a[1891–1919]: 376). Though admittedly pompous, this acknowledgment of belonging and being committed to the world – in all its complexities, beyond exclusive categories and across experiences of suffering – is also an act of life affirmation.

Born out of Luxemburg's careful and steadfast appreciation of life, her herbarium can be considered an affirmation of life under the conditions of persecution, imprisonment and war. Luxemburg's care for the nonhuman was rooted in her understanding that humans are not the only species affected by the systems of oppression she devoted her life to combat. In the spirit of Luxemburg's own reflections on her relative insignificance and against her posthumous glorification among parts of the left, however, it is important to stress that one need not be a legendary socialist heroine for one's engagement with plants to be politically significant. In what follows, I trace an ecofeminist genealogy of plant companionship by gleaning connections between Luxemburg's political ecology and contemporary artistic practices that engage with the politics of human relationships with plants. In the process, I think relationally about struggles from different geographies and temporalities to draw the two pressing causes of our time – human and earth liberation – closer together.

## Light, memory and life affirmation in Milena Bonilla's work with plants

Luxemburg's botanical notebooks are stored at the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw, but it is not entirely clear how they got there, possibly travelling via the US in the 1970s (Politt, 2016) or coming over from Germany in the 1950s (Zych et al., 2023). All sources seem to agree that the box containing the original notebooks was found in the Warsaw archive in 2009. The herbarium was then published in book form in Poland (2009) and Germany (2016), and has subsequently attracted some attention from artists and researchers (e.g. Gov, 2021; Majewski and Strauch, 2017; Starzmann 2021; Lisiak, 2022).

Artist Milena Bonilla's encounter with Luxemburg's herbarium happened through a different route, at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, whose analogue c-prints of the original notebooks were a (1976) gift by Joseph Buttinger, an Austrian social democrat and exile in the US. Bonilla was struck by the prints' discoloration: the plants appeared orange-brown, devoid of any other colours, eerily uniform in their ochre

intensity. As she found out, the prints had been kept in the dark and, over time, 'underwent a process known as "dark fading," which resulted in their chromatic deterioration' (Bonilla, 2019–2021: np). Upon this discovery, Bonilla was reminded of Luxemburg's own contemplations on the power of light and its absence. The artist also reached out to the Warsaw archive, receiving high-resolution digital scans of the original notebooks. Bonilla proceeded to create *Dark Fading Chlorophyll (Luxemburg)* (2019–2021, see Figure 3), a work consisting of three synchronized slide projections. Slides of the faded c-prints are juxtaposed with those of the new scans as well as selected passages from Luxemburg's 'letters from prison, in which she reflects on how sunlight (or its absence) affects different aspects of life'. Bonilla thus seems to emulate Luxemburg's own approach, inviting the audience to reflect on light – and life – *relationally*.

The epistolary excerpts and herbarium pages that Bonilla pairs up are not chronologically attuned: some are, in fact, dated years apart. This discrepancy mirrors the fissured timelines of the memories, real-time impressions and deferred reflections that Luxemburg included in her letters. For example, slides of a herbarium page with the yellow-blossomed, soft-haired medicinal plant called agrimony (*Odermennig* in German), dated 1 October 1918, are accompanied by a confession Luxemburg recorded in May 1917: 'I almost think I've overrated the sun in the sky and its strength' (Figure 4). In the letter in which this passage appears, Luxemburg recalls different sunlit moments: in the Wronke prison, where she is writing from and in her home in Berlin Südende, which she compares to 'a lantern exposed to the sun in all directions' (2013a[1891–1919]: 410). She appears to welcome sunlight for what it is at any given moment and also for the memories it triggers, all the while soberly acknowledging its strength's limitations under imprisonment. By collating the two types of slides – one of a faded c-print, one of a digital scan – Bonilla invites her audience to consider the different effects of light not only on Luxemburg herself, but also on the individual plants she collected. The symbolism of light as a life-affirming force is further reinforced by the fact that light is indispensable for Bonilla's slides to work in the first place.

*Dark Fading Chlorophyll (Luxemburg)* can also be regarded as an intervention into Luxemburg's archives, one rooted in the artist's ethics and practices of care (see Bonilla, 2022). The c-prints at the IISH are not the only materials of Luxemburg's that have been inadequately maintained: the Warsaw archive's collection of photographic copies of her letters, speeches and other documents that I inspected in 2022 is strikingly disorganized, poorly catalogued and ineptly preserved (I was not granted access to the original herbarium). Yet Bonilla's interpolation does not simply expose archival negligence, it also offers a solution: by juxtaposing chromatic deterioration with the withering of colour that naturally happens in dried plants over time, the artist invites the possibility of healing.



**Figure 3.** Exhibition view of Milena Bonilla's *Dark Fading Chlorophyll (Luxemburg)*. © Photo: Charlott Markus. Reproduced with artist's permission.

In another work engaging with Luxemburg's herbarium,[2] the three-part video series *I Am Life and Life Is Beautiful* (2020–2022), Bonilla, accompanied by herbalist and dancer Shelley Etkin, visits three memorials connected to Luxemburg's violent death in Berlin: the Eden Hotel plaque commemorating the place where Luxemburg and her comrade Karl Liebknecht were brutally interrogated by far-right paramilitaries on 15 January 1919; the memorial by the Landwehr Canal where Luxemburg's body was dumped after she was murdered later that day; and the Memorial to the Socialists at the Friedrichsfelde Cemetery where she was eventually buried. Bonilla and Etkin go to these sites not so much to pay tribute to the socialist martyr, but to acknowledge the persistence of life in places that symbolize its absence. Conceptually, then, this work is not unlike *Dark Fading Chlorophyll (Luxemburg)*: Bonilla sets absence and presence side by side, interrogating their dialectic relationship through Luxemburg's writings. Bonilla and Etkin's conversation, heard partially off camera, focuses on the trees, bushes, vines, flowers and mosses that were documented in Luxemburg's herbarium and happen to grow near the three memorials. The camera lingers on the plants as they gently sway in the wind, lapped by the water and stroked by human hands. This subtle choreography accentuates the assiduous aliveness of organic matter, contrasting it with the monuments' inanimate metal, brick and stone. Discussing the plants' 'healing capacities and symbolic powers' (Bonilla, 2020–2022: np), Bonilla and Etkin carefully situate the plants historically, geographically and affectively as they




**Figure 4.** Excerpt from *Dark Fading Chlorophyll (Luxemburg)*. © Image: Milena Bonilla. Reproduced with artist's permission.

share their immediate sensory experiences of the leaves, branches, bark and petals they touch and smell.

Titled after a passage from Luxemburg's letters, *I Am Life and Life Is Beautiful* manifests Bonilla's commitment to carefully listen to every place as always 'stuffed with memory' (Bonilla, 2022: 101). Like geographer Doreen Massey before her (Massey, 2005), Bonilla acknowledges that space is imbued with power relations and, as such, always needs to be negotiated. Her focus on the places associated with Luxemburg's murder recognizes the violence that interlocking systems of oppression inflict on human and nonhuman lives. 'Dedicated to all the dissidents, Indigenous Peoples, social leaders, ecological activists and biodiversity killed and disappeared by the accumulation of capital' (Bonilla, 2020–2022), the video series stresses the importance of memory as life affirming and inseparable from politics. In the final shot (Figure 5), a page from Luxemburg's herbarium containing rose leaves is superimposed on cemetery trees half-lit by the waning sun and paired with the artist's following caption:

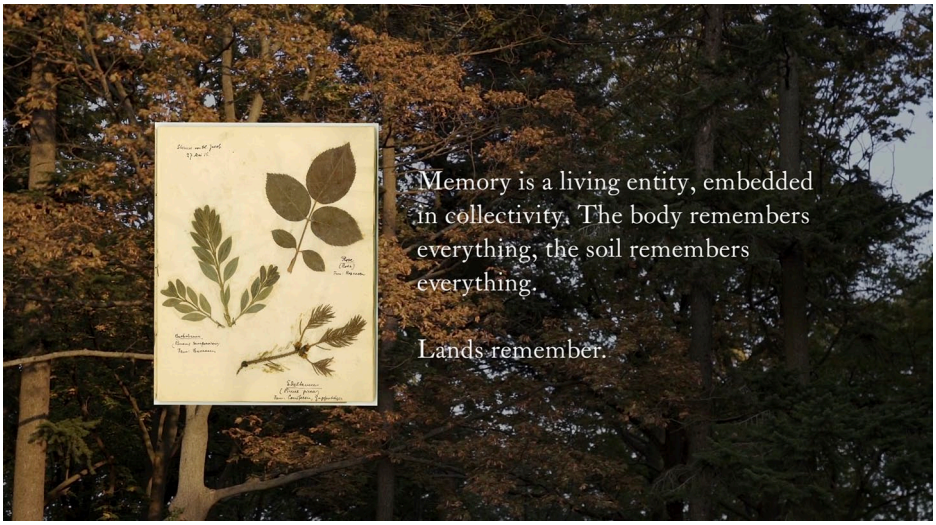



**Figure 5.** Still from Milena Bonilla's *I Am Life and Life Is Beautiful*. © Photo: Milena Bonilla. Reproduced with artist's permission.

> Memory is a living entity, embedded in collectivity. The body remembers everything, the soil remembers everything.
> Lands remember.

This succinct passage encapsulates Luxemburg's (2004[1915], 2013a[1891–1919]) own reflections on the interconnectivity of the processes that make up life and the lasting effects of capitalist, colonial and patriarchal violence on the lands where they occur. Luxemburg (2003[1913]) understood land to be the most important productive force that capital needs to expand and demonstrated how European colonial powers barred Indigenous and peasant populations not only from the lands they had previously cultivated, but also from the forests and meadows where they had foraged and their animals had grazed (see Betasamosake Simpson, 2017). Lands are territories with specific features and attributes, the actual soil and rock that make up the Earth's surface; yet they are also politically demarcated areas with culturally and economically ascribed – and violently contested – meanings and values. The 'everything' lands remember is thus fundamentally open, it entails human and nonhuman histories, and affirms life in all its varied manifestations.

## The politics of land struggles and comradeship with nature in Marwa Arsanios's *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?*

In her ongoing film series *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* (2017–), Marwa Arsanios looks into the politics of land struggles in several distinct locations to examine inventive possibilities of a more just future. The individual chapters reflect on the methods and ethics of ecofeminist resistance against the commodification of land and focus on, respectively, guerilla fighters in



**Figure 6.** A scene in the Qandil Mountains. Still from *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* Part 1 (2017). © Photo: Marwa Arsanios. Reproduced with artist's permission.

the mountains of Qandil in Iraqi Kurdistan; resilient community-building practices in Jinwar, a women-only village in Rojava, the autonomous Kurdish region in northeastern Syria; the protection and preservation of native seeds in Indigenous and peasant communities in Tolima, Colombia; and alternative forms of land ownership in northern Lebanon. Comprising experimental documentary footage, elements of art installations and drawings, each of these four parts is stylistically distinct. Together and separately, the films amplify Indigenous, peasant and other marginalized voices, asserting that 'we are part of that nature we seek to understand', as Arsanios declares, referencing physicist Niels Bohr via feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad (2007: 67).

The land depicted in the first chapter of Arsanios's series is comprised of rock, hardened soil and snow (Figure 6); it appears barren, except for leafless trees and wilted tufts of grass. The artist purposefully creates a sense of dislocation so as not to give away the whereabouts of the Kurdish women fighters featured in the film. With its long takes, the camera renders the landscape hypnotic, inviting the viewer to embrace disorientation while listening to the voices of Pelşîn Tolhildan, a Kurdish guerilla fighter and organizer, and Dilar Dirik, a Kurdish scholar and activist. Tolhildan and Dirik speak off camera about the ethics and politics of human relationships with nonhuman species and the land under the conditions of armed resistance against state violence and land grabbing (see also Arsanios, 2022). Dirik argues that the state has an interest in 'breaking the link between humans and nature', because the more people feel connected to nature, the more likely they – we – are to question the state (see also Dirik, 2022). Describing her ancestors' relationship with nature as 'comradeship' and

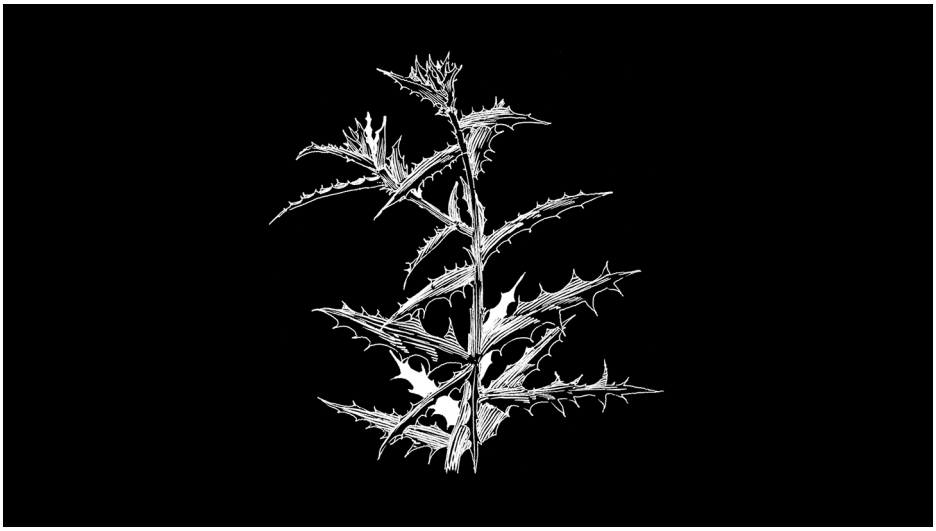


**Figure 7.** A thistle. Still from *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* Part 1 (2017). © Photo: Marwa Arsanios. Reproduced with artist's permission.

'a friendship rather than an alliance', Dirik notes that such an approach is hardly unusual as it is practised across the globe, particularly among Indigenous and peasant communities. Struggles over land are thus also struggles over the preservation and transmission of knowledge about the nonhuman.

Arsanios further studies the possibilities of subverting both the state and the market through comradeship with nature in Part 3 of the series, in which she visits seed guardians in Tolima. As has been common among Indigenous farmers for centuries (see, e.g., Kimmerer, 2013; Sansour, 2014–), these Colombian activists modify plants for sustainable adaptation to the specific requirements and properties of the land. Such knowledge is particularly valuable in the face of the pressing challenges related to the unfolding climate catastrophe, intensified as it is by the ecocidal agricultural industry. Undeterred by economic and physical violence, not infrequently including murder, these seed guardians insist on protecting and sharing the seeds as a common good rather than private property. Cultivating the land on their own terms, they affirm life (human and nonhuman alike) and fight not only the state, but also various paramilitary groups and private companies that seek to capitalize on the territory by coercively imposing monocultural plantations.

The steadfast presence of plants is accentuated across all chapters of *Who Is Afraid of Ideology*? Part 1 opens and closes with Arsanios's drawings of resilient herbs and shrubs native to the same mountains that appear so plantless in the landscape shots: wood bedstraw, thistle, thyme, miconia. Arranged vertically, they emulate herbarium pages. The white outlines of plants stand out on the black background as if backlit by cold light (see Figure 7). The monochrome



**Figure 8.** A herbarium in Jinwar. Still from *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* Part 2 (2019). © Marwa Arsanios. Reproduced with artist's permission.

sketches are echoed in the herbarium created by women in Jinwar that is featured in the next chapter of Arsanios's series. Part 2 starts with a top shot of plastic sleeves in a ring binder, each sleeve filled with a white sheet of paper and dried plants (Figure 8). The ordinariness of this arrangement – the commonplace objects utilized to preserve communal knowledge – calls to mind Luxemburg's low-key approach to her own herbarium albeit there are, of course, important differences between Luxemburg's spare-time botanizing, however passionate and politically informed, and the self-sustaining agricultural practices in Jinwar. We watch neatly manicured hands turn the pages as an off-camera voice explains the different medicinal and sensory properties of the collected plants. We learn, for example, that artemisia is not only decorative, but also good for reducing blood-sugar levels. While the daily activities of Kurdish women in Jinwar – building mudbrick houses, planting trees, tending to the land and animals, doing care and educational work, and, more generally, creating a self-sustaining community – may seem less militant than their sisters' combat activities in the mountains, Arsanios emphasizes that they are all part of the same struggle. As she observes, 'the ecological struggle against state colonialism is a matter of life and death, but also of knowledge: knowledge of the fauna and the flora' (Arsanios, 2022: 105). Both the guerillas in Qandil and the villagers in Jinwar 'fight against the eradication and erasure of that knowledge', albeit with different means. Their actions are life affirming in that they resiliently seek to protect and defend the nature of which they are a part while faced with militarized assault by, respectively, the Turkish and Syrian states, and the land grabbing they engender.



**Figure 9.** 'Akkoub'. Still from *Foragers*. © Photo: Jumana Manna. Reproduced with artist's permission.

## 'I Am Nature. I Would Not Harm Myself': plant companions in Jumana Manna's *Foragers*

Combining archival audio and video material with original footage shot around Jerusalem, Galilee and the Golan Heights, Jumana Manna's (2022) docufiction *Foragers* gives an insight into the ancient practice of foraging for za'atar and 'akkoub (Figure 9), two plants quintessential to Palestinian cuisine and thus culture. The film also depicts and contextualizes the restrictions imposed by the Israeli Nature and Park Authority (NPA) which, under the pretence of ecological preservation, criminalizes the collection of these and other native plants (see also Betasamosake Simpson, 2017). Dating back to the 1970s, the law, ostensibly aimed at protecting nature but indisputably targeting Palestinians, has resulted in fines and trials for generations of Palestinians. Working closely with human rights attorney and scholar Rabea Eghbariah, Manna restages court hearings to reveal both the absurdity of the legal restrictions and the steadfast resistance foragers enact in its face.

As 'foraging is an ancient means for survival' that long predates state formations, states seek to control it, especially, as Manna notes, 'settler colonial states, whose project is to dispossess natives from their land' (Manna et al., 2022: np; see also Kimmerer, 2013; Linnekin, 2018; Luxemburg, 2003[1913]). By classifying foraging as a punishable crime,[3] the Israeli state also discursively frames it in a colonialist manner as backwards, ignorant, harmful and uncivilized (Manna et al., 2022), yet the film confidently subverts this narrative. As one of the foragers accused by Israeli state officials of destroying the environment says in a scripted testimony: 'I am nature. I would not harm myself.' What seems implicit in this statement is his commitment to protect nature rather than to



**Figure 10.** Zidane foraging. Still from *Foragers*. © Photo: Jumana Manna. Reproduced with artist's permission.

injure it. Another forager explains what is commonly known: trimming za'atar (and many other bushy plants for that matter, as any gardening manual will tell you) helps it grow back thicker and stronger. Foraging is thus presented as an act of human symbiosis with plants and a deep appreciation of the land that nurtures life. In the film, foragers collect only as much as they need for their community; even those who sell za'atar and 'akkoub gather modest quantities. Such manifestations of sensible restraint are juxtaposed with images of plant cultivation: we learn that za'atar and 'akkoub farms are owned by Israelis who, unlike Palestinians, can afford the steep costs of insurance against drought – an increasingly common concern in the face of climate catastrophe. Capitalization on the native plants happens not only through their agricultural cultivation, but also symbolically through attempts – depicted in the film – of associating za'atar with Israel (rather than Palestine) the way that oregano is associated with Italy.

Foraging and its associated activities – the gifting, selling, preserving, cooking and eating of plants – can thus be understood as what anthropologist James Scott (1985: xvi) referred to as 'commonplace forms of resistance', that is, not the spectacular gestures that make up the 'language of the revolution' (Azoulay, 2011), but what happens *between* moments of upheaval, what happens in the *everyday*: unspectacular practices such as false compliance and feigned ignorance – which we see represented in the scripted interrogations in *Foragers* – as well as other 'ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups' (Scott, 1985: xvi). As Arsanios (2023: 68) similarly argues in the context of Kurdish women's resilient relationships with their lands and communities, such 'relatively small, slow, and supposedly low-key endeavors yield great



**Figure 11.** Aziza foraging. Still from *Foragers*. © Photo: Jumana Manna. Reproduced with artist's permission.

insights, showing how new ecological paradigms and politics are born out of the necessity to survive in situations of war'. And with Luxemburg's (2003[1913]) political ecology in mind, one could see resistance to colonial and capitalist eradication of traditional land ownership and use as indispensable to both maintaining a degree of economic independence and preserving the natural environment.

Plants take centre stage in *Foragers*. As Manna reveals in an interview:

> the main characters are the plants through which we understand the colonial dynamics of the law, the village relations around the collecting or buying of these foods, and the extractive economies of the Israeli industrialized plantations. So 'akkoub and za'atar are the center of the film, and all of the different characters and relations are built around them. (Manna et al., 2022: np)

For the most part, the camera follows Palestinian foragers – centring on a man named Zidane (Figure 10) and Jumana Manna's mother Aziza (Figure 11) – as they go about their daily lives, calmly defiant in the face of state oppression. The NPA guards – played by actors, with the exception of one smartphone clip shot by a forager – appear simultaneously comical and menacing. They look like strangers in the land they survey, even as they exercise full bureaucratic control over it. They do not seem to really know the plants and the film makes clear that they do not culturally identify with the flora. The way the park rangers methodically traverse the landscape in



**Figure 12.** Za'atar. Still from *Foragers*. © Photo: Jumana Manna. Reproduced with artist's permission.

search of potential offenders is juxtaposed with the elaborate choreography of foragers whose bodies bend and stretch as they interact with plants. The camera registers the foragers' movements from various angles: close-ups capture their attentive gazes; drone shots, leveraging the usual associations with surveillance, locate humans in relation to nonhuman species; hand-held camera shots depict the focused yet casual ways foragers tread familiar paths to reach spots where specific species grow; and wide shots give a sense of the scale and abundance of plants. This 'foraging camera' – the cinematographic approach developed by Manna and one of the directors of photography she worked with, Marte Vold- is 'very much about recognizing plants that are around you, in movement – about being in movement in the landscape' (Manna et al., 2022: np). In effect, the camera subtly captures what is otherwise deeply embodied: human familiarity with plants and the care and confidence that emanate from it.

That careful and caring interaction with plants continues after the harvest. In one top shot, the plants are tastefully arranged on a kitchen table; in another one (Figure 12), human hands remove za'atar leaves from stalks, and any parts that fall on the floor are later carefully swept away. Here, as in many other moments in the film, maintenance and care are intertwined, converging in *sumud* – the steadfast, everyday resistance that is manifested in life-sustaining work in the face of the disaster that is the ongoing Nakba (see, e.g., Issa, 2023; Meari, 2014) – or, as Nada Elia (2023: 15) puts it, 'the irrepressible determination to live freely, in dignity, undaunted by the might of the Israel–Global North alliance'. Despite the gravity of the situation, the 'prosaic but constant struggle' (Scott, 1985: xvi) against persistent settler colonial state violence and land

grabbing is not devoid of joy. In fact, to Manna, joy was the starting point for the film and the key sensation she sought to convey: in a life-affirming gesture, she 'wanted joy to be felt as much if not stronger than the anger towards the criminalization of the practice' (Manna et al., 2022: np). Not unlike Luxemburg's herbarium and prison letters, *Foragers* captures the exuberance of interacting with nature and acknowledging that we, too, are nature.

The scripted courtroom interrogation scenes reveal the foragers' intergenerational familiarity with za'atar and 'akkoub, and their inherited commitment to plant companionship. The camera accompanying foragers in the wild likewise captures their intimate knowledge of native plants as they casually name different ones, knowing their properties and greeting them as neighbours. In parts of the movie, however, particularly in the night shots, plants are pictured without any human presence, accompanied by other – invisible, but audible – nonhumans. Amplified sounds of animals and insects provide the soundtrack to scenes in which plants are not merely central, but the only visible protagonists, more on and of their own. What seems to be acknowledged here are the limits to human knowledge of the nonhuman, despite – or perhaps *because of* – the deeply rooted familiarity with plants and the resilient ethics of plant companionship.

## John Berger's confabulations on the limitless language of plants

Palestinian resilience and resistance enacted through caring relations with plants and the land that sustains them also provided political inspiration for visual artist, art critic and writer John Berger. He wrote evocatively about olive trees, mulberries, medlars and roses in the occupied West Bank, and the 'undefeated despair' of Palestinian farmers, gardeners and beekeepers in the face of daily violence (Berger, 2007; see also Simaan, 2020). Berger's engagement with plants – in Palestine and elsewhere – was manifested in myriad ways, including frequent renderings in poetry, prose and visual arts. Regarding plants' depiction in art more generally, plant morphologist Agnes Arber (1954: 121) has noted that 'artistic expression' saves plants from 'the narrowing influence of an inadequate verbal framework' and thus illuminates something about them that words cannot capture. The close examination of plants that is required for their realistic or affectively authentic representation takes time, strengthening the artist's relationship with the nonhuman in the process; Berger, however, came to find artistic examination insufficient too. He famously critiqued hegemonic ways of seeing – particularly the patriarchal ways of seeing women (Berger, 1972) – and proposed more careful and caring ways of looking at both the human and nonhuman world (Berger, 1980; Berger and Mohr, 2010). In an attempt to understand plants outside of limiting human-centric paradigms, Berger tested ways of knowing that go beyond the epistemologies and ontologies provided by natural sciences and the arts.

In 'How to Resist a State of Forgetfulness', Berger (2016: 127) wrote: 'During the past week I've been drawing, mostly flowers, motivated by a curiosity that has little to do with either botany or aesthetics.' The essay is accompanied by his drawings: roses, an evergreen sea-daisy, a campion, a (dying) camellia, a clematis and a stone. Berger explains he has been trying to look at plants and other 'natural forms' as messages 'that can never be verbalized, and are not particularly addressed to us'. This humble decentring of the human mirrors Luxemburg's apprehension of her own insignificance and signals an endeavour to recognize plant life for what it is without imposing human epistemologies (see also Bonilla, 2022; Kimmerer, 2013). Berger's reflections on the flowers he has been drawing likewise emphasize the interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman: 'I physically identify with the thing I'm drawing and with the limitless, unknown mother tongue in which it is written.' By noting the limitless language of plants, Berger acknowledges his own – and, more broadly, our human – limitations, and opts to work *with* them rather than trying to overcome them at all cost.

In his oft-pronounced criticism of colonial and extractivist violence, Berger felt drawn to Rosa Luxemburg's analyses of capitalism, imperialism and militarism. In an open letter he wrote to her in 2015, Berger confessed: 'You often come out of a page I'm reading – and sometimes out of a page I'm trying to write; come out to join me with a toss of your head and a smile' (Berger, 2016: 13). The letter features a small portrait of Luxemburg drawn as she appeared to him: head slightly tilted to the side, one eyebrow playfully raised in a question, the corners of her mouth lifted into what may be a gentle smile. The portrait exudes warmth and familiarity – and openness too. With the wavy hair crowning her head, her cheeks accentuated by what seem like only half-obedient lines of ink and the twin petals of her lips moved in amusement, she looks not unlike the roses Berger wrote about and drew elsewhere (see Berger, 2016) or those she herself pressed between the pages of her herbarium.

Berger's practice of seeing, looking and knowing is firmly rooted in a caring commitment to 'hold *everything* dear', as poet Gareth Evans once wrote of Berger's stance (Evans in Berger, 2007: viii, emphasis added). Holding evokes a close attachment not unlike companionship, and the qualifier 'dear' points to the possibility that everything has value (see Mattern, 2018), even if we cannot (fully) comprehend it (yet). 'Holding everything dear' also conveys the radical openness of imagination that is so clearly manifested in the works of Milena Bonilla, Marwa Arsanios and Jumana Manna, and that was at the core of Rosa Luxemburg's thinking and action. This kind of openness, coupled with a commitment to care for and about humans and nonhumans alike, is a prerequisite for liberatory politics. As Massey (2005: 11) argued in her reflections on the politics of space, 'only if the future is open is there any ground for a politics which can make a

difference.' Only if the future is open can we conceive of alternatives to past and present violence.

## Keeping our futures open

As I am revising this paper in May 2024, Israel's latest military onslaught on Gaza and the escalation of settler and state violence in the occupied West Bank have claimed the lives of more than 35,000 people, nearly half of them children. The unfolding genocide, supported financially and ideologically by Western states including Germany, where I live, has intensified other systemic forms of annihilation of life in Palestine including ecocide, urbicide, scholasticide and epistemicide. In the face of such unfathomable cruelty and suffering, it is more important than ever to hold everything dear, to affirm life. Rather than speculating on what Rosa Luxemburg would have to say about this carnage, I find it more instructive to read what she wrote about the violence of her own time: Germany's genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples in what was then German South West Africa and today is Namibia; the Peruvian Amazon Company's extractivist genocidal campaigns against the Putumayo people; the imperialist land grabbing powered by militarism; the ecological damage caused by monoculture plantations; the economic violence engendered by capitalism; and the horrors of World War I. Still relevant, Luxemburg's analyses of interlocking systems of oppression provide a framework not only for understanding, but also resisting today's genocides, wars, occupation, extractivism and ecological destruction. Both Luxemburg's political ecology as well as the work of contemporary artists Milena Bonilla, Marwa Arsanios and Jumana Manna inventively expand this framework to include life-affirming lessons drawn from plant companionship. As these women demonstrate, plant companionship can generate liberatory ways of relating to the present and provide a steadfast commitment to keeping our futures open.

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### Notes

1. Luxemburg was no stranger to prisons. She was first jailed in 1904, in Zwickau, for allegedly insulting German Kaiser Wilhelm II. In 1906, she spent three months in Warsaw prisons for her involvement in the 1905 revolution. In 1907, she served two months at Berlin's Barnimstrasse prison for women for advocating for the mass strike.

2. Bonilla has engaged with Luxemburg in several other projects, including *The Accumulation of Capital (riddled)*, 2019–2022 and *Spring starts as a murmur (Utopia)*, 2019.
3. After decades of activism, public scrutiny and legal interventions, including the work done by Rabea Eghbariah on behalf of the legal centre and human rights organization Adalah, the NPA recently announced that they would allow picking of small amounts of za'atar, 'akkoub and sage outside nature reserves and national parks. For more details, see, e.g., https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/9794 and https://www.parks.org.il/new/tavlin/ (accessed 19 March 2024).

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