

RIVERING TOGETHER

edited by

MANAR MOURSI



Rivering Together - Manar Moursi

A river is not merely composed of its flowing waters; it is a terraforming force, a site for ritual and bathing. It allows raindrops to gather, feeding through its collected waters factories, fauna and flora, birds, fish, rocks, golf courses, humans, and other beings, allowing these forces to converge, intermingle, flourish, decay, enmesh, and intertwine. Landscapes surrounding rivers are, therefore, spaces of relation, allowing us to perceive the river as an integral part of a broader tapestry. Over the course of ten intense days, we rivered together.

We took as our starting point the expansion of the city of Marrakech to the South and its relationship to its Ourika River and surrounding Oueds. We explored this river and its surrounding extended ecology including its connections to khattaras. We gathered to share our personal stories around bodies of water. These stories became the blueprint for multiple works emerging from the workshop. We read texts and discussed embodied and decolonial ecologies, drought, commons, and the politics of water distribution in the city. We watched documentary films and video works related to water bodies, examining their narrative structures, aesthetic conventions, and environmental imaginations. We went on contemplative walks, experiencing, thinking, and feeling our surroundings through walking and improvisational movement prompts.

We had a special guest, herbalist and nutritionist Tala Khoury from Palestine, who spoke about current challenges with foraging akoub and responded critically to Jumana Manna's film Foragers. Ethnobotanists in our group shared insights on the plants that could be foraged in the oueds and their medicinal properties. Women from the Dar Bellarj community shared their personal histories with river spaces in and around Marrakech. Artists reflected on and responded to these spaces through dance, moving image works, poetry, and performance.

In this zine, we share the writings of Khadouj and Najma Batta, Matthijs Mantel, Fatiha El Hallaj, Francesca Castagnetti, and Randa Toko. Randa and I also contribute photos, along with an archival photo from the Batta sisters. The reflections contained herein capture just a small part of the rich conversations and exchanges we had over these ten days. While some have shared videos and performances, as a group, our work and discussions breathed and flowed into one another. As the Batta sisters share in their film, "on the river, we celebrated."





The most beautiful flowers have thorns

Matthijs Mantel

Every summer, I swim in De Kromme Rijn, a body of water that can be defined as somewhere between a river and a canal. The Kromme Rijn flows through Amelisweerd, near Utrecht, the city where I lived for the past eight years. To enter the water, you step from the riverbank onto a giant rock and dive into the refreshing current. This rock becomes more challenging each year as the river meanders on. The river widens despite attempts to control it by canalizing the water. The Netherlands, despite its sophisticated and extensive system of delta works, is still highly vulnerable to climate change due to its low-lying geography, much of which is below sea level.

The threat of climate change is even more apparent when walking in what used to be the Oued Issyl in Marrakech, the city where I have been based over the past six months. This river originates in the High Atlas mountains and flows from Marrakech to Safi. It used to be wild and dangerous, frequently threatening to flood. Evidence of its changing water levels remains visible on the walls constructed to contain it. Today, the river is a hostile space, with its waters almost completely evaporated. Its dryness starkly contrasts with the pools and golf courses surrounding it in the more luxurious parts of town. Despite increasing droughts linked to climate change, water-intensive agriculture and wasteful water practices continue to be developed, promoted, and supported by the powerful in Morocco. Visiting the oued today, its dryness exaggerates the effects of extreme heat in Marrakech, with no evaporative cooling from its waters which no longer flow, and no lush vegetation to shade and provide thermal comfort. Its hostility is further marked on its ground plane by sharp shards of glass, old tiles, and foul-smelling detritus, replacing softer river seabed rocks and vegetation.

Only upon closer inspection did I begin to see the dried Oued's beauty. In the past ten days, I have been part of the Rivering Together Collective Workshop at Dar Bellarj, led by artist and researcher Manar Moursi. In one of our field trips, Moursi prompted us to explore the oued in pairs, with one person blindfolded and led by the non-blindfolded partner. This exercise allowed trust to build between partners and created a setting where sensory exploration other than the visual was encouraged. But most importantly for me, instead of feeling the harsh environment, I found that we searched for beauty within this otherwise seemingly inhospitable space as we scanned for soft objects with pleasant scents to introduce to our partners to touch and smell.

In our interdisciplinary group was Francesca Castagnetti, an ethnobotanist, who pointed out some of the flowers in the oued to the group and explained their medicinal properties. She said some yellow flowers can be especially good for our ears, but her comment on a thistle with a purple flower and spiky stems known scientifically as Burdock, stuck with me the most: "The most beautiful flowers have thorns." She elaborated that once you start thinking like a plant, you understand why cacti, thistles, or roses have defense mechanisms, especially in dry environments where herbivores compete to consume them. Their beauty and their danger are two sides of the same coin. The metaphor of the thistle's thorns encapsulates the dual nature of beauty and defense mechanisms of plants in harsh environments.

Anthropologist Anna Tsing's book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, further explores these themes of beauty and resilience. In her book, Tsing examines the symbiotic relationship between the matsutake mushroom and its foraging communities, showing how life persists and even thrives amidst ecological and economic degradation. Just as the thistle's thorns protect it from herbivores, organisms in Tsing's narrative develop unique strategies to thrive amid adversity, highlighting the interconnectedness of beauty, danger, and survival in natural and human-altered landscapes. The mushrooms and foragers have a symbiotic relationship in that they depend on each other. We cannot cultivate these mushrooms in plantations. They need the disturbance of foragers to continue to grow. At the same time, foragers organize their lives around the mushrooms, fostering an interdependent relationship. For Tsing, these interdependent relationships offer a glimpse of hope. Despite the precarity and struggle, life in the ruins of capitalism is possible. Her perspective resonated with me when I investigated Oued Issyl. The riverbed fosters medicinal plants despite its current state, demonstrating life's resilience.

This image of the thistle's beauty and resistance and the interdependent relationship between foraging communities and non-humans recurred in the continuation of the workshop. Tala Khoury, a researcher in *Wild Food Plants, Food Sovereignty, and Wellbeing in Palestine*, joined us for a conversation as part of a screening of Palestinian filmmaker and artist Jumana Manna's film *Foragers*. *Foragers* portrays the interdependent relationship between Palestinians and the 'aakoub (gundelia or tumble thistle), a relative of sunflowers that tastes a bit like artichoke. Historically, Palestinian foragers sustainably harvested 'aakoub to eat, ensuring its return each year because of pruning, which the plants need to grow. However, in the early 2000s, Israel's Nature and Parks Authority forbade traditional foraging, claiming it endangered the plant.

The restrictions imposed by Israeli authorities under the pretext of conservation efforts may have some scientific justification. However, these measures are largely punitive, particularly against Palestinians. In the film, an Israeli plantation manager explains how he grows 'aakoub, which he then sells to Palestinians. Cultivating 'aakoub requires intensive resources that are available only to larger farms or kibbutz communities. This situation has led to the commodification of the plants, forcing Palestinian dependence on Israeli agriculture and ultimately disrupting their communities' deep connections to their history, land, and traditions.

Foragers sheds light on how conservation is being used to greenwash occupation, but it is also a story of resilience. The film represents the joy of spring walks in the mountains and hills, the unique and intimate connection that Palestinians have to the land, the delights of communally preparing and foraging these plants, and the fight to preserve one's connection to the land and its produce.

In the conversation with Khoury following the film, she shared a memory of how she spent an entire day removing the thorns when she first tried to prepare 'aakoub with her friends, only to see them grow back the following morning. As one of my co-workshop participants, Nejma Batta pointed out, like the resistant thorns of the 'aakoub plant that continue to grow despite being removed, forcefully displaced Palestinians also continue to resist Israeli occupation. One of their strategies is to continue to forage despite repression, sustaining their intertwined relationship with local plants on their land.

Swimming in De Kromme Rijn and exploring the Oued Issyl confront the climate crisis head-on. The unruly Dutch river and the drought-stricken Moroccan oued have somehow resisted human control and persisted in sustaining life, embodying nature's strength in endurance and adaptation. Whether it's the untamable waters of the Netherlands, the revitalizing plants of the Oued Issyl, or the resilient 'aakoub of Palestine, life in the ruins of capitalism is possible and thriving. Beauty and resistance are two sides of the same coin, demonstrating that life finds ways to continue against the odds. However, we must avoid romanticizing the struggle. While Tsing offers hope, Manna reminds us that precarity, disruption, and dispossession remain real. Our true challenge today is to minimize violence against each other and our shared land and water resources. The oueds wild medicinal plants remind us that life can indeed persist and resist, but the results of uneven water distribution are felt nutritionally with less access to water to grow food and severed relationships to land and water, this all reminds us that we must and should not wait passively for the ruins of capitalism.

References

Heinrich, Will. "In Jumana Manna's Film, a Wild Plant Crosses the Political Line." *New York Times*, September ,29 2 0 2 2 .
<https://www.nytimes.com/29/09/2022/arts/design/jumana-manna-film-foragers-review.html>.

Manna, Jumana, "Where Nature Ends and Settlements Begin," *e-flux*, November 2020,
<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/360006/113/where-nature-ends-and-settlements-begin/>.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.





Bismillah (In the name of Alla



lah) is what I start with and try



In the garden,



, we cultivate crops



when people came they
thanks to



y thought we had long hair
to the spring



so they asked us if they



y could also use it to shower