URIEL ORLOW

Of Soil and Weeds

Uriel Orlow is an artist based in London and Lisbon whose work explores the blind spots of history, paying particular attention to forgotten and discarded memories and their resilience in the face of dominant socio-political forces. Archives often provide alternate resources to counter mainstream historical narratives, giving voice to actors unheard or unseen, human or non-human. The privileging of micro-histories offers a strategic channel from which to consider global interconnectedness. Between 2018 and 2019 he was in residence at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, looking at the town's multi-layered agricultural and industrial past. Here, an attention to weeds leads to a consideration of local gardening and colonial as well as ongoing ties with former French West-Africa.

A few years ago, I took a stroll through Aubervilliers, a neighbourhood just north of central Paris. I was walking with a friend who knows a lot about plants, and to my amazement, we came across more than a dozen edible plants, growing as weeds on the sidewalks, in cracks of walls, along busy avenues and in empty lots that were waiting to be redeveloped.

This surprised me and stoked my interest. I was in a zone marked by an industrial past of factories and warehouses servicing Paris. How did these edible weeds get here? I did not yet know that a lot of weeds are, in fact, edible - but more on that later.

I had a strong sense that these weeds were survivors, plant ghosts from another era haunting the pavements, lingering in the present, reminding us of the past.

Eventually, I began to dig a bit deeper into the local soil… which turns out not to be as local as I thought.

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The agricultural history of Paris is interesting in its own right. Since the 14th-century market gardeners established themselves

Fig. XX: Uriel Orlow, *Soil Affinities*, 2018-2020, Installation View Kunsthalle Mainz, (Detail of a stained-glass window from the church Notre-Dame-des-Vertus in Aubervilliers, made by the Charles Champigneulle Studio in 1919)

along the marshy lands of one of its canals in today's Marais neighbourhood in the centre of Paris, where they were doing intensive agriculture on very small parcels of land behind their houses.

The Maraichers turned unwanted horse manure from all over the city into valuable soil to produce edible greens all year round. The heat produced by the micro-organisms in the manure allowed them to grow seedlings as early as March. Over the years, the market gardeners turned millions of tons of stable horse manure from the city's transportation service into salads.

In the mid-nineteenth century, however, big city planner Baron Haussmann was transforming Paris into a modern city with large avenues and buildings for the new bourgeois class. This forced out the market gardeners living in the centre of the city.

Having built up their soil over so many years, they wanted to take their valuable soil with them when they were evicted from the city centre.

They decided to settle North of Paris, in and around the suburb of Aubervilliers. They walked their soil there in carts.

Around 1900 together with the farmed fields around them, the market gardens supplied ninety per cent of all vegetables sold at the markets in Paris. They continued using the hotbed system they had already developed as well as other pioneering permaculture techniques such as soil mulching and rotating crops, which prevents the impoverishment of the land by alternating crops over time.

They also developed special vegetable varieties: for example, a variety of onions called "jaune paille des vertus".

By the 1900s, however, bucolic life in the Parisian suburb had also begun to change. With the advancement of industrialisation, this form of local agriculture was already beginning to make way for developing industries. Factories were being built, and workers brought in. Initially, these were from the countryside, later also foreign workers. Disconnected from a more agrarian life and paid very little, the workers were often malnourished. Thus in the few remaining patches of land around the factories, workers' gardens

were set up for them to grow their own food. These are still cultivated today.

Other survivors of Aubervilliers agricultural past in the form of wild-growing plants – weeds – that escaped the fields, established themselves in the streets and got mixed with new arrivals brought in by migrant workers who often travelled with their favourite plants from back home.

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Not many people paid attention to these survivors, these living memories of the recent past, these ghostly plants haunting the pavements.

One of the rare enthusiasts of these colonisers of gutters, sidewalks, walls and roofs was Paul Jovet, a young working-class natural history student who supported himself by working as a teacher. In 1915, at the age of nineteen, he was appointed to work in the Northern suburbs of Paris and, in 1920, ended up at a boys school in Aubervilliers.

He wrote in his diary:

> *In Aubervilliers, during breaks, at lunchtime, in particular, I would make my way to a wasteland between the school and the canal Saint-Denis, where I ended up finding a number of peculiar plants and, looking closely through the flora, I came to understand that one of them was an alpine plant. And then, there were plants from other countries, which eventually became the object of my first botanical notes for the botanical society.*

He went out daily, scanning every gap in the pavement, every crack in a wall, the most insignificant discovery could turn out to hold the most precious piece of information.

The ecological category of spontaneous plants from the fields or foreign countries continued to fascinate Paul Jovet.

On his daily walks, he collected them and then carefully pressed them between newspaper sheets, eventually producing an enor-

mous collection of weeds, amounting to some 60.000 samples.

Eventually, he was appointed as a botanist at the Museum of Natural History in Paris, where he fought to have his interest in spontaneous, wild weeds recognised as a research subject.

His singular focus on the local flora of the region at a time when most other botanists were keen to discover exotic species in faraway lands was promoting localism well ahead of its time.

He said: "We need not travel far. There are many plants growing on the Parisian soil: you just need to search for the weeds' country of origin" And so he became one of the pioneering weed space-time travellers.

He took no direct interest in cultivated plants. But in the margins of his botanical summaries, he did make notes of cultivated plants he found in the early 1920s in Aubervilliers: barley, oat, rye, millet, sorghum, chickpeas, lentils, potatoes, flaxseed, mustard seed, beets, goatsbeard, onions, curly leaf parsley, chard, and coriander.

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In 1899, following the infamous Berlin conference in which European powers parcelled out Africa among themselves — at the same time Aubervilliers' suburban agriculture was beginning to make way for developing industries and their accompanying factories — the French colonial department created the Colonial Test Garden on the eastern edge of the Bois de Vincennes. This place became a hub for plants and seeds from the New World: recently discovered plants were tested and their economic value assessed. If deemed valuable crops, they were propagated and transported in specially designed transportation units, called Ward cases, to the new test gardens of Dakar, Saint-Louis, and elsewhere in West Africa. There they would be tested for the local environmental conditions and acclimatised. In this way, France introduced peanuts and many other cash crops to its new colonies.

In 1902, the Colonial Ministry of France also opened a Higher School of Tropical Agriculture so that French agronomists could be trained to work overseas. And over time, the local test gardens

began to test and farm basic European crops such as tomatoes, peppers, green beans, onions and cabbage for the growing population of French settlers.

Large-scale farming of market vegetables in West Africa for European consumption — contrary to the colonial economy based on commodity plants like cocoa, coffee, peanuts, etc.— only took off fully after independence from France in 1960, partly due to faster and cheaper means of transport. Today there are multiple French and European businesses located in Senegal and elsewhere in West Africa producing market vegetables almost exclusively for Rungis, one of the biggest wholesale markets in Europe located in the Parisian suburbs – thus continuing forms of extraction, structures of control and trade routes established in colonial times.

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Back in Aubervilliers, I began to follow and look for some of the plants in Jovet's diary entries almost a hundred years later.

On 21 October 1921, he went to the museum of natural history for the first time to register a plant he found: *Galinsoga parviflora, the gallant soldier or potato weed*. I also found it on my walks through Aubervilliers almost a hundred years later.

The plant is from the daisy family from South America and was first brought from Peru to European botanical gardens, including Paris and Kew Gardens in London in the late 18th century. When it escaped into the wild in the British Isles, it became temporarily known as the 'Kew Weed'. In the wild, it often lives among cultivated plants, especially on the edges of fields. Botanists began to wonder about its widespread arrival. In the muddy Northern Parisian fields, these "well-adapted foreign species" arrived in ditches and took refuge on-field banks after being "chased out" by vegetable farmers.

However, the potato weed is itself edible. In Colombia, it is used as a spice herb in the soup Ajiaco. It can also be used as an ingredient in leaf salads, and its subtle flavour is reminiscent of artichoke. In eastern Africa, the plant is collected from the wild, and its leaves, stem and flowers are eaten. It is also dried and ground into powder for use in soups.

Fig XX: Uriel Orlow, *Soil Affinities*, 2018-2020, detail (Edible Weeds in Aubervilliers)

On 23 April 1924, Paul Jovet described the landscape of the area around the boulevard Félix-Faure; it contained everything: bits of plaster, broken glass, tiles, *Linaria vulgaris* and wrote: "they very vertically anchor their pivots in the dregs".

I also found *Linaria vulgaris*, the yellow toadflax. Despite its reputation as a weed, like the dandelion, this plant has been used in folk medicine for a variety of ailments.

Walking in 1926 along the remains of gardens, Paul Jovet noticed "one single *Lycium barbarum* on the edge of the main boulevard." *Lycium barbarum*, or wolfberry, is a hedge plant whose double life illustrates the migration of plants as well as the shifting perceptions of them. It is native to Asia and was introduced into the UK in the 18th century, and eventually spread across Europe and is often considered an invasive weed. For a long time, the berries were thought to be poisonous until their recent introduction into health food shops as yet another superfood from the Far East: Goji berries.

This brings us to the end of our conceptual walk-in Aubervilliers, in the North of Paris and from there into its agricultural past as well as to the former French colonies in West Africa and back, accompanied by the ghosts of Aubervilliers former agriculture, by soil and weeds, seedlings and market vegetables: more-than-human witnesses of complex entanglements across time and space. ◉