



War-torn Ecologies, An-Archic Fragments: Reflections from the Middle East, ed. by Umut Yildirim, Cultural Inquiry, 27 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 67–83

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Who's Afraid of Ideology?

CITE AS:

Marwa Arsanios, 'Who's Afraid of Ideology?', in *War-torn Ecologies, An-Archic Fragments: Reflections from the Middle East*, ed. by Umut Yildirim, Cultural Inquiry, 27 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 67–83 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-27_3>

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ABSTRACT: Artist Marwa Arsanios shares textual fragments from research she conducted for the first and second parts of a video trilogy titled *Who's Afraid of Ideology?* Meditating on the voiding effects of war, and the ecological and affective texture of communal resistance and eco-feminist praxis as they emerge in Iraqi Kurdistan, Lebanon, and northern Syria, the text takes us to ecological milieus made of wild medicinal plants, fig trees, Kurdish guerrillas, and farmers in a women-only commune.

KEYWORDS: Communal resistance; Eco-feminist praxis; Fig trees; Kurdish movement; Kurdistan; Rojava; Voiding; Wild medicinal plants

Who's Afraid of Ideology?

MARWA ARSANIOS

LAND MAKING. LANDING IN THE RESEARCH SITE

The status of ownership always entails a voiding of the owned other. A temporal and spatial emptying out that enables the act of possession. If one thinks of land as the object of ownership, then the first thing that comes to mind is the invisible creatures that live in the soil and underground, such as bacteria. My artistic practice conceptualizes the void as a moving and murmuring entity: even if one needs a microscope to see it and an affective predisposition to feel it, it exists as such. My work questions the very idea of void as a passive entity. Void becomes a haunting matter, made of human and more-than-human elements, that transports us to a communal world that exists at the edges of capitalist structures of property, ownership, and legality. If voiding is a multilayered process through which colonial and capitalist violence crushed Indigenous lives by fabricating registers of ownership and legality, it also bears the affective echoes and ecological markers of such destruction.

Working with a few communes that were built on reappropriated land, I ask: How can one think of ecological markers, traces of voiding, and communalizing of the land? What kind of methodology would capture not only the ruination of land and displacement of humans, but also the world-making and resistance of communities that are involved in processes of reappropriation? How to perceive such voiding? With a focus on ecologies of displacement and resistance, I listen to murmuring landscapes made of humans, plants, rocks, fertilizers, preserved vegetables. This is to see what happens when life heals and regenerates in communal terms amidst war in militarized geographies while bearing traces of long-term violence.

The text moves through different geographies between northern Syria (Rojava) and Iraqi Kurdistan, where I encountered women who are shaping new relationships to their lands and rearticulating their communal lives. These relatively small, slow, and supposedly low-key endeavours yield great insights, showing how new ecological paradigms and politics are being born out of the necessity to survive in situations of war. They can potentially create a paradigmatic shift in power relations.

THE SICK FIG TREE. THE PLAIN. THE SUN.

While touring a cooperative in the region of Serekanieh, in northern Syria, we listen to the agricultural engineer describe what they are trying to build on this land recently appropriated by the autonomous region of Rojava after the regime was pushed back in 2011. The land appears dry but there are many wells on the plot. The conversation below captures how reappropriation, work, maintenance, and care for a land can heal years of industrial usage and how the double voiding of the state's grip on the land



Figure 1. Wild plant. Author's photo.

and then its retrieval has created the potential for another kind of relationship and reorganization of the plot. It is now a cooperative run by agricultural workers who were previously employed by the state and paid a daily wage. Historically, the Kurdish population from this region was systematically impoverished and had little access to land ownership.

Fragments from a conversation:

— This land was managed by the Syrian Libyan company before it went bankrupt

During the war the villagers around cut all the trees because they needed wood to heat themselves

Let's go see how they are irrigating the trees there

We have planted three thousand trees

We don't have enough means, there is a water scarcity, at the moment there is a water tank there and it's irrigating each individual plant, we are trying to keep it green

Here they are irrigating as well

— I am afraid of snakes

— Look at the sheep

This is the hospital for the sheep

There are the raisins, the apricots, the mango trees

There is more until the end of the field

We planted all this only five months ago

— Mango needs a lot of water

— This is the fig and there are the pomegranate

These bigger fig trees are from the regime's time but the smaller ones here are all ours

This the regime's fig

— It looks ill

— People say that during the regime's time there was fig and pomegranate here

— Let's take a picture of the regime's fig tree

These are our fig trees here they are in better shape

— What is this?

— It's wild herbs

This is called sower milk

It's very good for toothache

The small figs are ours

The produce is not the most important, our aim is for the tree to grow and for the field to become green

Here are the apples

— How can apple grow here?

It's very warm

— People used to say this area is not useful for trees

But it's not true, this was just the regime's politics

The politics of impoverishment

They just wanted to grow wheat here and take it for themselves, like a colonial extractionist force

The other side of the border in Bakur, in Turkey, it is so green. The agricultural state politics were better on the other side

If the people of Bakur had the Rojava land in their hands it would have been an amazing place (laughs)

There are the raisins, we can go see them

This is wild zaatar

Some of the raisins are dying, you can see that, but it's difficult with the water scarcity

Anyway, come back in two years, this will be a paradise on earth

Let's go back

— Are you afraid that the regime will put their hands on this land again?

— Even if there won't be a deal with the regime, the important thing is that this land will become green

— Do you use fertilizers?

— Yes in some cases we have to, but they are not chemical

This land is very fertile



Figure 2. Alternative medicine. Author's photo.

WILD HERBS. FERTILITY. FERTILIZERS

Khalisseh practices as an alternative medicine doctor in the Kurdish town of Derbesiyeh in northern Syria. She talks about many cases that she has healed, a few of them being fertility problems.

It's a practice I have learned from my grandmother, I was assisting her

Since I was ten I had the curiosity to follow my grandmother in her work

I started doing some experiments for medicine, I would try it on myself before anyone else

Since 1995 I have been practicing in my house, since five months I opened the clinic here

I had the opportunity to work in a hospital but I refused

I worked as a nurse and I also worked in a lab

I first diagnose the patients, if I have doubts I send them to do the analysis or to do an echography, then they come back to me with the analysis

I am an alternative medicine doctor, it's also called herbal medicine

I don't sell medicine, patients often ask me for herbs, but I don't give them away like this, herbs can be very strong on the body

For example I am often asked for this herb called Oshrok, I ask them what do you need it for? They say to lose weight. Of course I refuse to give it to them because Oshrok is not for weight loss it is for very strong cases of constipation

It is like a tranquilizer, it is very strong

After diagnosis I make a special medicine for each case

I treated fifty-six cases of depression this year, I usually massage the belly button and the lower back. I try to adjust the belly button and re-centre it

The most common diseases are spine, joints, back and neck problems, I treat all of those

Sometimes it can take two weeks to heal and sometimes months

I diagnosed a lot of cancers as well

In the spring I go to the fields myself to get the herbs

I have treated a lot of cases of eczema

For example for the spine, I have a special mix, olive oil, honey wax, snake oil, barakeh seed

You will heal

This is my special mix

After 2011 there was a lot of difficulties receiving all our herbs and material

Most of the resources were coming from Damascus before

After the war, roads were closed it was very difficult to get the basic products

In the spring I get a lot of the herbs as well, chamomile, the khetmiyeh, wild rihan, wild zaatar, I go to the mountains and get them. Zayzafoun, malisseh, all this I get it from here. The barakeh seed, the helbeh, the yansoun, sesame for the oil. All of that I get from here

I go to the wilderness and discover new herbs, and try them on myself, if they don't have a bad effect it means they might have some benefits

For example there is a lot of herbs that are detoxifiers. For example camomille is detoxifying

For example wild zaatar is a tranquilizer, for the colon, for the flu it cleans the lungs, for the liver, it detoxifies, for the removal of fat, for high tension

The wild rihan has the same benefits

The jaadeh is very strong and it can ruin the liver, so one should not abuse it; it is good for the high sugar, by washing the feet with it

The helbeh, is good for pancreas the heart, it can be boiled, it eliminates inflammation

It is good if men ha[ve] weak sperm

Koronfol is a very strong tranquilizer

And it is also used for people who have fertility problems.

The radish seed, is very good for erection problems

Coconut oil for increasing the hair



Figure 3. A diary. Author's photo.

If a baby is cramping you can put the naranj oil
 She used to do mixes with this herb called jwayfeh,
 this herb doesn't exist anymore, or we can't find it
 I have also treated people with war scares. Because
 of operations sometimes they lose the sensitivity
 on the scar
 Also burns, if they are at the beginning

WILD PLANTS. FOOD. NGOS.

In a cooperative in Hermel, east of the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, on the border with Syria, Khadija is running a workshop teaching Syrian women living in neighbouring refugee camps how to preserve seasonal vegetables for the winter. All these women who come from rural areas carry so much agricultural knowledge. They have been made landless by the Syrian regime, and struggle to survive without a plot that they can cultivate. Their relationship to this new place is built through their agricultural and food knowledge.

Khadija is cooking green fava beans on one side of the oven and tomato paste on the other. While explaining every step in the cooking process and the benefits of each vegetable — its type, origin, and local source — she pours the beans and the paste into a jar, closes it, and turns it upside down on the table. ‘That’s how you keep the pressure in and avoid any air leaks.’ Each jar will serve as a meal for the family, with a portion of rice on the side. It’s spring, and the contents of these jars will be eaten next fall or winter. Buying fava in March is very cheap, since it’s in season. ‘We are learning how to eat cheap and healthy’, she says while stirring the tomato paste, which has been cooking on a low fire for the past thirty minutes. ‘Always buy seasonal vegetables and conserve them for the coming season. Each season has its vegetables and each vegetable has its preservation process.’

I met Khadija in her cooperative, which consists of a three-room workshop and a big kitchen. It is surrounded by a plot of land that she inherited from her mother and turned into a food production cooperative, where she grows most of the crops and where women can gather, share knowledge, and learn from each other about food preservation, crop cultivation, seed preservation, and different ways of treating the soil. She has been running this cooperative for seven years, despite the local politics and the tensions with Hezbollah (the dominant party in the area), which often tries to make it difficult for her to continue with the cooperative. Meanwhile, she has continued to pursue her activities, producing seasonal jams and other food provisions that she sells to sustain the cooperative. Regarding the political tensions, she says to me: ‘Hezbollah could benefit from the fact that I am creating a micro-economy and transmit forgotten knowledge, but instead all they think about is how to have sole hegemonic power.

They don't want any growth that is outside of their control.' In fact, small independent organizations and cooperatives supported by international funders are usually left to do their work, unless it is believed that they oppose the dominant political power; the latter situation leads to clashes, tensions, and difficulties, such as indirectly pressuring the farmers to slow down their work or to stop it completely.

This cooperative is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and has collaborated with different groups since 2013, especially humanitarian refugee organizations. When Khadija was approached by USAID (as part of its program to fight hunger), she was already known for her skills and knowledge regarding the edible and medicinal wild plants she gathers. It is an old practice that many women carry on. Usually it is transmitted to them by their mothers or another elderly woman in the family.

Khadija opens a folder where she has gathered an extensive archive of dried wild edible weeds. She has a precise knowledge of the use and medical benefits of each plant. 'This is precious knowledge from my mother. She was also a farmer and owned this piece of land that I inherited from her.' After each workshop on cheap, healthy food and edible wild plants, the products are equally divided among the women to feed their families.

Since 2012, the flow of refugees from Syria has led about fifty international NGOs to set up camp in the Bekaa region. As the immediate crisis-solving apparatus, they settled in the area with the highest density of refugees. The few food cooperatives and NGOs run by women in the region became spaces where the transmission of knowledge happens. A few have begun to be used as support spaces for refugee women, in collaboration with humanitarian NGOs.

Before 2011 and the eruption of the Syrian revolution, these kind of initiatives (mostly funded by USAID and the EU) had found their place on the map of Lebanon's eco-conscious urban middle class. In urban areas they could sell produce to restaurants and directly to customers at farmer's markets. After 2011, many employed low-wage Syrian women, turning the cooperatives into fully-fledged businesses or transforming themselves into useful spaces for women from the camps — sometimes both.

The cooperative Khadija runs seems to want to reinforce the politics of the commons through the transmission of a knowledge that is embedded in a very specific geography and seasonal landscape. This knowledge of wild plants, often considered 'bad herbs' in modern agricultural practice, is at the core of this cooperative. What makes this construction of the commons possible in this case is in fact the global aid economy (USAID funding). The cooperative cannot fully sustain itself yet, since the food and herbs it produces don't bring in enough money.

Many non-governmental women's organizations have emerged in the Arab world in the past twenty years, and even more since 2011 to deal with the refugee crisis, a lack of nutritional resources, domestic violence, and women's health issues. Though some do not present themselves as explicitly feminist, many deal with women's issues or create spaces that specifically support women. Others more directly present themselves as feminist through research, discourse, and knowledge production. Often compensating for a lack of state structures, NGO structures work within the global economy and produce discourses that travel within and are shaped by this global economy. While many of these small initiatives adopt a language of 'empowerment', 'development', 'economic independence', and 'women's entrepreneurship', they also function within a

very small locality, and their political struggle often becomes isolated in local politics. Gender essentialism — ‘women’s empowerment’ — overtakes any class or race discourses, which are at the core of internationalist feminist politics. ‘Global womanhood’ becomes a category or a class in itself. Hunger is separated from class and from the failure of states to provide and distribute wealth equally. The main political aim becomes fighting hunger, without any reflection on what has caused this hunger — for example, the failure to subsidize farmers’ material needs; the historical mismanagement of water distribution, which has led to drought in many areas; the overexploitation of underground water (like in the Bekaa Valley); the distribution or subsidization of fertilizers for farmers, which over many years has damaged the soil; toxic waste polluting the water; and more generally the laws around property or land ownership, which favour the few at the expense of the many. NGOs do not address this mismanagement at the state level; instead, they try to compensate for it. ‘Entrepreneurship’ and ‘independence’ become the ultimate goals of women’s emancipation, privileging narratives of individual achievement (as in the case of Khadija’s co-op); rather than demanding redress from the state for its failure, individuals are expected to bear the responsibility of building structures to make up for where the state has failed. Terms like ‘empowerment’ are used to describe these projects, which really only emphasize ‘powerlessness’ and corner women into a narrative of victimhood. The mission of NGOs is then to intervene in order to empower the victim and ‘save her’, without taking into consideration the existing and historical collective support networks among women — especially among women farmers; this ill-considered intervention often risks breaking up these networks in order to single out individuals and support them. These non-



Figure 4. The rock, the mountain, and the bullet. Author's photo.

governmental structures, functioning within the global capitalist economy, produce an apolitical managerial discourse that risks erasing the existing struggles of feminists.

THE ROCK. THE MOUNTAIN. THE BULLET.

On the border between Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, we are standing here on the Iraqi side of Kurdistan. Silence is quite heavy in these mountains and the speech act of the guerilla women from the Kurdish autonomous women's movement is the most powerful sound. It reverberates and echoes in the landscape. I interview many members of the movement there.

On the subject of self-defence — the core concept of the women's movement — I interviewed Dilar Dirik. She

elaborates on this extralegality that is at the core of the struggle and the alliance between the women's movement and what she calls natural geographies, but also the intertwinement of ecological struggle, war, and emancipatory feminist politics:

So self-defence actually comes from nature itself, it is something that is very organic and normal, every existence whether human or not relies on means of protecting itself. In the human context it cannot just be in the sense of the army or states or police or so on because they are very destructive systems which are not there to protect but which are there to kill and destroy.

In liberalism, in liberal thought philosophy in general, the expectation [is] that people, groups, individuals should surrender the means of protection to the states, the states should have the monopoly on the use of force, and the assumption there is that you as an individual, as a member of society should not have the agency to act because the state should decide on your behalf what is dangerous to your existence, what is your existence to begin with.

If we look at how nature organizes its self-defence we can draw from that a philosophy which is also ecological and which does not need to organize defence, to conquer, to objectify, to violate, to destroy another person, another group of people, another collective but rather, how can we in harmony within society, with other people, together make sure that we can survive, make sure that we can continue our existence and understand self-defence beyond the physical survival.

Historically in the case of the Kurds, for example, the mountains have always been a very strong protector of the people who have been historically persecuted, also when in 2014 when ISIS attacked the Yazidis ... the first thing that they did was

to flee to the mountains, or water or landscapes, natural geographies have always been sites of protection of people and that is not because they are there in the service of humans but rather because humans are part of that region and humans have until the creation of big city-states and especially capitalism and industrialism people have always understood how to live together with nature, I know this for example from my own grandparents village, how they live and interact with nature, they have a very different relationship to the animal[s] that they raise and very different relationship, they sing songs to the mountains, not about the mountains.

Another woman I met is the guerilla fighter Pelshin, who is also one of the ideologues of the women's movement. She serves on multiple committees; one of them is the jineology committee (Kurdish for 'the study of women'), which is a project to rewrite the history of science from the perspective of women. The committee also publishes a quarterly journal, Jineology. Thinking of different paradigms of communal life within the PKK and the relationship between knowledge, ideas, and practice, Pelshin presents us with so many contradictory ideas and situations from guerilla life. How to inhabit these contradictions? Pelshin states:

There is a contradiction between ecology and war. When I joined the guerrillas twenty-four years ago, I entered 'a war atmosphere'. The conditions were such that you sometimes needed to cut parts of trees, to have something to lie down on or to protect yourself from animals.

The understanding of ecology in the women's movement was strongly influenced by these kind[s] of experiences and contradictions. Our ecological consciousness within the movement

evolved within our communal life in these conditions of war.

There's always a strong parallel between the massacre of nature and that of women. We, the women's movement, had to protect our existence.

I was in the mountains of Dersim for three years, where there are a lot of mountain goats. We were hungry many times during those three years, but only once did we kill goats for food. That is a rule of the guerilla.

I want to point out something about my personal experience. I remember my childhood. My first ecological teacher was my mother. She taught me that we as humans have a place in nature, like trees and birds. I have the right to exist, like all other species in the same place. You shouldn't hurt the earth, you should protect it. Don't kill trees, don't kill animals. But we are the children of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, so it took a long time for this philosophy to reach us. But these things transmitted by my mother are the signs of this old philosophy.

Voiding is a carrier for ongoing violence, but also imbues destruction with the potential of communal visions and eco-feminist praxis. Ecological fragments and war-torn yet resistant murmurs of this atmospheric landscape made of sick fig trees, wild herbs, and medicinal plants; of rocks, mountains, and guerillas; and of bullets, fertilizers, and the NGOs show me how ideology is produced and practised on the ground.