Eco-Redaction as Method

Umut Yıldırım

Imagine an ancient Middle Eastern city whose two popular names have been made illegal by a denialist sovereign state.[1] Disregard for aspects of the toponymical and demographic past is commonplace in nationalist place-naming practices, and the official name for the city of Diyarbakır in Turkey's Kurdistan where I have been conducting fieldwork since 2004 is no exception. Suffice it to say that this official toponomy was the genocidal result of academic, bureaucratic, and military Turkification efforts on the part of government administrators and experts, as evidenced by the coining of the name by Turkish Republican elite in 1937.[2] These elites operated from within the constitutive genocidal logic of the newly founded Republic. In the Ottoman province of Diyarbekir, rule had been imposed through a series of pogroms, displacements, dispossessions, and resettlements that intensified in the nineteenth century and culminated in the 1915 genocide of Armenians by the Ottoman state.[3] Although the Repub-

1 This text is an extract from Umut Yıldırım, "Mulberry Affects: Ecology, Memory, and Aesthetics on the Shores of the Tigris River in the Wake of Genocide," in *War-Torn Ecologies, An-archic Fragments: Reflections from the Middle East,* ed. Umut Yıldırım (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), 27–66.

2 Kerem Öktem, "Incorporating the Time and Space of the Ethnic 'Other': Nationalism and Space in Southeast Turkey in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 4 (2004): 559–78, and Kerem Öktem, "The Nation's Imprint: Demographic Engineering and the Change of Toponymes in Republican Turkey," *European Journal of Turkish Studies: Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey* 7 (2008).

3 Fuat Dündar, *İttihat Ve Terakki'nin Müslümanları İskan Politikasi, 1913–1918* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001); Fuat Dündar, *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi: İttihat Ve Terakki'nin Etnisite Mühendisliği, 1913–1918* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2008); Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *Armenian Tigranakert/Diarbekir and Edessa/Urfa* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2006); Joost Jongerden, "Elite Encounters of a Violent Kind: Milli İbrahim Paşa, Ziya Gokalp and Political Struggle in Diyarbekir at the Turn of the 20th Century," in *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870–1915,* eds. Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 55–84; Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij, eds., *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870–1915* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Raymond H. Kévorkian, *Le Génocide des Arméniens* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006); Raymond H. Kévorkian and Paul B. Paboudjian, *1915 Öncesinde Osmanli Imparatorlugu'nda Ermeniler,* trans. Mayda Saris (Istanbul: Aras Yayıncılık, 2012); Vahé Tachjian,

lic's denialist naming practices effectively erased from the official map both Kurds' and non-Muslim non-Turkish peoples' existence and the violence Ottoman-cum-Republican elites and their various collaborators had perpetrated against them, Diyarbakır's toponomy continued to be haunted by its Armenian and Kurdish heritage. The Western Armenian name of "Dikranagerd," used during the Ottoman period, was retained by the Armenian diaspora and in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia, while the Kurdish name of "Amed," which references the Kurdish movement's informal capital of Kurdistan, gained popularity in the 1990s during the escalating guerrilla war between the *Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Worker's Party, PKK) and successive Turkish governments.[4] As a contested toponymy, the name "Diyarbakır" is a total eclipse. It structures the denialist post-genocide present by obscuring the nested and layered nativity of Christians and non-Turkish Muslims to the land. In current debates over territorial custodianship, land rights, and property claims, such eclipsing toponymy precludes consideration of the violently traversed intercommunal multi-ethnic relations that exist following the extermination and forcible displacement of Diyarbakırite Armenians and Syriacs. And it suggests that fieldwork in this geography of spiraling mass violence should begin in the shadows by using an analytical radar attuned to the processes of redaction.

Not only has the dramatic and sedimented history of this genocidal city of seasoned rebellion piqued my concerns around an-archic justice but the association of its ancient urban agricultural plots with "lungs" has inspired my imagination to propose the idea of eco-redaction as an aesthetic manoeuvre for thinking with erasure and shadows so as to uncover the ecological sites of ruination and transformation.[5] By an-archic justice, on the one hand I propose how considering omissions in Ottoman and Turkish archives constitutes the genocidal aftermath of the anti-Christian pogroms of 1895, which culminated in the Armenian genocide, by obstructing a space for its reckoning and thus enabling and recycling genocide denialism. On the other hand, I propose how ecological resurgence pushes back against the logocentric hold of these archives. My attention here turns to Jacques Derrida, who by studying the etymological roots of the concept of archive drew a connection between the official prints of history, epistemes of rule, and structures of memory.[6] The Greek word arkhē, he notes, means

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Daily Life in the Abyss: Genocide Diaries, 1915–1918, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Ugur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Ugur Ümit Üngör and Mehmet Polatel, *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

4 Although the city is popularly named Dikranagerd among Armenians, the precise location of Dikranagerd remains unknown. See Hovannisian, *Armenian Tigranakert/Diarbekir and Edessa/Urfa*.

5 Umut Yıldırım, "'Resistant Breathing': Ruined and Decolonial Ecologies in a Middle Eastern Heritage Site," *Current Anthropology* 65, no. 1 (2024): 123–49.

6 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

both beginning and command, and links creation stories to government and law. Derrida informs us that the arkheion, or the archive, was originally "a house, a domicile, an address," which was the residence of "the superior magistrates, the archons, the commanding officers."[7] Originally, archons and magistrates governed these archives, maintaining the epistemic, legal, and affective parameters of homeliness for rights-bearing citizens, and providing franchises and entitlements to the privileged.

Violence is an integral part of this archival homemaking. As Derrida takes a pass at Freudian psychoanalysis, he entangles the Freudian primal drive toward aggression and elimination embodied in the death drive with an "archive destroying"[8] that provokes a collective amnesia by annihilating memory. Derrida bypasses the theoretical bottleneck of sovereign factuality that had jammed archival inquiries with problems they had created themselves in the first place. While the sovereign archons select, classify, order, and govern facts that build the house of citizenship, they also feverishly burn the house, so to speak, by erasing facts in order to escape responsibility for past atrocities, as well as future mass violence. It is, he notes, "in this house arrest, that archives take place."[9]

An-archic justice exposes this arrest through ecology in order to raise questions about ancestral claims, endurance, denial, complicity, and responsibility. Recently, Jodi Byrd analyzed the sovereign archive in a critical way that went beyond Derrida — that is, beyond the written word, demonstrating that archival destruction does not necessarily lead to passive forgetfulness and amnesia, but rather to an active dissociation from facts unsuitable for the maintenance of sovereignty, or "agnosia of colonialism."[10] At its core, colonial agnosia reproduces archival destruction socially and affectively in the present by suspending issues around historical culpability and everyday complicity with such destruction. An agnosia about colonialism refers to the affective preference of staying in the dark about archival destruction. It is a socially and historically structured psychic investment in remaining ignorant of sovereign mass violence and its pulsing effects in the present. It is the disavowal, especially, of right-bearing citizens of sovereign and racial privilege, who invest in their own failure to comprehend mass violence as an ongoing relation that shapes political imagination and action within the constraints of sovereign facts. This type of investment prevents those who benefit most from colonialism from taking responsibility for the violence it perpetrates. Colonial agnosia is culpability and complicity historicized and temporalized. An-archic justice is complicity's historical and ecological negative.

How can the Armenian genocide be considered in terms of its ecological roots and remnants? How can we acknowledge the layered processes of destruction while also accounting for the resurgence of multispecies life

7 Ibid., 2.

8 Ibid., 10.

9 Ibid., 2.

10 Jodi Byrd, "Silence Will Fall: The Cultural Politics of Colonial Agnosia" (unpublished manuscript, n.d.).

in war-torn geographies shaped by the wake of genocidal erasure and the context of ongoing genocide denialism? In acknowledging Marc Nichanian's observation that attempting to comprehend this catastrophe through reason, fact, and closure is a doomed endeavour predicated on its own collapse,[11] my methodology in tackling this issue is eco-redaction, with mulberry trees as my interlocutors.

After Christina Sharpe, I move beyond conventional disciplinary notions of archival factuality to centre resistant roots as a racial and decolonial resource of critical knowledge that pushes back against genocide denialism.[12] "We must become undisciplined,"[13] she writes. In conversation with Black feminist scholarship, particularly that of Saidiya Hartman, and abolitionist through and through, Sharpe's project develops new methodologies that go beyond archival eradications. Sharpe's aim is to abolish the very conceptual and archival framework that is constituted and pervaded by the anti-Black apparatus and racist logic in North America, one that forces Black researchers to obey quotidian, psychic, artistic, legal, and archival terms and analytics that precondition their own decimation. In thinking with "this pain of and in the archive,"[14] Sharpe claims and mobilizes the creative force of imagination, not to "make sense of [archival] silences, absences, and modes of dis/appearance,"[15] but to generate a processual ethics of radical care in the present and into the future. To this end, Sharpe theorizes "wake work" as a methodology that centres Black consciousness. The method stays on the side of the dead with a sensitivity toward grief, mourning, melancholia, and community building.

Laced with manoeuvres of "annotation" and "redaction," wake work moves attention "toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame; towards seeing something beyond visuality."[16] Following Sharpe, I am interested in understanding "dropout" ecologies neither with the aim of engaging in rescue work to bring ecology back into the legal register and sovereign gaze of the state, nor with the aim of lingering on ruination. I seek instead to register an an-archic aesthetic movement against the suffocating narrative arc of settler archives. I am aware of the risks of appropriating radical Black feminist theorizing for use in Middle Eastern contexts. Such a move would not only flatten the relational, ontological, and spiritual aspects of Black endurance and praxis, but it would also eclipse the particular structuring of effects and affects that underwrite genocide denialism in Turkey. In turning to Sharpe, my intention is more circumspect: I engage in archival wake work with the aim of mobilizing the resurgent power of an imagination that refrains from approximating the lived experience of Armenian life so as to produce a coherent, hopeful,

11 Marc Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion,* trans. Gil Anidjar (Columbia University Press, 2009).

12 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

13 Ibid., 13.

14 Ibid., 50.

15 Ibid., 20.

16 Ibid., 117.

or "civilized" corrective to settler archives. The point is not to detoxify an already toxic archive, but to place the conditions that reproduce the impossibility of generating historical facts under a magnifying glass, and in so doing, carve out spaces in which to think, understand, and feel otherwise, in un-settling terms and through an-archic temporalities.

Here I toy with the idea of eco-redaction as a way to think of ecological sites as media works that generate an aesthetic and affective interface that is caught in the long movement between destruction and resurgence. I embrace the idea of eco-redaction as "a counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see."[17] Such "noticing"[18] means paying attention to "mutant,"[19] "ruderal,"[20] and "unexpected"[21] ecologies that emerge at the ecological edges of colonial milieus and environmental histories. Rather than romanticizing an "outside" of settler colonialism as a model for alternative modes of endurance and resistance with an ontological twist, eco-redaction engages in "edge thinking," in which researchers come into contact with ecological elements at the archival and on-the-ground edges of destruction. In so doing, they allow for the possibility of imagining and registering the sedimented and layered quality of decolonial claims to land. Eco-redaction, as I employ it here, entails the use of photographic images and texts to create a montage of arguments and feelings designed to amplify the dissonant ways in which ecology has been pushed out of the order of a dignified life and reduced to background effect (figs. 18.1–6).

Elsewhere I foreground the concept of "resistant breathing" as a way of bringing fresh perspective to existing knowledge of ecosystems in the Middle East. My hope is that discussions of ancient sites run down by the current war in Turkey in the wake of the Armenian genocide of 1915 may be considered together with current debates on Kurdish decolonial praxis under climate change. Here, I propose eco-redaction as an an-archic methodology for pushing back against omissions constitutive of settler archives and as a means of experimenting with an "undisciplined" way of understanding life in the genocidal wake. I do so, after Derrida, by revisiting the Greek root of the word archive, ἀρχή (*arkhē*), also meaning "the originary, the first, the principal"[22] place of command. Inspired by methodologies that reroute the Greek root as an-archy,[23] I foreground an ongoing process of

17 Ibid.

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

19 Joseph Masco, "Mutant Ecologies: Radioactive Life in Post–Cold War New Mexico," *Cultural Anthropology* 19, no. 4 (2004): 517–50.

20 Bettina Stoetzer, "Ruderal Ecologies: Rethinking Nature, Migration, and the Urban Landscape in Berlin," *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (2018): 295–323.

21 Gastón R. Gordillo, *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

22 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 2.

23 Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2014); Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," trans. Davide Panagia and Rachel Bowlby, *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001); Simon Springer, *The Anarchist Roots of Geography: Toward Spatial Emancipation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); and Facundo Vega, "On Bad Weather: Hei-

reimagination as a way of problematizing and unsettling the "genocidal will"[24] that is embedded in settler archives. Eco-redaction is ethnographic imagination politicized.

Eco-Redaction: An An-Archic Counter to Denialism

"Char" — charred material, the stuff of charcoal — is an idiom of blacked-out redaction. Char invites me to think with ecological edges-in-the-making that exist under archival and on-the-ground erasure of interspecies life by the Turkish state, and that persist in the ongoing wake of genocidal spiral and the larger context of climate change. Char registers that disasters have already arrived, have been ongoing, and have been responded to. Char asks us to pay attention to those durable colonial enclosures, genocidal aftermaths, military blockades, and capitalist wreckages that are impossible to metabolize.

The first image is of charred stumps from an uprooted centennial mulberry tree on the outskirts of the Hewsel Gardens felled by chemical weaponry during the blockade of 2015/2016. I blackened the already charred stumps further to amplify their alleged status as non-life according to the genocidal optic of the state, and to point to their invisibilization (and hence their uncomplication) as ecological rubble that rots in the background.

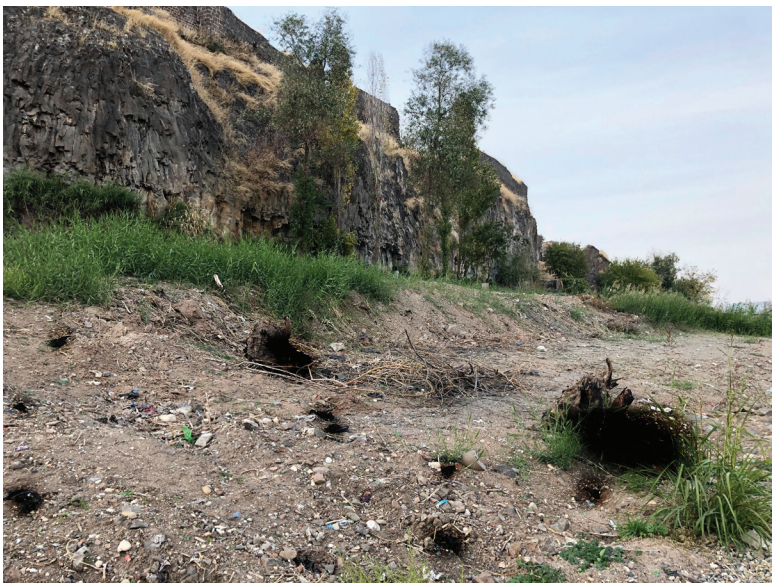


Fig. 18.1. Char, the Hewsel Gardens. Photo by the author.

degger, Arendt, and Political Beginnings," in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, eds. Christoph F.E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), 227–43.

24 Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, 9.

War is as much about construction as it is about destruction. This wall was erected soon after the blockade of 2015 to prevent Kurdish youths from escaping to the gardens and attacking the military convoys in self-defence. The livelihood of Kurdish farmers, based as it was on cultivating the gardens, was completely cut off during the blockade. Char is an invitation to reconsider one's tacit consent to indifference in the midst of an unending war.

I blackened the grey concrete wall to amplify its occupying power.

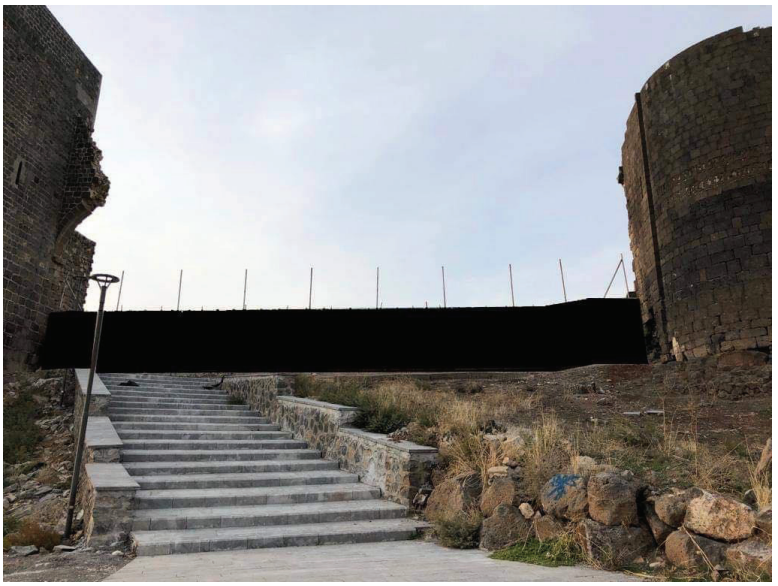


Fig. 18.2 Char, the wall. Photo by the author.

"To live in the habitus of denial is akin to perpetually setting the cycle of death alight,"[25] writes Aylin Vartanyan Dilaver. She continues: "imagine a tree that feeds on the tar of fear, flowing from its roots to its trunk and to the fire of anger. The tar feeds the fire. The fire makes the trunk glow. In time, the tree sprouts leaves of fire and bears fruits of tar. This poison from the roots keeps the tree erect, but it does not keep the tree alive." Just before the genocide, I relearn, mulberry trees grew both inside and outside Diyarbakır's city center: in the back yards of urban houses and in the Hewsel Gardens.[26] As with the living-dead tree that Vartanyan Dilaver imagines, emblematic of an impossible mourning in what has now become a Kurdish

25 Aylin Vartanyan Dilaver, "From Longing to Belong to Shaping the Longing: Dwelling with Armenian Women in Istanbul" (PhD diss., European Graduate School, forthcoming). Translation mine.

26 Ahmet Taşğin and Marcello Mollica, "Disappearing Old Christian Professions in the Middle East: The Case of Diyarbakır Pushee-Makers," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 6 (2015): 922–31.

city considered the capital of Greater Kurdistan, the mulberry's layered meanings prompt the imagination to recast the contested and violently traversed claims of nativity to the land and the right to repatriation. The tree offers an account of the aftermath of genocidal violence that conveys the sense of something ongoing, collective, intimate, and ecological about the impacts that episodes of mass violence leave on multispecies worlds in the denialist longue durée.

On my first visit to what I think might be Qeterbel, I arrive at an erased landscape dotted with feral centenarian mulberry trees. To amplify their resilience, I first considered photoshopping the trees by adding green to their leaves. But in an attempt to resist their being reduced to mere background effect as dull browns and greens, I chose instead to blacken them in order to invite reflection on the ongoing aftermath of genocidal ecocide. Char is an invitation to take responsibility for one's tacit consent to genocide denialism.

Fig. 18.3. Char. Mulberry Affects. Photo by the author.

Before 2015–2016, hundreds of eco-projects were realized with non-hybrid seeds and pesticide-free farming by eco-activists, Yazidi refugee women who had in 2014 fled the Yazidi Genocide in their ancestral homeland of Sinjar in Iraqi Kurdistan and settled in the camps of Diyarbakır. Since the occupation of Sur and its surrounding areas, these eco-projects are largely ruined. All signs of previous communal work and cultivation have been erased. Nothing remotely resembling a site of cultivation appears before the passer-by. Plants have been uprooted and are gone for good. Plots have become subdivisions of a wasteland.

Azad, a Kurdish anti-extraction activist, tells me that, given the predominance of systemic "industrial habits," farmers across the Hewsel Gardens

live an ideologically "ecological life" without necessarily living according to an "ecological conscience": most farmers depend on chemical fertilizers and pesticides to cultivate corn and maize, the monocrops promoted by Kurdish landlords and the Turkish state.

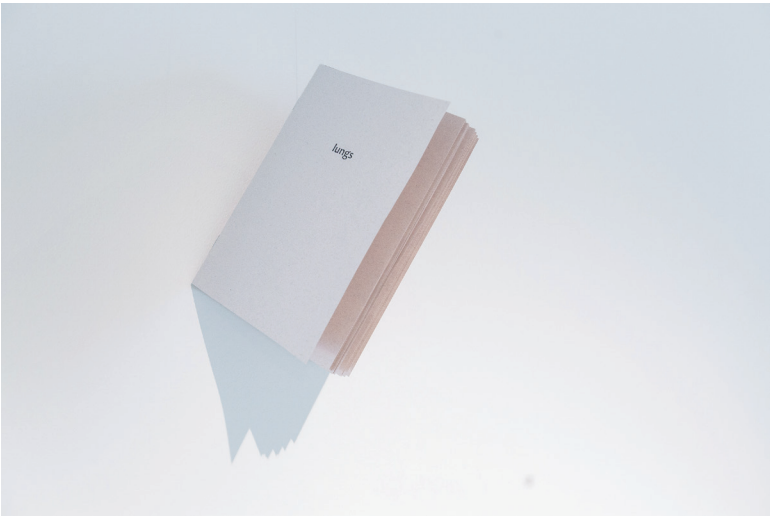
Azad cultivates a plot of land across from Hewsel near the Tigris River with a group of expelled academics and a Syrian refugee family. Together, they work to create a seed bank of pest-resistant plants native to the Kurdish region. Azad stresses the difficulties of putting decolonial ecological principles into practice under the state's brutal blockade where "war is the climate."

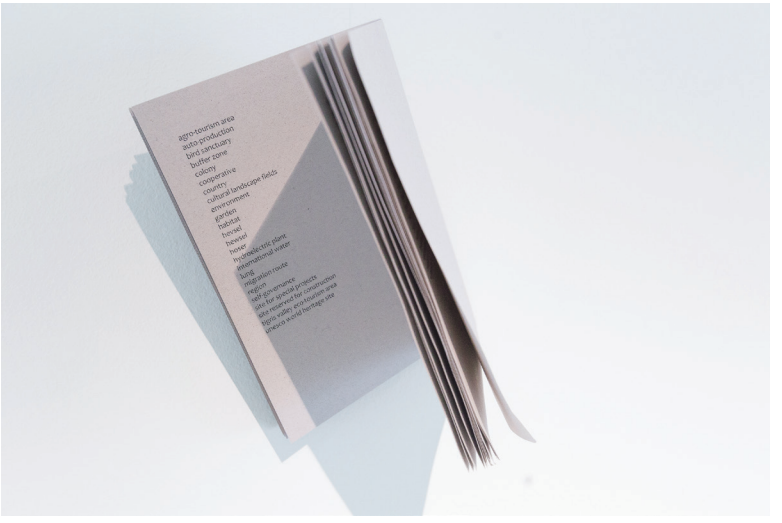
I blacked out some of the seeds stored in the ecologically constructed home that houses the seed bank to amplify and provoke reflection on the ongoing ecocide by war.

Fig. 18.4. Char. Seed. Photo by the author.

The zine is a medium of lexical eco-redaction. Titled *Lungs*, the fanzine and object is a simple lexical inventory of Hewsel Gardens. Words related to or associated with the Gardens' biodiversity are listed in succession, forming a catalogue of raw data arranged in cross-referenced thematic lists that codify those things that have persisted, the life and artifacts that have taken shape in the Gardens. The lists include such things as endemic plant and animal species, aquatic resources, fountains, orchards' names, Arme-

nian and Kurdish musical instruments once played in the recreational areas of the Gardens, news reports about blockades, phrases from the UNESCO protocol on Diyarbakır Fortress and Hevsel Gardens Cultural Landscape, construction machinery and materials, and the brand names of chemical pesticides and guns. I produced one hundred copies, some of which were placed in bookshops in Dikranagerd/Amed after obtaining the consent of shop owners. Others were exhibited in December 2017 as part of a collective show titled Koloni at Abud Efendi Konağı, Istanbul, and again in March 2018 at the Berlin Schwules Museum. Independent curatorial work was by Derya Bayraktaroğlu, Kevser Güler, and Aylime Aslı Demir.





Figs. 18.5–6. Lungs. Courtesy of the Schwules Museum, Berlin, 2018.

Doris Cross

Dictionary Columns

"—So you take a column and you strip words out of it…

—And the words left create their own rhythm and meaning, and that gets back to my great love. Henri Focillon, a French aesthetician. He wrote *The Life of Forms in Art*. He proves that it exists, that forms have a life, an existence of their own, gained through a series of formalizations."

— Doris Cross, quoted in Stephen Parks, "Doris Cross: The Painted Word. Interview with Doris Cross," *ARTlines*, February 1981, http://artlinesarchive.blogspot.com/2012/03/doris-cross-painted-word.html.

Doris Cross, "Bolt." Erasure poem from the series *Dictionary Columns*, generated from the 1913 *Webster's Dictionary*, Secondary School Edition, c. 1965. Courtesy of the Roswell Museum and the family of the artist.

Doris Cross, "Snake and Raven." Erasure poem from the series *Dictionary Columns*, generated from the 1913 *Webster's Dictionary*, Secondary School Edition, c. 1965. Courtesy of the Roswell Museum and the family of the artist.

RAW

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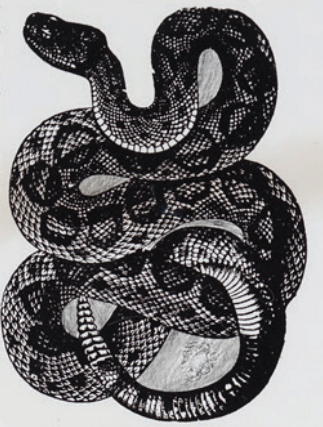

shak

us ( )

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( )

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— AGED

—

—

the idea

the idea of violence

SACK

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( ) ( )

talk, claim, as if or rage.

cite

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-LING [ ] into a tangled mass

twist

plain. come

ave [ ]

two embankments which make a salient angle.

( )

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black of the

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black like jet

black

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See

— **us**

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A word (*Shak. Macb.* IV. i. 24)

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a woman rape

—

raw

so little changed by art

— — o

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