

Pelin Tan
**Entangled
Exiles**

01/06

... not some joyous
possession of mine
full of sweet dreams
laden with goodness,
but an ancient land
belonging to others, where
life has the anguish of exile.
– Pier Paolo Pasolini¹

In March 2010, migrant workers gathered in Piazza della Repubblica in Rome to protest labor conditions. I was walking there in search of the Bangladeshi leader of this struggle, and I was carrying okra (*bamya*) that I had got from the market at Piazza Vittorio. I wanted to ask him how to cook this okra in the traditional Bangladeshi way. Okra is strong and can survive the precarity of exile and migration: it can be found in a Bangladeshi vegetable stand in Rome, an Ezidi camp in Diyarbakır, or a guerilla garden along the highway in Kowloon. Okra is one of the world's oldest cultivated crops, spread by the processes of colonization and the slave trade from Africa and India to the Mediterranean and westward to the new world. Its versatility makes it well suited for states of dispossession and survival.² For centuries, the region surrounding the Mediterranean Sea has been a migratory route, and southern Italy has long received refugees and immigrants from across the Mediterranean as cheap, seasonal agricultural workers. As most of these laborers are from rural backgrounds, they often travel with not only their seeds but also the knowledge of how to cultivate them.

Artist Leone Contini highlights the heritage of migrant communities on a planetary scale in both the past and current flow of refugees to the region of southern Italy. A vital question for him is: How are heterogenous plant, seed, and flora heritages linked to these flows of global migration?

In recent years Leone has followed Chinese migrants who work in the agricultural lands of Tuscany. He searches for cohabitations of migrants and traditional ingredients. He focuses on the unexpected biodiversity that becomes part of an imagined new landscape which, together with vineyards and olive trees, mirrors an inclusive, sustainable community:

In [the] case of Tuscany, I think there is a rural ideology still active beneath the commodified landscape shaped by the food and wine industry, tourism and the movie industry. This ideology is rooted in fascist policies during the period of autarky. It can reemerge in a very violent way – the idea that not every rural landscape belongs

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here. So there is a dominant ideology that promotes a dominant and standardized landscape.

The colonization and standardization of landscapes is always rooted in controlling the cultivation and erasure of localities. James C. Scott has pointed out how the cultivation and dissemination of grains and a variety of crops contributed to the formation of states, institutions of human slavery, and administrative governance in ancient Mesopotamia and across the Mediterranean region thousands of years ago.³ Today, the same region is inundated with wars and oppressions that destroy not only biodiversity but also the intangible heritage of ingredients and their narratives across our earth.

“Survival-with” and “through” is something of an entangled kinship that can be described as migrating ingredients, refugee seeds, and exiled foods. Works by artists Seçkin Aydın and Gülsün Karamustafa deal with forced eviction and exile from their homelands in different historical periods in the last century in Anatolia. Aydın is a Zaza minority from an evicted Kurdish town called Kulp (Diyarbakır Province). His work *I can't carry my grandma, i can also not eat her or wear her* (2015) uses the metaphor of Aydın's grandma keeping small fruits in his pocket during their journey of exile when he was a child. As they walk day and night from their village that the military forced them to evacuate, the grandma, who is old and frail, is left behind. The work is a shirt made of grape pulp – dried fruit pulp is a local staple in the region. Karamustafa's work *Heimat Ist Wo Mann Isst* (1994) depicts three spoons wrapped in an old cloth. The title means “Homeland is not where you were born, it is where you are fed,” which refers to cross-Balkan and Anatolian transnational migration.



Gülsün Karamustafa, *Heimat Ist Wo Mann Isst*, 1994, detail.

Practices of collecting and archiving heirloom seeds are a form of solidarity and resistance against extractive capitalism and industrialized agriculture. Such projects protect and aim to restore natural habitats and biodiversity.⁴ They are critical of dominant monocultural approaches and embrace interspecies hybridization and circulation. Last year, I visited Vivien Sansour's Palestinian Heirloom Library in the village of Battir in the West Bank, where in 2014 Sansour established her archive to preserve ancient seed varieties and traditional farming practices in collaboration with the villagers.⁵ Battir has Roman garden terraces that have been used for cultivating food for over two thousand years. It is also one of the many cultural landscapes in Palestine threatened by Israel's plans to build a separation wall through the area.

Sansour's library consists of heirloom seeds from the villages of the West Bank as well as from Gaza and other local communities. Palestinian farmers work under great strain as irrigation and water access are controlled by the Israeli government. Saving and sharing seeds for cultivation has impact beyond feeding human-centric needs; it also works toward preserving biodiversity and ancestral heritages that are under threat from colonial and structural violence. The West Bank is divided into three areas – A, B, and C – and Palestinians cultivate land in Area C. Israeli satellite housing projects occupy the lands, destroying Palestinian villages and farmland. Sansour's and the villagers' efforts toward uncovering and preserving seed stories is also about creating an infrastructure of seeds that is a form of decolonization. This work fights against the ongoing settler colonialism that continuously destroys and erases the ancestral knowledge of the Indigenous communities tied to that natural landscape.

How can we consider a more-than-human ethics around seed and seed heritage? How can

we collect cross-narrative assemblages of seed heritage? Artist Luigi Coppola, who is also a cofounder of Casa de Agricultura cooperative in his village in Salento, Italy, participated in “Gardentopia: Cosmos of Ecologies,” a project that I curated in Matera, in Italy’s Basilicata region, based on a locally engaged process. In his ongoing evolutionary garden project, Luigi is not only developing a relationship to landscape through seed and soil relations, but also engaging in social collectivism with local people – urban and rural citizens as well as refugees and migrants. The scale of ethical responsibility also includes protection of the entangled relationship between nonhuman entities such as seeds, soil, and insects. Furthermore, as seed and soil represent heritage, they are the most important elements in a nomadic life of forced eviction or displacement due to war or colonial oppression.

In our contemporary times, thinking of species as seeds is also a metaphor for survival during the Anthropocene, where humans are the main decision-makers – through neoliberal global companies and states – involved in extracting resources from the landscape and other parts of the earth. The idea of protecting species as seed for human needs must transform into an approach that questions how we might coexist together. How do we show solidarity with seeds? How might we create an entangled kinship with seeds? How might we create a collective empathy for this kinship?⁶ As the effect of the Anthropocene creates catastrophe and near-future dystopias, we must act in solidarity with other species for our collective survival.

The idea of seeds as Indigenous heritage helps to surface forgotten, destroyed, and oppressed histories of Indigenous communities. Seeds are often kept (especially by women) and carried through eviction and displacement during periods of colonialism and slavery. The Hudson Valley in upstate New York, where Bard College is located, is the ancestral homeland of the Muhheaconneok, or Mohican, people, known today as the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Nation. Bard Farm is coordinated by farmer Rebecca Yoshino, the former director of Wozupi Tribal Gardens in her hometown of Minneapolis. Through the work of Bard Farm, Yoshino aims to preserve Indigenous seeds of the Hudson Valley like the teosinte, Haudenosaunee cornbread bean, Seneca Buffalo Creek squash, and Dakota yellow flint corn, literally planting a “reconnection of seed relatives to communities of origin and sacred homelands.”⁷



Left: Zaza female shepherd making cheese, Çinerya village, Turkey. Photo: Pelin Tan; Right: Hanife Gevci points out the rock hole used for the preservation of pwheat in the past, Çineriya Ezidi village. Photo: Pelin Tan

Most of the practices and knowledge production of the abovementioned comrades are also reflected in my ongoing engagement in the landscapes of the Tigris River in southeast Turkey where I live. Indigenous phenomenologies are essential for tracing food heritage and the ingredients that are tightly connected to local communities of Zazas, Ezidis, Armenians, Suryanis, Kurds, and others who are continuously exiled by force in the ongoing extracted landscapes of the Tigris. Often with colleagues we find ourselves discussing, for example, the *giyayê xerdelê* (mustard greens) that can be easily foraged in the hills of Heskîf, a millennia-old archeological heritage site that has almost been destroyed by the nearby Ilisu Dam, which justifies the expropriation of lands from Kurdish villages and from many nomadic shepherds who were forced to leave.⁸ Military surveillance of farmers and of the common grazing grounds of Ezidi, Suryani, and Kurdish villages leads to a loss of the network of animal herding that is embedded in transhuman nomadism. Kurdish ecology activists Bişar İçli and Zeki Kanay, who were banned from their municipality and their university positions by the Turkish government in 2017, started an agro-ecological solidarity commune in Diyarbakır. They archive, exchange, and create networks of seeds around the Tigris River basin, producing an entanglement of solidarity infrastructure among Kurdish communities against military surveillance and capitalism-led extraction in this region.

Cineria, an Ezidi village near Batman, Turkey, was nearly emptied out in the 1980s due to conflict in the region between the Kurdish movement and the Turkish state. Most of its inhabitants left for Germany as migrant workers. For them, the most important thing is to preserve the sacred sites around the village. Soil, stone,

rocks, caves, and water are fundamental cosmological elements of Ezidi cultural practice connecting the past, present, and future. Each year the village hosts semi-nomadic Zaza shepherds who migrate from another southeastern Turkish city, Bitlis, with their herds of animals. The Ezidis accommodate the shepherds for six to seven months in Cineria; both communities communicate using the Kurmanji language. Female Zaza shepherds are hardworking laborers who forage edible plants, make cheese, lead the animal herds, and care for their children. Natural caves in the region served as shelter and housing for most communities until the 1980s. Using these caves for preserving wheat or cheese is a non-extractivist practice in this landscape.

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Alevi and Zaza communities). Yürür's research methodology consists of looking to the local narrative cycle that explains the relationship between oak forests, climatic conditions, and the agricultural cycle in Eastern Anatolia:

Gezhemgen is a sign of a good harvest and signifies the power of fertility (being also called "the power of *Hızır*," a deity). Pastoralist practices are affected by intrastate war and the appropriation of governance rights to grazing. There is a relationship between accessibility of pastures and the vertical transmission of knowledge on the flora of the highlands to young generations.¹⁰



Okra field in Hevsel Gardens with the old city walls of Diyarbakir, Turkey in the background. Photo: Pelin Tan.



In Arabic, *freekeh* means "rubbing/crushing." Freekeh bulgur is a durum wheat harvested before it has fully ripened, and then burned to remove the stalks and reveal the green freekeh kernels. Photo: Pelin Tan

Long walks through landscapes are a basic practice of Ezidi women, where they learn about the land and the cultivation cycle connected to Ezidi cosmology, which is about keeping and protecting ingredients, seeds, and healthy soil. Honouring nonhuman elements is fundamental to Ezidi cosmology. As Ezidi women walk through the landscape, they tell stories of dispossession, mourn for lost soil and seeds, and whisper continuously: "*av, agîr, erd, ba, roj.*"⁹

Anthropologist Gülkızılca Yürür often writes on the food-gathering behaviors of local populations influenced by urbanization, military violence, and the expropriation of use rights to common grazing grounds. In her ethnographic research on the political economy of wild edible "oak manna" (*gezhemgen*) in Dersim/East Anatolia, she focuses on the effects of extractive capitalism on sedentary subsistence herding and the loss of traditional knowledge in the Dersim region (an Armenian-populated region before 1915, and currently mostly populated by Kurdish

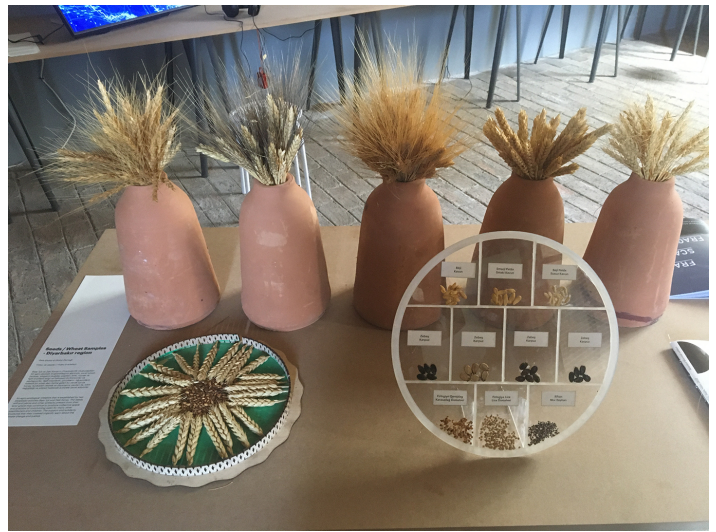
Palestinian geographer Omar Tesdell, who created the Palestinian edible plants archive,¹¹ tells us that landscapes move in slow, deep time, and that all wild plants, seeds, and healthy soil are our heritages. These heritages will not only support our precarious societies but may create an ethical, responsible entanglement of resilient coexistences for our collective future.

In May 2022 I visit the Turkish city of Antioch, near the border with Syria. I am standing near a refugee camp facing the Syrian

city of Idlib, on the far side of the border. Surrounding me is an ancient region that still produces large amounts of olives and olive oil. Fields of grain and olive trees covering the region used to be one of the most important parts of the Levant area. Nestled among olive tree fields, Boynuyoğun Refugee Camp hosts some 8,500 Syrian refugees, most of whom work as day laborers in the agricultural fields. Established as a tent camp in June 2011, it was transformed into a container camp in 2016. Between six in the morning and eleven at night, refugees are allowed outside of the camp to work.

James Scott writes: “Hominids have, after all, been shaping the plant world – largely with fire – since before Homo sapiens.” Later he writes: “In a grain state, one or two cereal grains provided the main food starch, the unit of taxation in kind, and the basis for a hegemonic agrarian calendar.”¹² In the current borderlines of Turkey and Syria, state-making is entangled with the realities of Syrian refugees working as day laborers, and with harmful, state-led agricultural policies in the region – a region that used to be famous for bountiful, high-quality olives, olive oil, and wheat. My friends Apo and Shiraz, who are farmers and olive oil producers in Antioch – they are from Tokatli, the only remaining Christian Arab village there – explain that one field in the Antioch region used to produce two tons of freekeh (frik) bulgur a day.

Collective learning and the creation of decolonial methodologies against slow violence, extraction, and forced eviction/migration leads to pedagogies of the commons. Following an okra plant through narratives, infrastructures, forgotten languages, and entangled exiles is not a metaphor. As artist Jumana Manna writes, we strive toward “imagining alternative/affirmative care structures that remain, within and beyond the current reality, aligned towards plant and human life alike.”¹³ Navigating through migrating ingredients, refugee seeds, and exiled foods, we witness and learn about extractive strategies, state-making, and slow violence. This essay on non-extractivist practices in dispossessed and cohabited landscapes is about “survival-with” and “through” foraging, composting, preserving, landscaping, and burning ingredients, which together create relational phenomenologies.



“State of Displacement: Entangled Topographies”, Arazi Assembly, 17th Istanbul Biennale, Gazhane Museum, Istanbul, 2022. It shows local heirloom seeds from the Diyarbakir region and 4 types of Wheat.

Recipe: *Bamya* (okra)

I cut and clean the top of the okra – this dish avoids the okra “saliva.” Combine with onion, thin-cut tomato, and some preserved boiled chickpeas in a pot. Cook for thirty minutes, then add *koruk suyu* (sour/young grape juice). Cook for an additional forty-five minutes, then add olive oil and let cool.

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1
The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini, ed. Stephen Sartarelli (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 22.

2
“The first recorded reference to okra was made by the Egyptians in 1216 AD, although the plant explorer Vavilov indicated that there was strong evidence that the crop flourished even before that date in the tropical climate of Ethiopia, while others have identified its origin as India.” William James Lamont, Jr., “Okra – A Versatile Vegetable Crop,” *HortTechnology* 9, no. 2 (April–June 1999).

3
James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of Earliest States* (Yale University Press, 2017).

4
Pelin Tan, “The Care of Seed,” *MOLD Magazine*, no. 5 (Winter 2021).

5
See <http://www.visibleproject.org/blog/project/palestine-heiroom-seed-library/>.

6
Donna Haraway proposes the term “Chthulucene” to replace “Anthropocene” in order “to renew the biodiverse power of terra is the sympoietic work and play of the *Chthulucene*.” The latter is an epoch “made up of ongoing multi-species stories and practices of becoming-with in the times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet.” *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 55.

7
Teosintes are a group of wild grasses that are believed to be the progenitor of corn. Yoshino’s seed archive includes sunflower seeds from the Arikara Tribe (North Dakota), squash seeds from the Miami Tribe (North-Central Indiana), and mother corn seeds (Dakota flint corn). Bard Farm collaborates with Ken Greene (founder of Hudson Valley Seed Library, the United States’s first public seed catalog) and Vivien Sansour in supporting the exchange of seeds as well as disseminating ancestral knowledge.

8
Pelin Tan and Zeynep S. Akıncı, “Waterdams as Dispossession: Ecology, Security, Colonization,” in *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary*, ed. James Graham (Lars Muller Publishers, 2016).

9
In Kurmanji: “water, fire, earth, wind, sun).”

10
Kızılca Yurur, “How Gezhemgen, the Oak Manna, Has Been Forgotten in Dersim (Tunceli) in

the Upper Euphrates Basin: Extractive Capitalism and Local Knowledge,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 28, no. 1 (2021).

11
See <https://archive.org/details/palwildfoodplants2018>.

12
Scott, *Against the Grain*, 11, 128.

13
Jumana Manna, “Where Nature Ends and Settlements Begin,” *e-flux journal*, no. 113 (November 2020) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/113/360006/where-nature-ends-and-settlements-begin/>.

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