

Assemblages of Loss: Extinction and Entanglement Between Two Rivers

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“The problem is not just the loss of individual species but of assemblages, some of which we may not even know about, some of which will not recover. Mass extinction could ensue from cascading effects. In an entangled world where bodies are tumbled into bodies, extinction is a multispecies event.”

– Introduction to Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet.[1]

Between the 1950s and 2003, the Mesopotamian Marshes, once the largest wetland ecosystem in Western Eurasia, were drained of 90% of their water. At first the human practices responsible were tied to land reclamation for agriculture or oil exploration. Then Saddam Hussein, in retribution for the failed uprising of 1991, ordered the diversion of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers away from the marshes. His intention was to turn the wetlands, one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world and home to many flora and fauna species, into a desert and eliminate food sources to force the local Shia population from their homes. Since 2003, a portion of the wetlands has been remediated, thanks to projects that seek to bring back the water and reeds[2] and with them both human and nonhuman inhabitants. Still, the region will never be what it was.

Landscapes exist as assemblages, which Anna Tsing describes as “open-ended entanglement[s] of ways of being” that “don’t just gather lifeways” but “make them”[3] in what Donna Haraway calls “worldings.”[4] Assemblages happen in balance, the disruption of which Deborah Bird Rose describes as “worlds of loss.”[5] Under terrible duress, the landscapes of the Mesopotamian Marshes reveal their interconnections to life.

Human activity’s severe impact on the region, whose name, meaning “between rivers,” speaks directly to its landscapes, is central to Sinem Dişli, Mahmoud Obaidi, and Tehran Platform’s contributions to *Sandstorm: And Then There Was Dust*. Sinem Dişli’s ongoing series *Currents* is an in-depth study of the effects of industrial agriculture in the region around the Euphrates River, where cereals like wheat and barley as well as lentils, cotton, and sesame are grown.[6] The two photographic projects Dişli presents in *Sandstorm* speak to the dangerous consequences of unnatural desertification. In *Fields of Fire*, we see images of stubble burning, a farming practice meant to get the most out of the soil in a short amount of time with devastating effects on the soil and biodiversity. *Sand in a Whirlwind* is a photograph of a whirlwind Dişli came across while working on *Fields on Fire* in an area that had been turned to desert by the Atatürk Dam in Urfa, Turkey. The dramatic and terrible whirlwind is a direct consequence of the dam.

In his installation *Turtles*, Canadian-Iraqi artist Mahmoud Obaidi honors the complexity of interweaving cross-creature destinies by placing twenty turtles made of sand as symbolic stand-ins for the more-than-three million Iraqis displaced by violence since the First Gulf War. The turtles, once plentiful, are now on the verge of extinction due to chemical waste.

Like the region's humans, they are being forced to disappear from a homeland marked by immeasurable loss. With his Uranium Generation Design, Obaidi, who left Iraq in 1991, subverts the trope of the pop-up shop in order to reveal the harsh realities of what living in Iraq means today, how violence and loss shape everyday life. Focusing on the lives of those who stayed, Obaidi questions what living means in a place that is fraught by disappearance.

Iranian collective Tehran Platform's Al Mashoof, meaning "marsh boat," alludes directly to the violence human politics and wars have had on the marshes straddling the Iran-Iraq border. In the past, this artificial boundary was meaningless to its inhabitants, humans or otherwise. Life revolved around the water and people traveled freely by boat. With Al-Mashoof, a partly virtual-partly material installation, Tehran Platform have created a "digital heritage" archive in which they have collected stories and experiences from many generations. Their hope is to save the place's stories so its history and existence won't be lost to future generations.

Intimate knowledge of place, memory, and visibility as fuels for possible ongoingness are also central to Negar Farajiani's piece Green Corners, an ecological education program that focuses on →nonhuman actors, specifically "superplants" that have the ability to clean the air, soil, and water from different toxic materials. In workshops with children, Farajiani connects plants from different places, overcoming manmade borders and creating networks of remediation and care.

The loss we are witnessing in the global ecological crisis, made so visible in this particular tragedy, highlights the entanglements we have tried so long to blind ourselves to in our efforts to grow and control. When you forcibly shift the paths that rivers have taken for eons, you force millions of beings into oblivion. When you accumulate their waters in one place, you deprive other places of life. The violence humans inflict on other humans extends far beyond the limitations of our societies into the innumerable worldings with which we are entangled.

Notes

Biodiversity – Elisabeth Deák

1 Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, Heather Swanson, Anna Tsing, Introduction to Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, (Minnesota:

University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G4.

2 "Resurrecting Eden," CBS documentary, 2011.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVTBwv69UzQ>

3 "Reviving the marshlands of southern Iraq," DW News.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Awsjn-_rvxl

4 Anna Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 83.

5 Donna Haraway, World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2016), 13.

6 Deborah Bird Rose, "Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed," Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, G52.

7 Mehmet Ali elik and Taner Aydın, "Analyzing the Relations between Drought and Crop Yield in Southern Plains of Şanlıurfa (Akakale, Ceylanpınar, Suru)"
<https://irbas.academyirmbr.com/papers/1571147654.pdf>