

Essay / 18 May 2020

Rock It Like a Rock

Close-Up: Inheritance

by **Aslihan Demirtaş** /Share



Attempting to re-articulate heritage by way of divorcing it from property rights and ownership, I wrote down a word to contemplate: unherit. Divorcing seems to be the right act, since heritage has a widow in it. [Heir](#)'s roots go all the way to the Greek words *chêros* meaning “widowed, orphaned, bereaved”, and *chérā* “widow”. If you prefer to follow the Latin path as opposed to the Greek, you have “abandoned” or “derelict” waiting for you. What a joy! A small price to pay for indulging in possessions and properties in a planet in which your body is decomposed and recycled, as part of its worldly creative processes perpetually giving rise to living forms: trees, rain,

sand, flowers, rocks. To inhabit the world, is to join in the processes of formation and to participate in a dynamic world of energies, forces and flows as Tim Ingold[1] unfolds the world of earth and sky. I add, not just when inhabiting the world but also when no longer inhabiting it, humans are part of the endless cycle of life which feeds off of what we call death, what scientists call the [nitrogen cycle](#) and what the planet probably does not even have a word for.



"Khora Rocks: How rocks morph you by being held" by Khora Office (Ali Cindoruk & Aslihan Demirtas), 2020

Sorry this text keeps going dark the more I try to make it sunny and keep inserting flowers and rain, I try. I am writing from my home in Istanbul where I and my other half have been in self-quarantine for 20 days because of a coronavirus pandemic. Frankly speaking, my life has been distilled into essentials and if I sweep aside the future concerns that constantly nag me into not living the present, I unearth a grounded existence that is so familiar, so distant, so warm and real, all the way from carefree childhood. I digress, I stop. Here is today's latest to anchor this moment:

“The human costs of the coronavirus outbreak continue to mount, with more than 917,000 people infected globally. The number of people confirmed to have died from the virus has now surpassed 46,000. Covid-19's proliferation has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, meaning it is spreading rapidly in different parts of the world. More than 190 countries have confirmed cases so far. Europe became the epicentre of the outbreak in early March. Weeks after entering a strict lockdown, Italy, the worst affected country outside China where the virus originated, is on the verge of turning the corner and seeing death numbers begin to decrease. The US, meanwhile, is still in the acceleration phase”[\[2\]](#).

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Concisely, Berardi puts it this way: “Capitalism has been a fantastic attempt to overcome death. Accumulation is the Ersatz that replaces death with the abstraction of value, the artificial continuity of life in the marketplace... Death is back at the center of the



landscape: the long denied mortality that makes humans alive”[\[3\]](#). Accumulation is heritage and it can be individual, cultural, and national. What is unheritance then?

“We do not own the land, the land owns us”, would say Chief Leonard Crow Dog, in response to an apology initiated by the veterans during the Dakota Access Pipeline protests in Standing Rock. It is the refusal of claiming what is not ours, it is the un-abandonment of Earth and the un-widowing of nature. The apology voiced by Wes Clark Jr., son of retired U.S. Army general and former Supreme Commander at NATO, Wesley Clark Sr., was as follows and contains many words affiliated with property, possession such as “we”, “your”, “stole”, “take”:



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“Many of us, me particularly, are from the units that have hurt you over the many years. We came. We fought you. We took your land. We signed treaties that we broke. We stole minerals from your sacred hills. We blasted the faces of our presidents onto your sacred mountain. When we took still more land and then we took your children and then we tried to make your language and we tried to eliminate your language that God gave you, and the Creator gave you. We didn’t respect you, we polluted your Earth, we’ve hurt you in so

many ways but we've come to say that we are sorry. We are at your service and we beg for your forgiveness"[4].

Can you leave something as heritage if you do not own it and particularly if you are owned by it? Heritage can be individual, like the love letters I inherited when I opted to take the unused paper piles deemed garbage by the rest of our family. The pile turned out to contain a large stack of letters written by my grandfather to my grandmother when he was deployed in the [Korean War](#), when my mom was around three and uncle around five years old. I think the letters are the most precious belongings I have, but if I lose their material content I will not be sad having recovered them from recycling once already. Heritage can be collective; cultural heritage. Like the 1600-year-old [Historic Yedikule Urban Vegetable Gardens](#) in Istanbul flanking the Istanbul Land Walls, part of the Unesco World Heritage. Bostans and bostanci (urban vegetable garden and gardener) have existed cutting a cross-section through two empires and a republic: the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires and the Republic of Turkey. Roughly speaking, Greek, Armenian, Albanian and Turkish gardeners have tended to them using the same technique for centuries. The soil and their custodians have been in the same place propagating life from death (remember the nitrogen cycle?) ever since the walls were built stone on top of stone. Yedikule Bostans were not the only existing gardens in Byzantium, Constantinople and Istanbul. There were many urban agricultural cultivation spaces inside the city before the invention of the railroads, the refrigerated trucks. The urban gardens would grow perishables, produce which would perish in transport, such as the Yedikule Lettuce among many other produce named after neighbourhood in the city. Today, bostans are within the zone of

Istanbul which maintains [Outstanding Universal Value](#) (enter the universe now) according to the UNESCO selection criteria for World Heritage Sites (world has the universe as sub-category, I too am confused) but at the end of the day their deeds are owned by municipalities and foundations that can decide to demolish them by dumping rubble to build a park on it just like they did in July 2013 during the Gezi Protests. Rest assured, no park has been built in place thanks to the Initiative for the Preservation of the Historic Yedikule Gardens but the saga continues this time with battles of different forms as to how to proceed to restore their healthy state of generosity and vitality.



Disinfecting Hagia Sophia. Credits: Anadolu Images

Since I said lettuce is perishable, Ali, my other half and I have a rock collection. We collect them, a bit with guilt of dislocating them perhaps against their will. We do not map them as per their found locations or annotate them according to their scientific categories, nor do we try to estimate their geological ages. We try to leave science and taxonomy outside of our relationship with them. All we know is that we are fascinated by them and compared to these beautiful recalcitrant things we are [perishables](#). How can we own them when they outlive us? We do not possess them, at most they are consigned to us, our unheritage. And perhaps, unheritage is a consignment.

Here I leave with two interesting views of the past, future and inheritance from sisters I have not met — not to end or summarise what I have written but to cast forth so as to continue.

“The idea of feminism and the idea of freedom is not something you can inherit from your ancestors. Each generation has to conduct its own struggle for that”[\[5\]](#).

“The virtual past is a time continuum. Virtual past propels you into possible futures — possible futures are not utopias. They are sources of energies that you borrow from in order to act here and now”[\[6\]](#).

[\[1\]](#) Ingold, Tim. 2013. *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. London: Routledge.

[2] <https://www.ft.com/coronavirus-latest>

[3] [https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/beyond-the-breakdown-three-meditations-on-a-possible-aftermath-by-franco-bifo-berardi/9727?](https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/beyond-the-breakdown-three-meditations-on-a-possible-aftermath-by-franco-bifo-berardi/9727?fbclid=IwAR0d4fNABQoCdhZhL1Wr0Z3pIN_CrZsacgS-4lyBW8h0hl7oc007d1Hp948)

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[4] https://www.salon.com/test/2016/12/05/we-beg-for-your-forgiveness-veterans-join-native-elders-in-celebration-ceremony/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=socialflow

[5] Maria Alyokhina (Pussy Riot) in Pussy Riot meets Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti, organised by the First Supper Symposium, 2014, Oslo https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXbx_P7UVtE (accessed March 1, 2020)

[6] Rosi Braidotti in ICI Berlin <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/rosi-braidotti/> 43:27 - 43:47 (accessed March 1, 2020)

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Aslıhan Demirtaş is an architect and the principal of the interdisciplinary studios Aslıhan Demirtaş Architecture & Research Office and KHORA (founded with Ali Cindoruk) based in Istanbul and New York. Her practice purposefully crosses territories of disciplines in the forms of building, landscape, installation projects,

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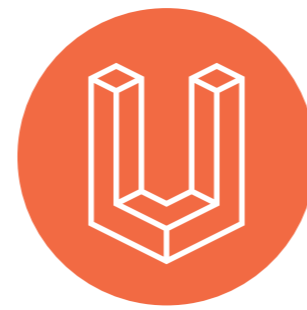
Demirtaş holds a SMarchs from MIT, Cambridge, MA, and a BArch from the Middle East Technical University, Ankara. She is currently working on her upcoming e-book *Graft* to be published by SALT in 2018 with the support of Graham Foundation Grant she received in 2013, and on the strategic renovation of the Lumbardhi Cinema in Prizren. She is an active member of the Initiative for the Protection of the Historical Yedikule Urban Gardens, working to keep the 1,500 year old urban agriculture heritage and landscape of Istanbul. Demirtaş is full-time faculty at Kadir Has University, Faculty of Arts and Design, Department of Architecture.

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