

Militant Mothers of the Kurdish Resistance: Statelessness, Mothering and Subaltern Politics in
Contemporary Turkey

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Abstract

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This dissertation looks at the ways in which Kurdish women in Turkey produce insurgent bodies, non-statist discourses of resistance, and anti-national forms of kinship through radical practices of mothering and reproduction. Focusing on the politicization/militarization of the domestic space, the reproductive body, children, and racialized grief by Kurdish women, my research takes issue with the scholarship on war and militancy which constructs militancy as an exclusively masculine form of insurgency and sees motherhood and reproduction as private, apolitical sites of affective relations. It also disrupts Global North feminist frameworks that see mothers as vessels of peace by revealing Kurdish mothers' militant and at times destructive mothering practices.

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To Peace Mothers, whose power and resilience changed me forever. Jin, Jiyan, Azadî

Preface



Image 1. A still from the short movie *7 Days, 7 Nights* by Ali Bozan

This is the image that led to this dissertation: the image of Taybet İnan, who was killed by the Turkish Army during the curfew enforced by the state of emergency regime in 2015. Her body was left on the street to rot while her family watched for seven days (see Image 1). The image is a reiteration of her death from a short movie “7 days, 7 nights” by Ali Bozan.¹ I am not sharing this image to invoke an emotional response. It is not here for shock value. Rather, the point I am trying to make with this image is that it has no shock value. I still remember quite vividly to this day how I thought she blended so smoothly with the debris of war when I saw the image. She was part of the debris of war. Her blood looks as black as the burn marks on the wall on her right, probably part of the wreckage of a house. I was shaken to my core by my reception of the image, how I thought Mother Taybet did not stand out in this picture. She did not seem out of place. She seemed to fit.

Mehmet İnan described what it was like to watch his mother, Taybet İnan, rot right before his eyes for seven days:

¹ *7 roj 7 şev* (“7 Days, 7 Nights”), directed by Ali Bozan. Vimeo, 2018. 3 min. 7 sec. <https://vimeo.com/253946851>.

She just laid there. She was moving indistinctly first, then hours passed, her movement diminished. She stayed out there for seven days. None of us slept thinking dogs could get to her, birds could chip away at her. She laid out there, we died 150 meters away. 7 days. For 7 days, my mother laid out there in dead winter. And the worst part is that we don't know how many hours of it she was injured. I wish, I hope she died instantly. You killed my mother.²

The image was something that I consumed off a screen: a still image that did not rot. I did not observe her cross the border between life and death in real time. Even if I looked at the picture for seven days straight, she would still be the same distance from death or life as she was when this image was captured. It was never a temporality issue for me. I did not think about the exact time of her death, nor was I haunted by the lack of that information. All I knew was that she died on the 19th of December in 2015. Her family watched her die all day, and still do not know when exactly she did die. To me, it was an image of a past event with a recognizable beginning and an end, something that happened on a linear timeline. For the family, she is still dying out there. Then I pondered my reception. What had shaped my mental imagery so that I saw Mother Taybet as part of the debris? Was it merely oversaturation of Kurdish death? Was it desensitization? What was it that made this Kurdish body, like others, so intimately attached to death? Lastly, what happens to grief when death is omnipresent, not only as a primordial specter but also as a corporeal being blended in the social fabric of the everyday Kurdish reality?

In this dissertation, I think about Kurdish death through a framework which centers Kurdish mothers who, as the immediate targets of the Turkish war machine for reasons I discuss later, expose the terrors of modernity that are supposed to be hidden as well as creating an insurgent grief register and maintaining radical mothering practices that work against the erasures of the dominant frames of war. During five months of fieldwork in Fall 2019, I conducted interviews

² “Taybet İnan 23 gün sonra defnedildi; eşi ve çocukları cenazeye katılmadı.” *T24*, January 11, 2016. <https://t24.com.tr/haber/taybet-İnan-23-gun-sonra-defnedildi-esi-ve-cocuklari-izin-verilmedigi-icin-cenazeye-katilamadi,323748>.

with Peace Mothers, a Kurdish mothers' organization founded in 1996 to hold the Turkish state accountable for the forced disappearances and murders of their Kurdish children, guerilla or civilian, by the state and the evacuation/destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages in 1990s. With the resurgence of the genocidal attempts that mimic the 90s' OHAL (state of emergency) regime as of 2015, the Peace Mothers have become more assertive and vocal than ever. Their resistance practices range from starting diplomatic conversations with the state authorities through the HDP (the Kurdish party), to hunger strikes, sit-ins, and street protests. In addition to conducting interviews, I took part as a participant observer in their daily meetings, sit-ins, street protests and press conferences. Since I also focus on how Kurdish children and family are transformed into sites of insurgency, I interviewed young Kurdish activists both in Istanbul and Diyarbakir to understand the traumatic path that led to their politicization and militarization as children of the 90s.

The pursuit of a framework that recognizes the gendered acts of insurgency examined in this dissertation proved to be quite challenging. Kurdish women's insurgent reproductive and mothering practices as members of the Kurdish resistance movement in contemporary Turkey, where war figures as a normative social condition for Kurdish people instead of a state of exception, are not immediately recognizable to North American academia. Mothering has been traditionally discussed outside of war even when it happens in a context of war. Mothering has been theorized in relation to war only as something that is suspended, disrupted, or terminated due to war. Conversations around the relationship between mothers and war either revolve around refugee mothers mothering in refugee camps in diaspora physically removed from war but traumatized by it or see mothers as war victims grieving the loss of their pre-war home. This project intervenes in the theoretical disconnect between mothering and war and exposes child-making as

always already a part of armed conflict. It investigates questions of sexual reproduction as a constituent element of war. This focus has been obscured both in feminist studies on reproduction which have tended not to emphasize the spaces of organized violence as resistance. It is also absent in the historiography and ethnography of modern war which tend to be masculinist and dismiss questions of reproduction and mothering during war time. The reproduction of Kurdish life and the deliberate integration of it into the insurgent war machine by Peace mothers is at the center of this dissertation.

While the lack of literature on the gender aspect of Kurdish resistance presented challenges to the development of the theoretical framework of this dissertation, it eventually proved to be liberating. It relieved me from the restrictions imposed by the conventions of academic knowledge-making. It made me part of an intellectual community grappling with similar challenges. I had fascinating conversations with Kurdish feminists and Kurdish studies scholars based in Turkey and abroad about the questions that drove our work. The sense of frustration and insecurity resulting from not being able to situate my work in the broader literature was eventually replaced with a sense of empowerment and solidarity. I got to witness the emergence of a transnational feminist episteme which was not reactionary but original. I genuinely believe that we, as a community, are breaking ground for a transnational feminist praxis that puts the nation state at the core of its critique. The growing pains that my peers and I experienced as Global South scholars inevitably entailed making unconventional methodological choices. The ethnographic research I carried out for this dissertation was an act of collaboration. I obviously had questions that I brought into the interview spaces, but Kurdish women undoubtedly had stories to tell I did not necessarily anticipate. Some of those stories on mothering and grief defied my expectations as a researcher trained in the academia of North America and western Turkey, which became a learning moment

for me. Eventually, I came to realize that questions I had framed to prompt certain answers were not only limiting but also silencing stories that were supposed to be centered in this dissertation. Only when I came to terms with the limitations of my thinking did I really start to listen. Most of the interview data I collected emerged out of informal conversations I had with the mothers. The methodological choices that I made constantly changed depending on the sample group and the fieldwork conditions. As a researcher who thought myself already experienced in ethnographic research, I was quickly made aware that operating in a conflict zone and working with a radically politicized group was a whole new story. The first problem I faced very early on was that my interview questions did not make sense to my interlocutors. Some questions were too abstract, and even the questions that were specific enough did not matter, because my interlocutors already had a narrative they wanted to get out. I realized later that this was common among members of a group that had a long-standing history of political organizing. The Kurdish resistance movement is a very close-knit movement that produces its own political theory and has a very effective method of spreading the knowledge created within the movement. In other words, they had a discourse. It was quite difficult to break through that discourse that was literally recited almost verbatim by different interlocutors living in different cities. The solution I found was to engage with them on a personal level with questions about mundane things about their own lives. I decided that would be the right methodological choice to make because I had encountered a similar problem while I was conducting fieldwork for my master's thesis back in 2009. For that project, I interviewed trans and non-trans sex workers in Istanbul, and the interview questions I formulated did not work because they were too abstract/theoretical. My initial questions included topics like: what does womanhood mean to them? or what is it like to be a sex worker in Turkey? Then, during a conversation off the record, one of my interlocutors started to talk about a typical day in a state-

run brothel. That conversation provided a lot of information regarding their relationship with the state, legislation, police, the state hospitals where they were taken for regular STD screenings, and the community, kinship systems, and forms of resistance and solidarity they created within those brothels. It was a methodological breakthrough that would take me out of the impasse I had found myself in. I formulated the primary question I used in the interviews based on that conversation: Can you describe a typical day you have at the brothel? I revised the question depending on whether the interlocutor worked at a brothel or on the streets. When I realized that I was getting pre-scripted, collectively shared answers to the interview questions I asked during my dissertation fieldwork, I thought that asking about individual life stories and focusing on the mundane could help me again. When I talked to the Peace Mothers, their children, Kurdish women's rights organizers, and local politicians, I wanted them to talk as an individual, not as a collective. I asked them about their village they had to leave, the animals they raised, their childhood, the reasons why they had to migrate etc. In other words, I told them to tell me their life stories. Within these life stories were the more pointed stories I was looking for. Stories that are part of a long genealogy of state violence and Kurdish resistance.

The second problem I faced had to do with the political environment I was in. The Diyarbakir part of the fieldwork was particularly challenging due to intense police surveillance that had been put in place since the state of emergency rule declared after the 2015 elections. Diyarbakir was particularly targeted by the Turkish government as the capitol of the imagined Kurdistan and for its radically politicized population. Since September 11, 2016, more than 90 mayors out of the 102 elected pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) mayors were removed from their positions and replaced by government appointed trustees. This political crackdown was followed by mass incarceration of Kurdish MPs, mayors, members of Kurdish

organizations, journalists, student activists, and lawyers. Diyarbakir was at the center of the highly militarized crackdown and was also the center of resistance. I worked with people who were actively involved in protests and members of the HDP, the government was determined to eliminate as a threat. My methodological practices and choices were limited by the conditions my interlocutors and I operated under. The day after I visited the unofficial office of the Diyarbakir Peace Mothers to set an interview schedule, some of the mothers got arrested or fled the city to avoid arrest. Some of the interviews were cut short because we got word that a raid was about to happen and we had to move the mothers somewhere safe. When I went to the HDP headquarters in Diyarbakir, the building was surrounded by hundreds of police officers and tanks and there were only two women in the building. I was also asked for ID every step of the way. As a researcher, I experienced the precarity and intimidation tactics of the state only for a short period of time, but for the people of Diyarbakir, state violence, police brutality, human rights violations were all too familiar. Intense military presence has been the backdrop of their lives for decades and become a part of the social fabric. Since the state of emergency rule I was witnessing was the norm, not an exception, it was not difficult for me to find participants. They were not intimidated. I, on the other hand, was. I was worried about my own safety and the safety of my interlocutors. Meeting people, talking to them about horrible things they went through and hearing they got arrested the next day and realizing that I was not going to see them again anytime soon was not only a methodological obstacle in terms of not being able to develop a sustainable rapport with them but also an emotional and ethical burden on me as a researcher. I would probably do many things differently knowing what I know now but at the time I worked with the tools I had. One of the tools was the connection I had built with the Kurdish liberation movement in Istanbul prior to my trip to Diyarbakir. I spent a considerable amount of time with the Istanbul Peace Mothers. Mother Sultan was my contact

person who introduced me to the other Peace Mothers and convinced them that I was safe to talk to. I stayed at Mother Sultan's apartment. She fed me when I lost my appetite due to intense anxiety. I became very close friends with her daughter. Mother Sultan still checks in on me and makes sure I am eating enough. My rapport with Mother Sultan, her family and other Peace Mothers in Istanbul was what made Diyarbakir part of the fieldwork possible. When I landed in Diyarbakir, thirteen HDP mayors of Diyarbakir had been replaced by trustees. There was chaos and exhaustion within the community. My time in Diyarbakir also coincided with Donald Trump's order for American troops to retreat from the Afrin region, which left northeast Syria, including the Kurdish city of Afrin, vulnerable to Turkish occupation. There was a lot of outrage against the US. I was accompanied by a Kurdish friend and an active member of HDP who worked closely with Peace Mothers during my Diyarbakir visit. She used her connections in the region to help me find people to talk to and also acted as my translator during interviews with interlocutors who did not speak Turkish or refused to speak it. Even with her presence, I experienced a lot of distrust and suspicion for being affiliated with an American school. Many people initially refused to talk to me until Mother Sultan made a call to Diyarbakir Peace Mothers and vouched for me, saying I was like her daughter and could be trusted. Building a rapport with my interlocutors in Diyarbakir was more difficult, but after it was built, I was inside a zone where I was hearing and documenting stories of biopolitical and necropolitical state violence and acts of resistance, violent insurgency and counter knowledge production that would traditionally fall outside the dominant framing that scholars use for war.

The last methodological challenge that confronted me is a temporal one. Since I rely heavily on archival, news, and public images in addition to the ethnographic data I collected in person, I cannot determine where the data starts and where it ends. Using a mixed methodology

was the right thing to do in order to situate my research within a genealogy of racializing practices that define the making of Modern Turkey. However, it also provided a challenge in terms of setting temporal boundaries for my writing. Kurdish death and the specific conditions that surround Kurdish death have not ceased to exist with the end of my ethnographic research. The conflict I observed during fieldwork and write about in my dissertation is still going on. Every single day, I see an image or read a news article that I think I need to include in my work because it is a classic example of the necropolitical state power I examine. During the writing phase, this flood of information was paralyzing and hindered my writing process considerably. I eventually had to make peace with the fact that no matter how much I write, it will feel unfinished. Kurdish death is unfinished. Just like racialized maternal grief, any work on Kurdish death and resistance will be temporally unbounded.

Introduction

This dissertation is a study of Kurdish women's insurgent reproductive and mothering practices as members of the Kurdish resistance movement in contemporary Turkey, where war figures as a normative social condition for Kurdish people instead of a state of exception. It focuses on the role played by the Kurdish reproductive body in the fight against Turkish state violence not as an affective subject passively impacted by war, rather, as an active participant of war. Like other communities from Syria to Afghanistan, from Bangladesh to the Myanmar border, Kurdish communities have now lived in a state of war for generations. Yet what is unknown is how these communities reproduce and sustain life when war becomes the norm. In engaging with these concerns, this research posits the gendering processes and relations that constitute life under war and explores the role of Kurdish women in resistance with a focus on the insurgent practices of reproduction and mothering. One of the primary questions of this research is how human subjects that have been historically rendered apolitical and peripheral to war become active participants of armed resistance in a Kurdish context. Kurdish children, for instance, do not figure as innocent, fragile bodies to be protected or invested in; instead, their bodies are weapons, active militarized agents that plant/dig out mines, throw Molotov cocktail bombs and stones to the soldiers, and dig trenches to block them. In addition to the urban child guerillas, Kurdish guerilla forces in the mountains recruit children every year mostly with the consent of their families. They have even established child regiments: according to a report by the Umut Foundation in Turkey, 43.68 percent of mountain guerrillas were under the age of 18, with the youngest being 7.³ This dissertation also thinks through the ways in which the Kurdish female body and reproductivity create stateless zones of insurgency and stateless bodies by reproducing in guerilla camps on the

³ Umut Foundation, 14 Feb. 2012, <http://eng.umut.org.tr/>.

mountains or through total rejection of reproduction and norms of femininity by degendering and weaponizing their bodies as part of a war machine.

This dissertation project examines gendering processes and relations of power in conditions of constant duress and war from the perspective of Kurdish mothers who mother under the genocidal attacks of the Turkish nation state and whose response to military racism and other, relatively subtle, manifestations of state racism is not only affective but also militant. My projects' historical contextualization reaches back to the construction of Turkish ethnic nationalism during the late Ottoman and the Republican Era and the production of "Kurdishness" as difference as part of the Turkification project of the Turkish nation-state.

The Kurdish Question

Examination of the construction of Turkish ethnic nationalism during the Republican Era and the production of "Kurdishness" as part of the modern nation-state building process entails historicizing the relation between the Kurds and the Ottoman empire throughout "its long history — from roughly 1300 to 1922," and why and how this relation changed in the nineteenth century. This section examines the ways in which Kurds navigated the "long and bitter process of attempting to transform the state from a decentralized empire, based on negotiated arrangements and loose, local control (what Ariel Salzman has described as a system of "vernacular politics") to a modern state capable of competing economically and militarily with European incursions, while addressing the growing threat of nationalist separatist movements within its own boundaries."⁴

⁴ Howard Eisenstadt, "Modernization, imperial nationalism and the ethnicisation of religious identity in the late Ottoman Empire," in S. Berger and A. Miller (eds.), *Nationalizing Empires* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), 432.

Kurds, known for their tribal organization and nomadic/semi-nomadic lifestyles, constitute the largest tribal population that “roamed the vast territories of the Ottoman Empire.” As Reşat Kasaba points out in his book, *A Moveable Empire*, “such groups were not confined to frontier areas or peripheral provinces but lived across the entire empire, even in urban areas. Furthermore, rather than figuring solely as carriers of dissent, in many instances migratory and nomadic groups actually mediated and imposed the will of the imperial center.”⁵ Kasaba examines the ways in which nomadic tribes and migrant groups managed to survive first a highly bureaucratic and powerful empire and then the Turkish state despite the concerted sedentarization and assimilation efforts. He revisits North African philosopher and statesman Ibn Khaldun’s work to understand the complexity of the relationship between tribes and empires and to challenge the dichotomy of the civilized states and backward tribes constructed by the Western systems of thought. Enlightenment thinkers who wrote about tribes traditionally used an evolutionary perspective. They argued that “the persistence of nomadic and migratory communities and the formation of strong polities represented different stages of human development and as such were inherently incompatible with each other.”⁶ The linear, progressive historiography of modern Western thought fails to see the forms of power that tribes had within Ottoman Empire or explain the persistence of Kurdish tribes into the present. Dialectical treatment of history not only subjugated certain stories of power and forms of political agency, but also granted “European civilization, representing the more mature, older age of humanity, the responsibility to pull these communities out of their childlike stage” which has been a powerful discursive tool used to justify colonialism.⁷ Dialectical approach to history also relies on the argument that “modernization” is

⁵ Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

characterized by a conflictual relationship between two monoliths: the modern State with universally shared ideals, practices and historical trajectories and the backward groups (distinct from each other as micro monoliths) with shared traditions, practices and characteristics, that differ significantly from other backward groups. Ümit Üngör criticizes the categorization of “people based on ethnic markers such as language, culture, religion, class, or political orientation by focusing on the differences between people,” because these classificatory criteria often “risk essentializing and reifying, and often constructing and amplifying the ostensibly objective characteristics.”⁸ In his work, Üngör focuses on Diyarbekir, an Ottoman province characterized by “a formidable diversity of ethnic and religious groups, small and large, scattered and concentrated, urban and rural” including Ottoman Turks, Armenians, Kurds (tribal, non-tribal, (semi-)nomadic, sedentary), Yezidis, the Kizilbash, The Zaza, Arabs, Syriacs, Gypsies, and Shemsi communities.⁹ Pointing out the “very heterogeneous ethnic and social composition” of the province, he contests the “tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis . . . as if they were . . . unitary collective actors with common purposes.”¹⁰ He argues that modern nation-state formations *created* ethnic markers to categorize people into distinct units of governmentality. For him, “objective differences exist mostly *between* regions separated by natural or administrative borders rather than between groups *within* a region” and “people perhaps resembled each other more than they differed.”¹¹

⁸ Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

⁹ Ibid, 12.

¹⁰ Ibid, 14.

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

Breaking from the dichotomous historical approach, Kasaba accounts for the complex ways in which nomadic tribes and migrant groups were integrated into the organization of the Ottoman empire and how they contributed to the foundation and expansion of it.¹² This multidirectional power relation challenges the dominant narratives on monarchies which treat monarchies as unidirectional, repressive systems of power. As Kasaba points out, the Ottoman Empire is a great example of this multilateral power relations. The integration of the nomadic tribes and the migrant groups as constructive elements into the empire not only gave these groups the power to negotiate with the central government and other mobile groups and the ability to form autonomous structures, but it also created a “tribal aristocracy” which is still hard to break down. One of the well-known negotiations between the Empire and the Kurdish tribes was the Hamidiye Movement. In *The Margins of Empire*, Janet Klein looks at the ways in which Kurdish tribes were integrated into Ottoman Empire and complicates the relation between the tribes in the periphery and the central government.¹³ She contextualizes this process by paying attention to the unique factors in the political geography that gave rise to the Hamidiye movement. The Ottoman Empire took a “hostile” element within its borders and turned it into a tool to fight against other, “bigger” internal and external threats. This strategy is quite similar to Foucault’s argument that power absorbs a perceived threat, incorporates it and transforms it into one of the guardians of the system by granting certain privileges and ruses of autonomy.¹⁴ The empire secured the loyalty of Kurdish tribes temporarily and used them as a buffer to secure the borders of the shrinking empire while at the same time consolidating Kurdish nationalism and tribal aristocracy, which has material

¹² Kasaba, *Moveable Empire*, 7.

¹³ Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 4.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 86.

consequences into the present day. Akin to what Kasaba argues in *A Moveable Empire*, Klein says that contrary to the dominant historiography on monarchies, power did not operate in a unidirectional way, exercised by the monarch onto his people. Klein complicates this power dynamic even further by focusing on the establishment, operation, and consequences of Hamidiye, which she calls a “manifold mission” and “internal colonization.”¹⁵ The political agenda behind this mission was multilayered. It was designed to secure the borders, expand the regional military forces, suppress the Armenian nationalist activities, and civilize the “barbaric” Kurdish tribes into docile, “peaceful agriculturists in body and Ottoman (indeed Turkish) ‘citizens’ in spirit.”¹⁶ Klein calls this movement “internal colonization” because Ottoman empire was still an empire, but it was “thinking like a nation-state” and the rulers intended to expand their administrative power and governmentality to all parts of the empire, “especially its “nonstate” spaces or “tribal zones.”¹⁷ In other words, “particularly after the official declaration of the Tanzimat Edict of 1839, the state made it its business to permeate levels in society it had not reached before.”¹⁸ Khaldun’s definition of tribe is quite useful in understanding why Kurds became a target of the homogenization efforts of the Empire in 19th century after being relatively autonomous for centuries. Tribes as “entities bonded by strong feelings of solidarity based on lineage” are more effective in fighting and spreading their influence, which made them very difficult to control by a sedentary, centralized empire.¹⁹ Instead of operating under a unitary national identity as national subjects, “Kurds were generally motivated by the desire to work with which ever power allowed them the most independence and privilege.”²⁰ Local bonds trumped group identity: “The interests of the tribe or

¹⁵ Klein, *Margins of Empire*, 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁸ Selim Deringil, ““They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery””: The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 2 (2003): 316.

¹⁹ Kasaba, *Moveable Empire*, 5.

²⁰ Klein, *Margins of Empire*, 24.

the village always superseded ethno-religious interests and loyalties and produced cultural contact between various groups.”²¹ The Ottoman Empire, as the only Muslim empire “that survived into age of modernity,” had to transform itself to survive in a new world order and respond to the project of modernity.²² With the increased pressure and threats from its neighbors and the rise of nationalism in Europe, the Ottoman Empire had to respond to the requirements of running a modern state. Ottoman and Turkish intellectuals and Ottoman statesmen who were under the influence of European thinkers “grew increasingly wary and harshly critical of nomadic tribes and other migrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”²³

As part of this modernization competition, “the empire thinking like a nation state” embarked on a project of internal colonization in its borderlands. This project brought with it a “shift in perceptions of peoplehood, as well. New identities emerged in this transformation as the concern with borders—which necessarily had to be less porous than frontiers—was accompanied by a mission to define, if not create, the peoples who occupied the lands on either side of these borders, and to further control their relationships with one another and with the state.”²⁴ The “shift in perceptions of peoplehood” that Klein refers to is an attack on the “heterogeneity of the ethnic and social composition” of the internally colonized because this heterogeneity was an obstacle in the centralization and homogenization attempts of the empire with twofold complexities: “the vagueness of identities and the presence of multiple loyalties as tribal cleavages and ethnically mixed villages produced competing loyalties.”²⁵

²¹ Ümit Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 15.

²² Deringil, “They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery,” 1.

²³ Kasaba, *Moveable Empire*, 7.

²⁴ Klein, *Margins of Empire*, 23.

²⁵ Ümit Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 14.

Technological innovations and economic developments in Western European states enabled them to catch up with the Ottoman Empire, and by the early nineteenth century they had surpassed it in economic, military, and political power. Two interrelated processes that the Ottoman Empire went through at the time were decline and modernization. In order to guarantee the loyalty of all its peoples, fight separatist movements emerging within the empire under the influence of European nationalisms, and keep up with the modernization trend of the time “sometime in the nineteenth century the Ottoman elite adopted the mindset of their enemies, the arch-imperialists, and came to conceive of its periphery as a colonial setting.”²⁶ Deringil argues that “the Ottoman elite conflated the modernity and colonialism, and applied the latter as a means of survival in an increasingly hostile world.” Colonialism was seen as “a modern way of being.”²⁷ In other words, Western powers had penetrated the Ottoman Empire both through their armies and their ideas. The logic of the modern nation-state required homogenization of its subjects under a shared national identity. According to Ügür Ümit Üngör, starting in the nineteenth century and extending into the Republican Era, the national identity and the modern nation-state building evolved in three phases led by the Young Turk movement.²⁸ The first phase was “Ottoman patriotic citizenship,” which began in roughly the 1860s. This phase “aimed at the creation of an overarching common Ottoman citizenship irrespective of religious or ethnic affiliation.”²⁹ The second phase was called, “Muslim nationalist activism,” and it lasted from 1889 till 1913. With the ongoing territorial loss and separatist movements of religious minorities which led to more territorial loss, Ottoman Empire became increasingly Muslim-dominated. The transition from Ottoman nationalism to Muslim nationalism was “a process of disidentification with non-

²⁶ Deringil, “They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery,” 311.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 313.

²⁸ Ümit Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 26.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 27.

Muslims.”³⁰ The third phase, (1913-1950), consisted of the Turkish nationalist hegemony, which was characterized by a “disidentification with non-Turks.”³¹

The Young Turk Movement was an opposition movement against Sultan Abdulhamit II (1876-1909) and consisted of both indigenous Turkish Muslim intellectuals and exiles in Western countries. These two ultimately merged to form the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). Western influence was very salient in this movement, but it was not only an intellectual attempt. In addition to discourses akin to those of colonialism, it also produced armed dissidence. Young Turks collaborated with other opposition groups and their efforts produced the Constitutional Revolution of July 1908, which launched the Young Turks into the Ottoman parliament and power. The relationship between the Ottoman Kurds and the CUP rule is complicated and full of contradictions. The CUP, which had Turkist tendencies from the very start, shifted its stance towards the Kurds and their right to self-determination according to the power dynamics of the time. Their position regarding the Kurds fluctuated between attempting to establish a centralized system of governance and a Turkish monopoly of power and the recognition of Kurdish claims for ethnic and cultural rights, guaranteeing their self-development so that they could use the manpower and fighting abilities of the Kurdish tribes against internal and external threats. This opportunistic attitude and contradictory practice of the central government not only created loyalty issues among Kurds towards the Turkish administration, but also consolidated the military and economic power of Kurdish ruling class, which further deteriorated the already weak ties between the two side. Deringil interrogates this paradoxical characteristic of the modern Turkish nation-state formation using Ussama Makdisi’s “two faces” formula. He applies Makdisi’s study of the Ottoman Lebanon

³⁰ Ibid, 29.

³¹ Ibid, 29.

to examine the relation between the Ottoman Empire and its nomadic Muslim population.³² This paradoxical relationship is at the core of the “borrowed colonialism” that characterized late Ottoman colonialism. He says “the ‘two faces’ – official intolerance of diversity, and the reality of the need to tolerate such diversity – can be extended to those Muslims who “live in a state of nomadism and savagery [...] The face that had hitherto largely left the ‘savage’ to his own devices now, in a situation of dire need, turns into the face that will ‘civilize’ him and make him useful.”³³ One of the most significant examples of the utilization of the “savage” is seen in the recruitment of Kurdish tribal chieftains and their armed forces for the Armenian Genocide and in the War of Independence.³⁴ The Hamidiye movement, specifically, is an example of this two-faced internal colonization. Nomadic and tribal peoples were seen as savages to be civilized but simultaneously a military resource that could be tapped into if needed. The central government integrated the periphery into its nation building project by granting local leaders certain privileges and bargaining power to use their armed forces while at the same time excluding them from the category of the “civilized.” Deringil thinks that this paradoxical treatment of Kurds is an example of utilization of Western colonial methods: “The leaders of the nomads or the provincial notables were to be won over by “giving them a little something” (bir mikdar şey) and “flattering their leaders” (elebasilarini tayyib), [which] resembles the British practice of ‘cajoling local leaders.’”³⁵ The Young Turk regime continued this two-faced relationship with Kurds until the foundation of Turkish Republic, after which Kurds replaced religious minorities as the subjects of colonization when the face of “official intolerance of diversity” took over.³⁶

³² Deringil “They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery,” 315.

³³ Ibid, 318.

³⁴ Klein, *Margins of Empire*, 20.

³⁵ Deringil, “They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery,” 318.

³⁶ Ibid.

Turkish nationalism is full of contradictions. The literature on Modern Turkey not only offers the language and terminology through which Kurdish resistance can be interrogated but also reveals the failures and contradictions of modern nation-state formation, which constitute the “stateless zones” where Kurdish resistance continues to emerge from. “The contradictions of modern statecraft,” in Janet Klein’s words, is what manufactured Kurdishness as an insurgent by-product of the creation of Turkishness. Kurdishness did not exist as a collective political identity with a shared history, traditions, and characteristics before the Young Turk regime.³⁷ The contradictory co-existence of the exclusionary and inclusionary policies of the Turkish state toward Kurds consolidated the power tribal structure by granting tribal chiefs privileges but also made Kurds unite under Kurdishness, a new monolithic identity targeted by the assimilation project of the state. With regard to the Hamidiye movement, Janet Klein argues that “if their goal was to create a force to counter Armenian revolutionaries and their suspected supporters, in this state agents were partially successful; however, if their aim was to assimilate and subjugate the Kurds themselves, in this they were largely unsuccessful.”³⁸ In other words, “in many ways the tribal Kurds were able to perform an act of “symbolic jujitsu,” subverting the state’s wishes through the very tools and trimmings they had been given.”³⁹

Howard Eisenstadt describes the development of a new language of Ottoman political legitimacy as a “messy process of experimentation” to save the state rather than a movement from one ideological basis to another.⁴⁰ Eisenstadt’s approach is an important critical intervention because it complicates the three-phase evolution that led to Turkish nationalism. Erol Ulker is

³⁷ Klein, *Margins of Empire*, 12.

³⁸ Klein, *Margins of Empire*, 38.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Eisenstadt, “Modernization, imperial nationalism and the ethnicisation of religious identity in the late Ottoman Empire,” 429.

another scholar that critiques the linear historiography on Modern Turkey. He engages in a critical dialogue with the existing historiography to argue that Turkification was only one of the imperial policies aimed at saving the empire and that it cannot be said that Turkification and Ottomanism mark two separate, mutually exclusive historical periods and ideologies. He argues that the three modes of nationalism discussed by historians coexisted and were implemented differently in varying intensity depending on the necessities of the time and geography. Turkification was not a nationwide project so much as a regional one. He emphasizes that, “The programme of Turkification was indeed a novelty that can be attributed to the Young Turks. But the confluence of the centralisation policies with a colonialist attitude towards peripheral subjects was not.”⁴¹ The primary emphasis is on the fact that Turkification is one of the imperial measures taken to save the empire, but it is unique in terms of where and when it was implemented and who it targeted. As Eissenstat points out, modernity bore a Turkish stamp in the late Ottoman Empire, and therefore the non-Turkish populations were branded as “non-modern” or “pre-modern.”

Understanding contemporary Kurdish resistance entails disengagement from hegemonic historiography that sees modernity as an epoch. Kurdish people claim the “pre-modern” in the present as an “attitude,” as a way of resistance, borrowing Foucault’s contextualization of modernity as an “attitude.”⁴² Inhabiting the “stateless zone” with a “pre-modern” attitude in modernity, Kurds produce forms of resistance and politics, the analysis of which requires abandoning the statist approaches to politics and revolution that take nation-state and modernity as *the* site where historical subjectivity and politics of domination and resistance occurs.

⁴¹ Erol Ülker, “Contextualising ‘Turkification’: nation-building in the late Ottoman Empire, 1908–18,” *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 4 (2005): 616.

⁴² Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 39.

Race and Reproduction

The gendered aspect of internal colonization that began in the late Ottoman period and continues in modern Turkey is highly understudied. Ottoman Studies and Turkish Studies have traditionally revolved around contestations between two male “bodies,” the empire/state and the raced subjects/populations, thereby erasing Kurdish women from Kurdish political subjectivity. Scholarship that does attend to the intersection of gender and racialization in relation to Turkey’s Kurdish issue predominantly focuses on the discourses and technologies of oppression and violence leaving out the resistant and violent subjectivity of Kurdish women. Cultural production on Kurdish resistance created by Kurds, on the other hand, has traditionally had a masculinist tone focusing on male war heroes. Both theoretical and cultural production on Kurdish resistance sidelines or completely erases politics of resistance exercised by women.

Hegemonic Turkish feminism does attend to the gender aspect of Kurdish oppression and resistance, but it only takes Kurdish women as the victims of exceptionally patriarchal regime of Kurdish feudal structure focusing on honor killings, child brides, domestic violence, incest rapes etc. In other words, Turkish feminism fails to see the connection between violence against Kurdish women and the history of internal colonization due to the domination of Kemalist ideals within the Turkish feminist movement. In addition to challenging Ottoman Studies and Turkish Studies for their masculinist and nationalist attitude, my research intervenes in the erasure of reproduction and mothering as sites of both racial oppression and resistance in Western feminisms, which have historically been dominated by two approaches. The first approach sees mothering and reproduction as a site of oppression and focuses on how women have become complicit in the reproduction of male supremacy by accepting the submissive “feminine” role in exchange for social acceptance (Irigaray (1985), Chodorow (1995)). The other approach suggests that women

reclaim ‘authentic’ femininity unapologetically and that women, especially mothers, have epistemic privilege and a natural gift to make the world a better place and bring peace by replacing the violent, destructive masculine systems of power with peace-oriented, constructive ethics of care unique to female body (Ruddick (1995), Rich (1976)). Both approaches fail to recognize that women are not only exploited for their reproductive work but also for their power to produce national bodies (white mothers) and non-citizen subjects of exploitation (enslaved mothers). Using Alys Weinbaum’s “race/reproduction bind” as an analytical tool, this dissertation makes a critical intervention into the white-dominated standpoint theory which fails to see the inextricable connection between race and reproduction and reveal the “double bind in which [they] have found themselves when they have attempted to untangle race and reproduction.”⁴³ In this dissertation, I interrogate both theories on mothering and reproduction with a critical, transnational feminist perspective to expose the link between reproduction, nation building and anti-nationalist narratives that has been traditionally dismissed. Kurds experience war and mothering in relation to a racial state. Kurdish difference is constructed both by the state and by Kurds themselves through production of racial narratives, which relied on the regulation of reproductive body. This dissertation makes its intended critical intervention into race-blindness of Western feminisms by building on Black feminist literature which analyzes reproduction under chattel slavery in relation to US nation-building processes. Black feminist theory traces the long history of the regulation of Black reproduction as the primary technique of maintaining racial capitalism. Slave-breeding (forcing slaves considered as “prime stock” to mate), selling families apart, preventing enslaved mothers from mothering their children, exploitation of Black women both as producers and reproducers simultaneously inevitably excluded Black people from the normative ideals of family

⁴³ Alys Weinbaum, *Wayward reproductions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.

and parenting, which links race and reproduction inextricably (Weinbaum (2004), Bridges (2011), Roberts (1997)). In a similar vein, my research takes reproduction as the primary site where nation-building and its failures happen. During the transition from the empire into modern nation state, Turkish political elite (Young Turks) in early 1900s implemented colonial narratives they imported from the West to create “Kurdish” as the racial other and incorporated colonial methods of reproductive control into their “Turkification of the nation” project. The process of the racial homogenization of the country involved, besides genocidal attempts against ethnic and religious minorities, opening boarding schools for Kurdish children to strip them of their Kurdishness, banning mothers from teaching their children their native language, separating Kurdish girls from their parents and placing them in Turkish households in remote cities, and more. This dissertation traces a genealogy of internal colonization that targets Kurdish home, family and reproductive bodies, starting from the historical construction of Kurdish subjects as non-nationals in the early Republican era to current attempts by the AKP government to label Kurdish mothers as “terrorist mothers” who produce “terrorist children” with the mothers of Turkish martyrs who produce national bodies. Drawing from Black feminist literature that unearths the violent insurgent mothering practices of enslaved mothers and unconventional kinship formations they created to maintain their historical subjectivity in the face of constant dehumanization they faced, this dissertation examines the ways in which Kurdish women produce militant insurgency through reproduction and mothering, a subaltern form of resistance, analysis of which entails “conceptually disengaging emergent modes of social experience from older forms of politically valorized subjectivity.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 10.

Kurdish women's racialized reproductive practices offer an alternative politics of resistance, "a political elsewhere" which does not revolve around bourgeois rules of respectability and does not utilize neoliberal tools and discourses of opposition imposed by the West. To make the Kurdish subaltern's historical subjectivity legible, my research imagines/seeks to create a *new* theoretical framework that explodes disciplinary boundaries of Western academia, defying geographical hierarchies and norms of knowledge production and dissemination. It examines the Kurds' embrace of guerilla warfare, militant practices of grief, militarization of home, women and children, and the creation of stateless zones of insurgency.

Racialized Grief

Understanding racialized maternal grief entails a revision of the ways in which grief is experienced as a gendered phenomenon in the neoliberal West. The examination of how racialized grief works and how it constitutes "a memory of the future, a recollection of hopes and dreams from which the future is extrapolated," it is imperative to read grief as the gendered, raced, and historical constituent of racialized memory and political subjectivity.⁴⁵ Dominant narratives on loss and grief in Western literature either revolve around a non-raced and non-gendered (but male) historical subject that suffers from the destructive forces of modernity such as capitalism, urbanism and industrialization or treat grief as a personal/individualized process of dealing with an ahistorical loss. To understand how racialized grief works and how it constitutes "a memory of the future, a recollection of hopes and dreams from which the future is extrapolated," it is imperative to read grief as the gendered, raced and historical constituent of subaltern memory and political subjectivity.⁴⁶ In this introduction, I first present a brief literature review on grief through which I

⁴⁵ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

trace the genealogy of the racialized subject of grief in the formation of modern nation and construction of modern episteme. Then I make a critical intervention into the literature by exposing the boundaries/limitations of the “racialized subject of grief” of modernity and present Kurdish maternal grief as a form of subaltern epistemology that disrupts the neatly delineated “modern subject” and nationally bounded politics of revolution. I believe that the subaltern epistemology that emerges from Kurdish mothering practices and politics of grief provides a “new” language that can articulate “the experiential predicaments and subjective hopes of those relegated to the global undersides.”⁴⁷

Dana Luciano suggests that grief generates an alternative temporality when she says, “The conceptualization of human time according to the foundational truth of emotional attachment alters the body’s status as a time-piece, rendering it the measure less of mortality than of memory.”⁴⁸ This affective time disrupts the vision constructed by “the radical reorganization that we understand as the advent of modernity” which sees time as “linear, ordered, progressive, and teleological.”⁴⁹ Luciano centralizes the “feeling body” whose grief operates on “a sensibility that sought to provide time with a “human” dimension, one that would be collective rather than productive, repetitive rather than linear, reflective rather than forward-moving.”⁵⁰

As Anne Anlin Cheng argues in her book *The Melancholy of Race*, the American political discourse’s dominant vocabulary of grief relies on the logic of comparability and compensation and it “has ironically deflected attention away from a serious look at the more immaterial, unquantifiable repository of public and private grief that has gone into the making of

⁴⁷ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁸ Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 6.

the so-called minority subject and that sustains the notion of ‘one nation.’”⁵¹

For Cheng, racialized grief is a “continuous interaction between sociality and privacy, history and presence, politics and ontology.”⁵² She explores the transformation of an individual from “being a subject of grief to being a subject of grievance” and asks about the political and psychological gains or losses this transformation could yield.⁵³ For her, grievance is “the social and legal articulation of grief” and in this articulation, certain aspects/expressions of grief become unspeakable. She is interested in those aspects of grief that “speak a different language,” which is “not fully reconcilable to the vocabulary of social formulation or ideology but that nonetheless cuts a formative pattern.”⁵⁴ She gives a historical account of how raced grief was integrated into legal discourse as quantifiable scientific data to prove the damage of racial segregation. The invisible, non-material, “intangible” aspect of racism has always been difficult to attend to because “we hardly know how to confront the psychological imprints of racial grief except through either neglect or sentimentalization.”⁵⁵ In a similar vein, Tadiar describes racialized grief as a “historical experience,” a “human activity of mediation between self and social reality.”⁵⁶ She argues that grief is not only a response to the social and economic conditions that people inhabit, but also refers to the “collective subjective practices” through which people produce themselves as subjects and the objective conditions that shape them.

Racialized reproductive body operates in an alternate form of aesthetics by experiencing the world more through senses than language and representation. As Lindsey Andrews points out, the aesthetic disruption through “minor empiricism” is critical for “Black women, who were

⁵¹ Anne Anlin, Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

⁵² *Ibid*, 10.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, x.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

⁵⁶ Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 10.

subjected to harsher regimes of visibility and exploitation on transatlantic stages”⁵⁷ adding, “Minor empiricisms, (...), reflexively constitute or reorganize the senses as they experience sensation.”⁵⁸ Hazel Carby suggests that “the Black women’s critique of history has not only involved us in coming to terms with “absence”; we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us.”⁵⁹ The critical attention to the regimes of visibility of history in both pieces makes it clear that the aesthetic and the empirical are inextricably connected.

This took me back to the original etymological meaning of the word “aesthetics,” which is “perception by feeling” or “to perceive by the senses,” a pre-modern form of aesthetics. In its original meaning, aesthetics is formed through a direct embodied connection with the world. I believe Black feminist aesthetics emerging from minor empiricism is closer to the original meaning of aesthetics.

Andrews suggests that this pre-modern, as I would call it, aesthetics of minor empiricism works in “eternal temporality.” It is important to distinguish the eternal temporality of Black aesthetics from the alternative temporality that Dana Luciano offers. In the chapter “Maternal Melancholia and Sentimental Domesticity,” Luciano elaborates on the ways in which motherhood and grief attached to it generates a heterogeneous temporality which poses a challenge to the progressive time imposed by capitalist modernity. However, according to her, maternal melancholia and grief is experienced within the limits of the domestic and conjugal relations for a lost subject. This formulation not only fails to see how grief extends itself from family to community but also perceives death as an end to a historical stage, reproducing the dichotomy

⁵⁷ Lindsey Andrews, “Black Feminism’s Minor Empiricism: Hurston, Combahee, and the Experience of Evidence.” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 1, no. 1 (2015): 12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v1i1.28808>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

⁵⁹ Hazel V. Carby, “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood,” in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, ed. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 211.

between the living and the dead. The feeling body of the Kurdish mother operates on an alternative grief register which I call “necropathy,” or “feeling the dead.” The racialized maternal body feels the lost subject not merely as an act of longing through remembering; rather, she physically feels the dead with all five senses in physical spaces, characterized by violent intimacies between the dead and the living created by the racializing state.

Luciano follows the path opened by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin offers a critique of historicism through a redemptive historical approach. For him, modernity replaced messianic time which operates on the redemption rhetoric with a homogeneous empty time organized by capitalism which sees history as a continuum flowing into an inevitable progress. Walter Benjamin refers to a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus* in his essay “On the Concept of History” to explain what the historical materialism he is calling for looks like. He interprets the image in the painting as the angel of history whose “face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe.”⁶⁰ The angel has the capacity to see the past as destruction and he has the desire to rehabilitate it; however, a storm of progress is blowing from Paradise, and he is irresistibly being dragged into the future. For Benjamin, the past as catastrophe and the futurity as progress is both the reason for the plight of mankind and the obstacle to redemption. The possibility of redemption does not rest in the dream of a better future; it is predicated on active engagement with the past through the act of memory by the oppressed. I am quite fascinated with this allegory of the angel of history because I think the experience of motherhood as grief through the “feeling body” of the racialized mother gives her a “weak messianic power” and a historical materialist gaze into the past.

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, “On the concept of history,” In *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

In my search for the grief register of the insurgents, the first thing I need to do is to understand the specificities of the context this dissertation project is speaking from. I look at the peripheries of modernity, where the legitimacy of the nation state as the imagined epicenter of modernity and civilization is constantly contested and where the contradictions and failures of modern statecraft are exposed. The main objective of this dissertation project is to recognize the periphery the Kurdish subject inhabits as a site where a unique mode of politics emerges which can speak of “the experiential predicaments and subjective hopes of those relegated to the global undersides.”⁶¹ As Neferti Tadiar aptly argues in her article, this “new understanding of politics” requires ‘falling away’ from global capitalist and nation-state narratives of development as well as from social movement narratives of liberation.⁶² It requires deployment of a “new” aesthetic practice that can sense the racialized other as an empowered historical subject and express the “expressible elements of the unrecognized and overlooked modes of viable life.”⁶³

At the center of my research resides a particular experience of modernity “within the seemingly inexorable vortex of destruction and disappearance that characterizes our global history.”⁶⁴ What we witness in the context of modern Turkey in relation to Kurdish question is “the uncanny return but also transmutation of an older, imperial, some would say totalitarian politics.”⁶⁵ The position of the Kurdish subject at the periphery of modernity is a position from which the uncanny return of the Sovereign can be closely witnessed.

⁶¹ Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 9.

⁶² *Ibid*, 5.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

Necropolitics

In order to understand the Turkish Sovereign, I first need to understand Kurdish death. How does death work? More specifically, how does Kurdish death work? This pursuit requires a critical engagement with the specificities of how power works in the context of modern Turkey which transitioned from an empire into a nation state and the contradictions and contestations involved in this modern state craft where the Sovereign and the modern power repeatedly collapse into each other. The convergence of biopower and Sovereign power in the context of modern Turkey constitutes the unique conditions that surround Kurdish death and Kurdish resistance. As defined by Michel Foucault, biopower is a “power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”⁶⁶ We observe the execution of biopower on the Kurdish population during the process of “Turkification” of the nation in early 1920s. The juxtaposition of the Turkish and Kurdish mothers in opposition is the basis on which the Turkish Republic was established as a racial state. Biopolitical practices carried out on the Kurdish population included utilization of sociology as a tool to categorize racialized people and to document their ethnic and religious identity, their language, cultural practices, traditions; regulation of reproductive bodies of Kurdish girls by sending them to boarding schools where they would mate with Turkish boys and be rid of their Kurdishness by bearing Turkish children; constructing a class of Turkish women intellectuals and recruiting them as “Mothers of the Turks” to embark on a mission of assimilating Kurdish children into Turkishness as teachers sent to the Eastern provinces.

Side by side with the comprehensive regulation of the lives of the racialized body (biopower) coexists violent, physical subjugation by death en masse in several massacres

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Birth of Biopolitics,” in *Michel Foucault. Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 73.

(Sovereign power). The simultaneous operation of the power over life (make live) and the power to kill (let die) exercised on Kurdish body makes it necessary to challenge the clear-cut distinctions between modern power and Sovereign power. Achille Mbembe's discussion of necropolitics where he "draws on the concept of biopower and explores this concept's relation to the notions of Sovereignty (imperium) and the state of exception" offers a useful framework. In his book *Necropolitics*, Mbembe asks: "Can the notion of biopower account for the contemporary ways in which the political takes as its primary and absolute objective the enemy's murder, doing so under the guise of war, resistance, or the war on terror?"⁶⁷ This question complicates the notion of biopower by making necropower an integral part of it. He considers politics a form of war and inquires about "the place that is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular when it is wounded or slain). How are these aspects inscribed in the order of power?"⁶⁸ My examination of Kurdish death will build on this question, albeit with a shift in focus. In order to understand Kurdish death as a process with a temporal and spatial significance rather than a temporary act of dying/killing, I will dwell on a specific part of Mbembe's question: What place is given to the human body in particular when it is wounded or slain? How is the corpse of the racialized inscribed in the order of power? What happens when the necropolitical power does not end with the murder of the enemy? This question is crucial in understanding Kurdish death because it challenges an established perception of death in the age of biopolitics: Death is something to be avoided and hidden. As Foucault points out death gradually disappeared from public sphere when Power began to focus on the protection of life. Foucault calls this "disqualification of death."⁶⁹ Judith Butler makes a similar argument when she says that modern frames of war are designed precisely to

⁶⁷ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 66.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended" *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 247.

solicit us to not see the precarious condition of targeted lives. However, she says, “we can nevertheless apprehend the precarity at the limit of the frame.”⁷⁰ With this dissertation, I invite you to stand at that limit, to fall away from the modern frames of war that cannot recognize state violence beyond the death of a racialized body. Exposure of the terror “hidden” in modernity requires a shift in focus. The Sovereign’s right to kill has been the focus of the conversations around necropolitics. What is understudied is the Sovereign’s power over the dead bodies. In this dissertation, I use necropolitics to refer to the violence against the already dead bodies.

In pursuit of the shift in focus or an insurgent grief register I am looking for, I draw heavily from Banu Bargu’s article “Another Necropolitics” where she examines “the violence that takes as its object the realm of the dead – the corpse, the act of burial, funerary rituals, the graves and cemeteries as sites of burial and commemoration, and forms of mourning and reverence.”⁷¹ Bargu distinguishes the form of necropolitical violence she focuses on in her work from other forms of death-making, which are also abundantly present in the context of Turkish-Kurdish conflict by looking at the “acts that target the dead bodies of those killed in armed conflict, by way of their mutilation, dismemberment, denuding, desecration, dragging, and public display, the destruction of local cemeteries and other sacred spaces that are designated for communication with and commemoration of the dead, the delay, interruption, or suspension of the conduct of funerary rituals, the imposition of mass or anonymous internment, the pressure for clandestine internment, and the repression and dispersion of funeral processions for the newly dead.”⁷² I apply Bargu’s conceptualization of “another necropolitics” to my ethnographic data which were gathered through a feminist lens in the first place with research questions concentrated around the gendered and

⁷⁰ Judith Butler, *Notes towards a performative theory of assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), xvi.

⁷¹ Banu Bargu, “Another Necropolitics,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 1 (January 2016): 2 <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/610222>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

sexualized operation of necropolitics. This gender focus took me to the gendered necrohabitats where death and life blend into each other in very intimate ways which have been outside of the radar of the dominant frames of war. At the center of this blending is the reproductive body of the racialized subject. Death and life collapses into each other through the Kurdish reproductive body. The first time I identified this unique necropolitical phenomenon where the living and the dead do not exist in separate realms was when I read about Mother Berfo.

Mother Berfo asked the state for her son Cemil's bones for almost forty years, until her death at the age of 105. Her son was forcefully disappeared while in police custody during the 1980 military coup. She never got an answer as to what happened to her son or where his remains are. She said in an interview: "I want to die but I will not close these eyes of mine until I see the bones of my son. And If I do die, do not bury me, do not hold a funeral. I want to be buried with my son in the same grave. This is my will."⁷³ Mother Berfo knocked on every door of every state institution she could to ask about her son. She travelled from Kurdistan to the heart of the state with other Kurdish mothers countless times. She lived an exceptionally long life despite her poor health and the mistreatment she constantly experienced. A proper death and the rituals which traditionally accompany grief are denied to her son and herself by the state. This denial not only literally prolonged her life but allowed her to constantly reproduce her son in the memory of the state. She constantly injected her son's image, his name, his story into the homogeneous temporality of the national imaginary.

From the analysis of Kurdish death, then, emerges a phenomenon observed at the peripheries of modernity, which I call "over-qualification of death." The site where Mother Taybet died for seven days, (she died *for* seven days when her death was framed through the eyes of her

⁷³ "Berfo Ana'nın son sözleri," *Sabah*, February 21, 2013. <http://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2013/02/21/berfo-ananin-son-vasiyeti>. Author's translation.

family) is one of the sites where “that old Sovereign right of death” was observed once again. The logic that was behind the hours-long execution of Damians the regicide on March 1757 as Foucault mentions in *Discipline and Punish* or the display of the severed heads of the condemned on a pike to the satisfaction of the crowds in France is at play in the case of Kurdish death.⁷⁴ It plays a significant role in Turkish state’s attempt to consolidate its sovereignty. It also exposes the limits of that sovereignty.

Mbembe’s question about the place of the slain human body in the order of power offers an opening for the recognition of and a discussion about a particular form of violence exercised on the Kurdish body *after* its death that has been left out of the conversation. The analysis of this unique form of necropower, which I will call “not-let-die,” makes abundantly clear the fact that necropower and biopower, more often than not, mutually constitute each other. The regulation of the Kurdish life heavily relies on the regulation of Kurdish death. In other words, subjugation of Kurdish life to death through the necropolitical practices of the Turkish state (the Sovereign) exposes, in Mbembe’s words, the links between modernity and terror. Understanding the behavior of the Turkish Sovereign in a span of a hundred years in relation to the Kurdish subject is a matter of understanding “the relationship between politics and death in [the] systems that can function only in a state of emergency.”⁷⁵ The ongoing process of racialization of the Kurdish body is a site where state of exception becomes the norm. Kurdish body, individual and collective, as a *colony*, borrowing the term from Mbembe, “represents the site where Sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where “peace” is more likely to take on the face of a “war without end.”⁷⁶ In the context of this “war without end” where Kurdish

⁷⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 1.

⁷⁵ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 70.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

death is not hidden but on display, a counter war frame has to be created to recognize a unique racialized subjectivity and an insurgent grief register that the frame of the Sovereign cannot efface. This counter war frame emerges out of the eyes of Kurdish mothers. The data presented in this dissertation, including numerous highly disturbing images and interview extracts, aims to create a visual and conceptual frame that would “register war in a way that transforms the senses” since, as Butler argues, “every war is a war on senses.”⁷⁷ Through this frame, I reveal the gendered subjectivities of Kurdish reproductive body who has developed a radical relationality with death and the Sovereign’s right to kill. In other words, I shift the focus from the necropower of the Sovereign to the necropower possessed by the racialized subject. Racialized maternal grief is located at the center of the necropower exercised by the Kurdish subjects and this racialized maternal grief that possesses and reproduces necropower is what I call insurgent grief.

Insurgent grief

The framework of insurgent grief I offer in this dissertation speaks from the “death-worlds, [...] in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer them to the status of the living dead” but tells the stories of racialized subjects who, having existed in these death-worlds for decades, do more than dying.⁷⁸ In these death-worlds, death is adjacent to life. Kurdish death is integrated in life, not in the sense that it will happen eventually to everyone, but in the sense that it is always already in the present. Death does not happen in an instant and passes. It spills into everyday life and stays there. It is not only a specter that haunts generations but is oftentimes physically there with the living as part of the household for days because the racialized body is not to be buried or grieved. The Kurdish condition challenges the dichotomous thinking

⁷⁷ Butler, *Notes towards a performative theory of assembly*, xvi.

⁷⁸ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92.

of life as an active process and death as a temporary state. Life and death are not two mutually exclusive concepts under the necropolitical state of emergency regime the Kurds live in. As Judith Butler aptly observes, “War is in the business of producing and reproducing precarity, sustaining populations on the edge of death, sometimes killing its members, and sometimes not; either way it produces precarity as the norm of everyday life.”⁷⁹ I believe the everyday precarity created by the war with no end places the Kurdish reproductive body in a unique epistemological position which is what Tadiar calls “the standpoint of dispossessed historical experience.”⁸⁰ From this standpoint, Tadiar says, we are led to “envision forms of political action and alternative futures that are at once immanent in and yet seemingly outside of the dominant historical imaginations of existing social movements.”⁸¹ The Kurdish condition and the insurgent grief register it leads to blurs the boundaries between life and death rendering life almost over and death already happening, which then begs the question of ‘what is left of necropower when death is not necessarily negated by the racialized subject?’

Judith Butler’s description of ungrievable lives unknowingly points at this site of insurgency residing in the everyday precarity:

Ungrievable lives are those which cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed.⁸²

I see a very productive existential paradox here. How can the Sovereign destroy a life that cannot be destroyed because it is always already destroyed? The “already destroyed” zone Kurdish people inhabit marks the limits of the Sovereign’s necropower. The “already- destroyedness” of

⁷⁹ Butler, *Notes towards a performative theory of assembly*, xix.

⁸⁰ Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 16.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 16.

⁸² Butler, *Notes towards a performative theory of assembly*, xix.

the Kurdish subject, the precarity with no end the Kurdish subject is born into, is a position that bears two consequences. The first consequence is that it gives the Sovereign the urge to keep killing beyond the physical death because the physical death of the Kurdish body has long stopped having the desired disciplining effect. This is the reason why no Kurdish death can ever be called “collateral damage.” Judith Butler describes collateral damage as the situation where “some populations are killed simply because they are in the way, situated in proximity to the ostensible target.”⁸³ Within the frame of the Turkish war waged against the Kurds, every single Kurdish death is deliberate. The Kurdish body as a racialized collective is the ostensible target. Turkish state’s necropolitical practices on already dead bodies is a testament to the value of Kurdish death as a disciplining tool. At this point, I would like to bring in the concept of “rescuing the dead” that I came to know from Sinan Antoon. I was a research fellow with the Simpson Center for Humanities for the 2020-2021 Mellon Sawyer Seminar, where we organized bi-weekly webinars on humanitarian care. Sinan Antoon is an Iraqi poet, novelist, translator and an Associate Professor at New York University's Gallatin School, and in this case, he was the inaugural keynote speaker for the Spring seminar.⁸⁴ In his talk, Antoon urged us to think about care beyond the living. He says that “material and discursive resources and energies are dedicated to rescue the living and to tend to their wounds,” which is never enough, and care is always carried out unequally. For Antoon, “humans live very unequal lives and the inequalities that structure their lives extend to their deaths and beyond as well.” Systems of racialization not only make certain lives expendable, but also make certain deaths ungrievable and dehumanize certain dead bodies. As clearly evidenced in the cases presented in this dissertation, the physical death of a body does not

⁸³ Ibid, xviii.

⁸⁴ Sinan Antoon, “Rescuing the Dead,” April 1, 2021. Youtube. 1:07:41 <https://www.humanitarianisms.org/spring-2021-rethinking-the-human.html>.

necessarily stop its racialization and remove it from the state's reach. Antoon aptly argues in his talk that "death is not the total equalizer. It is rather the in-equalizer." He then offered examples of people who rescue the dead through acts of caring beyond death. The website iraqbodycount.org, created by two academics in the UK, is one of them. The website works against the deliberate erasure of civilian deaths by the US government, who "only counts destroyed tanks and artillery weapons and does not do body counts." By counting Iraqi deaths, the website "rescues the dead from oblivion, anonymity and collective amnesia." Another example that Antoon talks about is a Muslim Shia cleric who works with volunteers to give the dead, even those deemed terrorists, a proper burial. As a novelist, inspired by these real-life examples of caring beyond death, Antoon creates fictional characters such as Jawad in *the Corpse Washer* who strives to rehumanize and dignify the dead by washing their corpses, or Wadood, an eccentric bookseller, in *the Book of Collateral Damage*, who tries to catalogue everything destroyed by war, from objects, buildings, books and manuscripts, flora and fauna, to humans. In both books by Antoon, the boundaries between the dead and the living and the human and non-human are blurred. "Rescuing the dead" is a useful concept that helped me better understand the complexities of the certain necromothering acts carried out by Kurdish mothers as forms of defiance and transgression. As Walter Benjamin suggests, "Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious" and therefore the dead must be rescued.⁸⁵

The Turkish state has been killing the racialized body for more than a century. The history of modern Turkey is full of massacres both big and small, such as the Armenian Genocide, the Dersim massacre, the Zilan massacre, the Maras massacre, and the events of September 6th and 7th, to name a few. Given the abundance of massacres in the making of modern Turkey, it is safe

⁸⁵ Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 391.

to say the Sovereign has readily used its right to kill against the racialized body. In other words, the necropolitical practices of the Sovereign in the conventional sense of the term has been widely documented. This dissertation focuses on what happens to the racialized body after it is murdered by the Sovereign. The oppression of the Kurdish people and their resistance movement offer numerous examples as to how racialized body remains a site of conflict after his/her death. Kurdish funerals have always been a matter of contestation. Virginity tests on the corpses of female Kurdish guerillas, torture and beheadings of guerillas and recordings of these tortures being circulated on social media, public display of dead civilians during the state of emergency regimes and curfews for days, are all common instances of the Sovereign extending its necropower beyond the physical death. The first consequence of the ontological position of already destroyedness that Kurdish people inhabit is this unique aspect of necropolitics exercised on the already dead body of the Kurdish subject.

The initial focus of my dissertation was intended to be the racialized maternal grief that would expose the other necropolitics, the power over the dead body. Following Banu Bargu's path, I wanted to talk about the forced disappearances, mass graves, confiscation of Kurdish bodies by the Turkish state and the impossibility of closure. Turkish state's necropolitical practices such as denying Kurdish families their right to claim the dead bodies of their loved ones have dramatically transformed Kurdish grief. For thousands of people, grief has become a life-long political act. During the 1980 military coup, thousands of political dissidents were "disappeared" in police custody. A lot of them were later found in mass graves and the rest are still missing. As Banu suggests in her article "Sovereignty as Erasure," these forced disappearances occurred within the "invisible penal architecture" of the Turkish Sovereign. In other words, the torture and killing of the racialized subject is kept hidden from the public in an attempt to erase Kurdish death from the

national imaginary. However, what I heard from my interlocutors told a completely different story. They told a story of Kurdish death that was hypervisible. The Kurdish death that I heard about over and over again did not occur in the “invisible penal architecture.” It occurred in Kurdish home, in the living room, in the kitchen, in the garden, on the streets. Kurdish death was not hidden; on the contrary, it was disseminated publicly. Unlike Mother Berfo’s case, where her racialized maternal grief operated on an *imagined* death, the cases I present in this dissertation reveal how Kurdish death spills over into Kurdish life not as a specter but in flesh.

As I researched further into Kurdish death and its gendered operation, I realized the intimate connection between the living and the dead was beyond the cerebral level. It was not only affective, it was corporal. In the necrohabitats that Kurdish mothers inhabit, there is a time lag between when the physical death of a body occurs and when it becomes a memory. The start of the mourning process over a loss on a cerebral level through the integration of the lost subject into the memory implies a physical and temporal separation between the grieving subject and the dead. Judith Butler points out that the traditional war frames do not just “serve as a mechanism through which the living and the dead are distinguished and maintained in times of war.”⁸⁶ She argues that “the time of war is precisely the time of this iteration, that is, the repeated and violent differentiation between the living and the dead.”⁸⁷ The shift in focus or the insurgent necropolitics I offer here is crucial to identify and oppose a war which is, on the contrary, defined by a violent *indifferentiation* between the living and the dead, and to analyze what it does to the senses. The cases I present in this dissertation complicate the presumed physical separation of the living and the dead. The state of emergency regime declared after the 2015 elections and the heavily militarized curfews conducted in the Kurdish region created countless necrohabitats where

⁸⁶ Butler, *Notes towards a performative theory of assembly*, xix.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

intimate corporeal connections between the living and the dead occurred in the time lag that transforms the operation of memory.

The case of Mother Taybet in the beginning of this introduction is only one example. The state of emergency in 2015 and 2016 witnessed numerous incidents where the line between life and death was repeatedly contested, and at the center of this transgression resides the reproductive body. The most striking example that lays bare the connection between the Kurdish reproductive body and the necropolitics I am calling attention to in this dissertation is the case of Mother Ayşe and her baby Rustem.

On December 14th 2015, sixty-eight people died during the curfew in Silopi, Sirnak. The curfew lasted thirty-eight days, but the military blockade of the region continued for 308 days. During this period, people were denied basic needs. Those who attempted to go out to meet those needs were killed by snipers. Ayşe Butuntekin, mother of nine, who was breastfeeding her six-month-old son Rustem, went dry due to malnutrition and went to a neighbor's house to get milk for the baby. As she was coming back to her house, she was executed by a sniper at her doorstep. The family notified the hospital and the police department to initiate the burial but were turned down. Due to the curfew conditions, Mother Ayşe's dead body had to be kept in the same room with her nine children for seven days. Baby Rustem tried to breastfeed from his dead mother. This is a striking case of what I call *necromothering*. When I say necromothering, which is discussed extensively in the following chapters, I do not limit the term to mean the affective, grief relation between a mother and a child. What I primarily mean by it is a form of physical mothering that continues beyond death. Shifting the analytical focus from the spatially and temporarily bound sites of exception, such as a military coup and its official and unofficial prisons to mundane and

highly gendered necrohabitats will help us identify a unique form of necropolitics, the power to not-let-die.

As the data presented in this dissertation suggest, the Kurdish imaginary is oversaturated with Kurdish death; the constant subjugation of Kurdish life to death has made the Kurdish subject develop a radical relationship with death and loss that chips away at the necropolitical power of the Sovereign. The transformation of senses and the reorganization of grief and its temporality by Kurdish mothers is the second consequence of the “already destroyed” position the Kurdish body inhabits. The origin of this transformation is their radical relationship Kurdish with death.

The Kurdish resistance movement is full of acts of self-harm that exemplify this radical relationship. Leyla Güven, former MP for the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), went on a hunger strike in prison on November 8th, 2019 to protest the solitary confinement of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan and the precarious conditions of Kurdish political prisoners, and the hunger strikes spread to other prisons and became a national movement. I interviewed Leyla Güven in 2019 right after she ended the hunger strike and what she said about death showcases transformation of senses Kurdish subject has been put through when it comes to death:

When we believe in a cause, we act knowing that we should risk death for that cause. We definitely do not glorify death, though. We do not live to die. We fight to live and ensure our people live. We say everybody has the right to live and live happily. However, sometimes in order to live, you have to walk towards death.⁸⁸

Güven was following the legacy of Kurdish women who engaged in practices of violent insurgency such as self-immolation, guerilla warfare and suicide bombing. These women who engage in self-harm as a form of insurgency are called “goddesses” in Kurdish resistance literature. Both their acts of self-harm and killing the enemy, in the case of guerilla warfare, showcase the fact that the racialized subject, who is predominantly framed as the target of the war waged by the

⁸⁸ Leyla Güven, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Sovereign, becomes war makers with their own necropower. Adapting Foucault, Mbembe argues that “in the economy of biopower, racism is mobilized to regulate the distribution of death and to render possible the murderous operations of the state.”⁸⁹ In other words, racism is “the condition for the acceptability of putting to death.”⁹⁰ Kurdish resistance lays bare that the racialized subject is actively involved in this “distribution of death” rather than solely being on the receiving end of it. The ontological acceptance of death into their life and their daily exposure to death either by dying or observing death or death in the making or killing marks the beginning of the racialized subject’s necropower. It also designates the limits of the necropower of the Turkish Sovereign.

The Sovereign’s power to not let the racialized subject die create sites and acts of necromothering that emerges from an insurgent war frame which registers death and violence “in a way that transforms the senses.”⁹¹ The Kurdish reproductive body registers war from an epistemological position through which death is not readily negated and the Sovereign’s necropower is turned on its head. The Sovereign’s right to not let die attaches tremendous disciplinary value to the corpse of the racialized subject. Postmortem management of the Kurdish body as a state tactic then falls apart when the target of that disciplinary act deliberately removes the value from the body it was attached to.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation consists of three chapters:

In Chapter 1, *Necropathy: Power over Death and Necrohabitats*, I examine three manifestations of necropolitics exercised by the Turkish state against the Kurds: the

⁸⁹ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Butler, *Notes towards a performative theory of assembly*, xii.

spectacularization of death, necrohabitats where the dead and the living spill into each other, and attempts to erase Kurdish death from history and memory through enforced disappearances. Examination of these three interconnected forms of necropolitics reveals a striking paradox where the Kurdish racialized body is marked for death from birth while it is simultaneously situated outside of the conventional norms of dying. The necropolitical practices of the Turkish state create spaces of violent intimacies between the dead and the living, which I call necrohabitats, where the spatial and temporal distinction between life and death disappears. Necrohabitats are characterized by a radical reorganization of time and space and therefore call for reimagination of grief as a form of insurgency. Necrography, *feeling the dead*, which is the overarching concept that underlies this dissertation, is the site of contestation where the insurgent grief register Kurdish reproductive body violently creates emerges from.

In Chapter 2: *Mothering for the State: Mothers as Nation Builders and Terrorist Makers*, I explore the gendered sites of biopolitical power that were at the center of the process that built the Turkish nation state and constructed the new Turkish identity. I trace the genealogy of how both the Turkish and Kurdish reproductive body have been intimately regulated as the primary site of nation building in the making of Modern Turkey. This historical account will expose the legacies of European colonialism that shaped the population politics of the Turkish state during the late Ottoman and early Republican period. Focusing on this time period, the first section of the chapter examines the Turkish take on “race” which was redefined for the purposes of Turkification of the nation and how gender factored as a significant component of the military and educational practices of this Turkification process. In the second part of the chapter, I analyze how a newly emerging group of female Turkish intellectuals in the early years of the Republic took on a national motherhood duty that divorced motherhood from biological reproduction and reinforced an

understanding of race that is culturally reproducible. Lastly, the third section looks at the ways in which the Kurdish reproductive body has historically been a site of genocide and assimilation, which in the modern Turkish context often blend into each other.

In Chapter 3: *Necromothering: Reversing Necropolitics, Mothering the Dead*, building on the concept of necrography, I examine three forms of necromothering Kurdish women practice. *Mothering the dead, refusal of care* and *mothering towards death* are practices of care that break away from the established norms of mothering and imaginations of resistance that cannot aim beyond the preservation of life. The Kurdish reproductive body has always been situated at the limits of life and death both as breeders of life and makers of death. The Kurdish women centered by this dissertation actively respond to both forms of necropower that the Turkish Sovereign exercises, the right to kill and the right to not-let-die. They respond to its right to kill by “walking towards death” in Leyla Güven’s words. Their response to the Sovereign’s right to kill go beyond putting themselves in danger. As necromothers, they not only mother their children beyond death but they also mother them *towards* death. I investigate the insurgent mothering practices of Peace Mothers which included actively encouraging their children to get involved in the resistance movement or join the Kurdish army and refusing to perform the care work which is meant to keep their children alive. They refuse to protect their children from being part of the necrohabitats they create or are put in. They also neutralize the Sovereign’s right to not-let-die by creating a radical grief register where neither death is negated as a site of non-existence nor life is necessarily affirmed as an existence free of death.

There were questions that lingered in my mind throughout the writing process and they are still with me today. How do you care for a child whose death is always imminent, a child who inhabits the position of “already destroyedness,” whose life is always already replete with death

since birth, a child who reproduces death through his/her birth? Does the act of maternal care ends with the death of a child? And does it necessarily start with the birth of a child?

This dissertation has been a war on my senses, and out of the process of writing emerged a poem which might be an affective response to it all. I would like to end this introduction with it:

How long had she traveled?
 Away from that place she tries so hard to remember
 The place that is kept alive to be killed further
 She was a pomegranate tree, or a baby
 Maybe she wasn't supposed to remember
 She remembers the smoke, however
 Seeped into her hair
 The soot, the flesh, the wailing and the laughter
 The touch of a tiny palm, the nail of a lost son,
 One morning she embarked on a walk
 She carried them along, the pomegranate tree
 Along with the taste of the bitterest tea, smell of a daffodil,
 And the eyes of the darkest child who'd never seen a sea
 And she walked, and oh boy did she walk!
 With everything she saw under the shadow of a century
 She was a baby or a pomegranate tree
 Is this a walk to remember or to desire?
 The desire of a baby desiring milk from an expired tit
 Is she longing for death or a breath?
 Neither came
 Both stayed
 Like milk in an expired ...

Chapter 1

Necrography: Power over Death and Necrohabitats

Death is intrinsic to life for us. During a chit chat like the one we are having right now, a bomb would fall right in the middle of us; one or two of us would die, just like that. Their anxieties, dreams, joys, sorrows, everything ends. I saw people die in the middle of a smile or while tears were falling down their cheeks. Death is a part of you. This is the philosophy. We know the coexistence of death and life better than anyone.

- Sirin, a female PKK guerilla⁹²

I was waiting to get off the plane in Amed (Diyarbakir), the capital of the imagined Kurdistan in the southeast of Turkey, when I checked Twitter to see that the elected mayors of four districts in Amed were dismissed from their posts over alleged links to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), adding to the ninety-five dismissed Kurdish mayors since the State of Emergency declaration in 2015. The democratically elected Kurdish mayors were replaced by government-appointed trustees. The elected mayors were arrested and charged with membership in a terrorist organization. Gültan Kişanak, for instance, was the mayor of Amed when she was arrested for terrorist propaganda in 2016 and put in isolation in a remote western city prison, disconnected from her community. State prosecutors are demanding a 230 year-long prison sentence for her. None of the dismissed mayors has seen a trial yet. The mass incarceration of Kurdish politicians, activists, and pro-Kurdish journalists led to prison hunger strikes in April, 2017 as a protest against isolation in prisons, particularly against the isolation of the Kurdish leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Peace Mothers initiated the protests outside metropolitan prisons to draw attention to the hunger strikes and death fasts carried out by their imprisoned children. The political atmosphere I witnessed in Fall 2019 during my fieldwork was a continuation of the military crackdown on Kurds following the June 7, 2015 general elections. In 2015, after the unprecedented victory of Kurdish party HDP (People's Democratic Party) in the general elections, which caused

⁹² Berivan Bingöl, "*Bizim gizli bir hikâyemiz var,*" *Dağdan anneliğe kadınlar* ("We have a hidden story, from mountains to motherhood) (İstanbul: İletişim, 2016), 193.

Erdoğan's party to lose its majority in the parliament, the government revived the war against Kurdish population after three years of ceasefire and peace negotiations. After August 16th, the authorities declared thirty-two curfews in eight Kurdish districts. What happened during these curfews in these cities bordered on genocide. The state of emergency rule created spaces and bodies of exception that fell outside the national and international law. The specter of the 90s' "dirty war" resurfaced in the interregnum between two elections creating a new state of emergency regime which continues to date.

Throughout 1990s, over four thousand Kurdish villages were destroyed by the Turkish army and approximately four million Kurds were displaced. Between 1990-1998, one hundred seven Kurds were extra-judicially executed, 1,683 were killed in unsolved political murders, one hundred seventy-nine were "disappeared," three hundred forty-eight were killed in police custody and prisons, four hundred sixty-eight died in mine/bomb explosions, and 1,053 were executed in shootings against civilians. In total, 17,955 people were killed by Turkish security forces in the 1990s. In addition to the military violence, Kurds were also kept under 24/7 surveillance, physically and psychologically tortured daily and stripped of their sources of income, which forced them to migrate to non-Kurdish cities in the south and the west, which have historically been hostile environments for Kurds.

For the purposes of this chapter, I followed this century-old specter of death to Amed, where death is neither a thing of the past to be mourned nor it is an inevitable destination, a dot in the future on a linear timeline. On my way to the HDP headquarters in Amed, I watched children climb onto tanks, dangle on the tank guns, play hide and seek around inactive military vehicles. Heavy military presence and around the clock police surveillance is nothing new to the people in the region so much so that it is integrated into the social fabric of everyday life. This chapter

examines the relationship between the Kurds and the death centering Kurdish reproductive body and the child.

Theoretically, I will be following the path opened by Banu Bargu. Instead of using Foucault's categorization of power as a binary system of "taking life" or "letting live" or Mbembe's necropolitics, which is exclusively concerned with physical spaces of exception which are marked for destruction, Bargu traces the specter of state violence to the literal "realm of the dead – the corpse, the act of burial, funerary rituals, the graves and cemeteries as sites of burial and commemoration, and forms of mourning and reverence."⁹³ Moving beyond Bargu's approach to necropolitics which she sees as a biopolitical practice of "dishonoring, disciplining, and punishment of the living through the utilization of the dead as postmortem objects and sites of violence," I examine the mundane sites of necropolitics, the surroundings of death, how life is sustained in the face of death, what reproduction looks like when child-making can simultaneously mean death-making and life-making.⁹⁴ This chapter investigates gendered sites of necropolitics, where the state violently intervenes into Kurdish child-making and social reproduction.

In his argument against repressive hypothesis, Foucault argues that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere."⁹⁵ For him power is the "multiplicity of force relations imminent in the sphere they operate in."⁹⁶ His formulation of power allows for a nuanced discussion of resistance. He elaborates on the notion of resistance asking a significant question: "Should it be said that one is always inside power, there is no

⁹³ Bargu, "Another Necropolitics," 2.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁹⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 93.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 92.

escaping it [...] because one is subject to the law in any case?”⁹⁷ For Giorgio Agamben, the answer is yes. He reads resistance as a double-bind, saying:

The spaces, the liberties and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals' lives within the state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very Sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves.⁹⁸

Agamben elaborates further on this paradox through the figure of “homo sacer.” Critiquing Foucault and Arendt for missing the connection between biopower and totalitarian regimes, Agamben argues that biopolitics – in other words, the intrusion of bare life into the political realm – is only a continuum or concealed version of Sovereign power that is why biopower can both protect life and authorize a holocaust. While it protects lives and improves health of some people, it creates states and bodies of exception out of others as in the case of camp. I will take up the notions of homo sacer and state of exception to analyze the operation of power that racializes Kurdish population. However, my reading of homo sacer and the state of exception departs significantly from Agamben in that I conceive the status of homo sacer (or being a body of exception) as a loophole in the contract with Power where resistance emerges. Comprehension of how Kurdish resistance works entails a deep understanding of the intricacies/intimacies of Kurdish death. I will begin with analyzing the aesthetics of death as a disciplinary mechanism. Then I will move on to the more intimate relationship between Kurds and death and look at the coexistence of death and life in gendered spaces of care. Lastly, I will examine the third manifestation of necropolitics which relies on the erasure of Kurdish death by the state through “enforced disappearances,” rendering bodies anonymous through mass graves. These three subsections of this chapter will lay the foundation for Chapter 3 where I examine the ways in which Kurdish

⁹⁷ Ibid, 95.

⁹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 147.

mothers create insurgency through politicization and militarization of their racialized, maternal grief. The spectacularization of death, cohabitation of the dead and the living and the attempts to erase Kurdish death from history and memory through enforced disappearances are three necropolitical tactics of the state from which the unique Kurdish maternal grief and its temporality emerges. In other words, before I examine multiple forms of resistance created by Kurdish women in the following chapters, I explain the multiple forms of dying experienced by Kurds.

In order to practice the subaltern temporality in my own writing, I made a framing decision. I will abandon the conventional norms of historiography and not follow the linear logic of chronology. This chapter has a deliberately messy narration of historical events. By following a circular temporality in my writing, I attempt to confuse the readers out of their established training of reading history. I also see this framing decision as a feminist praxis of indulging myself as the researcher and the reader, albeit temporarily, in the subaltern temporality to come a bit closer to understanding how past and death works for Kurdish mothers.

Aesthetics of War, Death as a Spectacle

After the 2015 general elections, as mentioned above, the Turkish government revived the war against Kurdish population, put the law aside, did not recognize the election results and imposed a new election. Four cities were literally closed by the state with curfews for sixty-seven days. They were states of exception to which national or international laws did not apply. It was not only a racial but also a spatial caesura. The following three examples illustrate how the boundaries between the dead and the living and public and private blurs. First, the dead body of a 68-year-old Kurdish woman, mother of six (Motheh Taybet), was displayed on the street for 7 days. Due to the constant gunfire on the streets and because of the curfew, her family and neighbors had to watch her body rot right in front of their eyes. They could not pick the body up and bury it for

almost ten days. The ones who tried to go out were shot as well. Second, a young Kurdish man's dead body was dragged by a military car around the neighborhood where he was born and had grown up. Third, a young Kurdish woman's body was stripped of her clothes after she was killed, and the Turkish soldiers who killed her took selfies with her naked tortured body and posted it on social media. This is an example of Agamben's argument that parliamentary democracies and totalitarian regimes might collapse into each other in the 20th century. These examples do more than constituting an example of necropolitics. They call for a reformulation of the term. Necropolitics in this very case is not only about right to kill but it is also about what I would call "power over the dead". This torture cannot be explained with right to kill because they were already dead when they were tortured. I choose to call it *not-let-die*. What necropolitics does with death here is the equivalent of what biopolitics does with life. It proliferates death in such a way that it becomes productive. As Foucault points out, biopolitics made death something that is avoided and hidden to proliferate life. Death gradually disappeared from public sphere when Power began to focus on the protection of life. Foucault calls this "disqualification of death."⁹⁹ The above examples demonstrate that necropolitics works the other way around, which might be called the "overqualification of death." It not only proliferates death, but also prolongs it. Power over a dead body was used against Kurdish population as a disciplining tool to haunt the living. This goes beyond Foucault's formulation of biopower as the right to "make live" and "let die" and adds *not-let-die* to the formula.¹⁰⁰ Contrary to Foucault's argument, death has not disappeared from the public sphere. It has become the backdrop of everyday life. It has become mundane so much so that children play around the vehicles of death. The words of a Peace Mother I interviewed

⁹⁹ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 247.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 254.

in Amed reveal how the prolonged dying of Kurdish children is made known publicly and gives voice, literally, to the specter of death:

Mother Akrime: Not just my son, a lot of mothers' children were murdered in the city walls of Amed (Diyarbakir).¹⁰¹ Our kids would groan with pain for days. We would hear them, but they didn't let us go get them. They attacked them with chemical gas, killed them. [...] We collected body parts. They dismembered them. We collected hands, heads, breasts from the dumpsters. They didn't let us take the remains of our children.¹⁰²

Proliferation and dissemination of death publicly as shown in the cases so far sets the atmosphere in the zones of exception where the modern power and the Sovereign power converge. In other words, the body of homo sacer becomes the site where biopolitics and necropolitics violently collapse into each other enabling the state to reclaim its power to kill first and spectacularize the death.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin cites Marinetti's manifesto, which says:

War is beautiful because it establishes human domination over the subjugated machinery, thanks to the gas masks, the terror-producing megaphones, the flame-throwers, the small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it fuses gun-fire, cannonades, cease-fires, the scents and stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates the new architectural form of big tanks, geometrical flight formations, smoke spirals from burning villages.¹⁰³

Aestheticization of politics/war, which is "managed" by fascism for Benjamin, is a useful notion that explains why the Turkish nation state and the national body experience the destruction of the Kurdish nation and Kurdish body as an aesthetic enjoyment. The following photo is just an example of this enjoyment.

¹⁰¹ Amed's city walls are castle-like buildings with dungeons where political prisoners are kept.

¹⁰² Mother Akrime, oral interview with author, November 2019.

¹⁰³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 41.



Image 2: Turkish soldiers posing in shattered basement.¹⁰⁴

In January 2016, twenty-seven Kurds got stuck in a basement of a house trying to escape the constant gunfire and bombings by the Turkish army, and seven of them starved to death when the army did not let them out or let anybody in. In the photo two Turkish soldiers are holding a Turkish flag in front of graffiti which reads “Love is made in the basement, darling,” referring to the killings in the basement. One of the soldiers even made a video at this spot and proposed to his girlfriend. The fascist aesthetics of warfare blends into the toxic heteronormative masculinity of national identity. Turkish army notoriously records the torture, beheading and mutilation of Kurdish guerilla bodies and distributes it on social media. The most recent example of this is a photo of a Turkish soldier in a deserted bedroom of a Kurdish family in Hakkari, Yuksekova (a city known for its politicized Kurdish population), who were either killed or had to flee their home due to constant raids. He is posing in front of the mirror of the dresser with “Love is made in Yuksekova, my love,” written on the mirror with a red lipstick. The display of the naked bodies of female guerillas surrounded by Turkish soldiers making rape jokes were also commonly recorded and circulated in social media.

¹⁰⁴ “Amedspor Taraftarını Kızdıran Pankart,” https://www.yeniasya.com.tr/spor/amedspor-taraftarini-kizdiran-pankart_385438.

Aestheticization of death has been a widely used necropolitical tool in the Turkification process of the country since the last two decades of the Ottoman Empire. The following is the headline from Cumhuriyet newspaper, the mouthpiece of the Republic, regarding the Zilan massacre in 1930:

The villages on the hills of Mount Ararat who were sheltering guerillas have been burned to the ground and the villagers were relocated to Ercis. The number of guerillas destroyed in Operation Zilan is over fifteen thousand. It was a spectacular war. River Zilan was filled with corpses piled up on top of each other.¹⁰⁵

The images that documented this “spectacular” war where “the Zilan River ran red” show how Kurdish death is (re)produced and circulated for national consumption for pleasure. In the disturbing pictures below from the Republic archives appears a pile of bodies; on top of the pile is the body of a pregnant woman with her belly cut open and her unborn baby placed on top of her.



Image 3: Slain Kurdish woman and unborn child amid heap of bodies.¹⁰⁶

This image accompanied by the witness statements of the soldiers who participated in the massacre reveals Turkish State’s century long construction of the Kurdish reproductive body as a site of terrorist making. The following is an extract from a witness statement of a soldier who witnessed the moment captured in the above picture:

¹⁰⁵ Halkların Demokratik Kongresi. “Zilan Katliamı’nı unutmadık!,” <https://www.halklarindemokratikkongresi.net/zilan-katliamini-unutmadik/1739>.

¹⁰⁶ “Bebeklerin Anne Karnında Öldürüldüğü Vahşetin Adı: Zilan Deresi Katliamı,” July 13, 2021. <https://hakpar.org.tr/2021/07/13/8893/bebeklerin-anne-karninda-olduruldugu-vahsetin-adi-zilan-deresi-katliami/>.

The commanding officer yelled: “I want a volunteer to cut this woman open and take her bastard out”. Soldiers remained silent. He then added that the one who does it will be awarded 40 days of success leave. A soldier stepped up and slit her belly open with a bayonet. The poor woman died immediately. The baby was still alive. The commanding officer asked “Is the bastard a boy or a girl?”. Soldier answered: “A boy”. The commanding officer “I sensed it was a boy” and then ordered the soldier to kill the baby.”¹⁰⁷

This extract illustrates more than the state’s treatment of Kurdish reproductive body as a site where Kurdishness is produced not only as a body but also as a culture. It also demonstrates the interest of the state in the sex of the Kurdish baby. There is no way of knowing for sure from the above extract whether the commanding officer would have let the baby live if it was a girl, but the fact that he asked about the sex of the baby is historically significant. As evidenced in the archives, Turkish nation state took great interest in the figure of the Kurdish girl in the early years of the Republic as a medium of Kurds’ assimilation into Turkishness. Kurdish girls were seen as potential sites where Turkification could happen once their Kurdishness was exorcised through penetration by a Turkish penis. This strategy is seen in the methods of assimilation used by the Ministry of Education, which established boarding schools for Kurdish girls in Turkish cities to be taught the Turkish culture and mated with Turkish boys, to then in return produce Turkish citizen subjects. The Kurdish reproductive body was being reverse engineered by the state as a national body where Turkishness is manufactured out of a terrorist body through national penetration. The state attempted to reconstruct Kurdish girls as nests for Turkish nation building and the Turkish penis as the reservoir of Turkishness. The Dersim Massacre in 1938 constitutes an example where Kurdish girls’ lives were spared during the massacre only to be kidnapped (“adopted” in official documents) by high rank soldiers to be taken to Turkish cities and raised into Turkish women. The documentary “The Lost Girls of Dersim” tells the story of the struggle of Kurdish women who

¹⁰⁷ “Cumhuriyet dönemi barbarlığından bir kesit - Zilan katliamı.” Batman Gündem, July 15, 2021. <https://www.batmangundem.com/cumhuriyet-donemi-barbarligindan-bir-kesit-zilan-%20katliami/11246/>.

were taken away from their families during the Dersim massacre to find whoever was left from their real families. I will elaborate further on the necropolitical and biopolitical practices of the state exercised on Kurdish reproductive body in Chapter 3.

Fifteen thousand Kurds, according to the official records, and fifty thousand according to local sources, were executed in the Zilan Massacre on July 13th, 1930 by the state in response to the alleged rebellions for independence that took place in the region. The newspapers at the time labelled the victims as guerillas with separatist agendas when, in reality, they were civilians and over five thousand of them were women, children and elderly. The celebratory narration of the massacre as a “spectacular” war and portrayal of a genocide attempt as a “war of independence” reveals the state discourse that marks Kurdish body as “bare life,” who could be killed with impunity and the conditions that surround their death as legitimate wartime practices.¹⁰⁸ Agamben’s examination of homo sacer offers a powerful rubric to understand the biopolitical terms through which Kurdish people are constructed as bodies of exception, whose death made possible, on one hand, through its exclusion from the judicial system and, on the other hand, its violent inclusion into the Sovereign governmentality and its violent regimes of visibility. As Agamben states “[A]t once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested.”¹⁰⁹ The Zilan massacre showed us that Kurdish death is not only unpunishable but celebrated as well. The following image from the Official Gazette, dated 7/20/1931, reveals the official confirmation of the state’s impunity regarding the massacre.

¹⁰⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9.



Image 4: Law passed on the anniversary of the Zilan massacre¹¹⁰

A new law was introduced by the government regarding the Zilan events on the anniversary of the massacre. The title of this law is “Law regarding that any deed done in a rebellion region shall not be considered criminal.” The first three items read:

Item 1: During the uprising in Erciş, Zilan, Ağrı mountain regions and following that due to the tracking and punishment operations in the jurisdiction of First Public Controller and in Erzincan’s Pülümür town, from 20 June 1930 to 1 December 1930, any individual or group actions of the military forces, government employees, and anyone who acts with or for them, including watchmen, paramilitary [korucular], and regular citizens, related to getting rid of the uprising and events associated with it are not criminal.

Item 2: This law is in effect on the day of its publishing.

Item 3: The representatives of judiciary and internal matters are charged with the implementation of this law.¹¹¹

Law no. 1850 is one of the laws from the early Republican period that constituted the origin of Emergency Decree Laws of 1990s and today, which once again legitimize Kurdish death and

¹¹⁰ “İşte Atatürk’ün isyancılara karşı çıkardığı düzenlemenin belgesi,” December 26, 2017.

<https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2017/12/26/iste-ataturkun-isyancilara-karsi-cikardigi-duzenlemenin-belgesi>.

¹¹¹ Ibid. Author’s translation.

reestablish the “homo sacer” status of the Kurds. The Emergency Decree Laws that have been issued since the 2015 general elections also reconsolidated the homo sacer status of Kurds. The cases I will be discussing in the next section were results of the Emergency Decree Laws that blurred the distinction between private and public by collapsing the living and the dead into each other. The following section examines the second aspect of necropolitics I will be tackling: the coexistence of the living and the dead and the subaltern temporality it creates.

When Death Never Leaves: Necrohabitats and Necropathy:

Public display of the dead as a necropolitical practice usually falls within the realm of Sovereign power. It has been studied relatively extensively in Western academia in the last two decades after social media and online broadcasting platforms began to be widely used to globally display violent executions and beheadings by ISIS militia. The following section of the chapter turns to an understudied realm of necropolitics, the private.

The public/private dichotomy is one of the most significant constructs of capitalist patriarchy that feminist theory has been trying to break down since the 1960s. Attempts to politicize the home have taken many forms and created various feminist agendas ranging from vilification of marriage and family to drawing attention to domestic violence as a political matter and from women’s integration into workforce and equal pay to claiming reproductive rights. All these narratives emerged from a white, middle-class feminist movement as a critique of the Victorian ideals which constructed the home as an apolitical, feminine space, free of conflicts and managed by a chaste Christian angel. What this movement failed to acknowledge was that Victorian ideals of gender did not apply to non-white, working class communities and therefore women of color were illegible and irrelevant under this rubric, let alone benefiting from its

accomplishments. The epistemological whitewashing of home brings with it an inability to recognize alternative formations of home, family, and kinship which have existed in indigenous societies, communities of color, and queer communities for centuries. Women of color feminism and queer of color critique came along as an intervention to this heteronormativity and color blindness prevalent in white feminism. Home has been reclaimed as a site of counter knowledge production and cross-generational dissemination of it.

As Angela Davis argues, “Of necessity, [this] slave community would revolve around the realm which was further most removed from the immediate arena of domination. It could only be located in and around the living quarters, the area where the basic needs of physical life were met.”¹¹² Embracing the domestic as a site of healing and connection is a common theme in Black feminism. In “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” bell hooks presents home as a refuge, a safe place where wounds of racial discrimination are healed and where the marginalized can affirm each other. Home, in her formulation, figures as a source of an alternative social reproduction, one that reproduces a collective identity, a history of the subjugated, a counterculture.¹¹³ Since slavery, home has been a space where re-humanization happens for Black people. Angela Davis argues that the domestic space was where enslaved people retrieved their humanity. She says: “We can assume that in a very real material sense, it was only in domestic life – away from the eyes and whip of the overseer – that the slaves could attempt to assert the modicum of freedom they still retained.”¹¹⁴ This account is a critical intervention by Black feminists into epistemological whitewashing of home by white feminists as a site of patriarchal oppression. This whitewashing brings with it an inability to recognize alternative formations of home, family and kinship relations

¹¹² Angela Davis, *Women, race and class* (London, The Women's Press, 1981), 86.

¹¹³ bell hooks, “Homeplace (a site of resistance).” *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, ed. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 383.

¹¹⁴ Davis, *Women, race and class*, 86.

which have existed in indigenous societies, communities of color and queer communities for centuries. However, while refusing the public/private dichotomy in terms of sexual division of labor, Black feminists still assume a spatial distinction between the two spheres. For Black feminists, labor exploitation, poverty, and sexism continue at home, but racism does not. Home is a space of racial healing.

The Kurdish home stands out as a counterexample to this western home constructed as a space free of political/racial conflict. The Kurdish home has always been haunted by either material or imaginary death. Mass destruction of Kurdish villages, destruction of agricultural lands and livestock, mass deportations, dismantling of families, and infrastructural racism have been the primary practices of the Turkish nation state to assimilate Kurdish population. The Kurdish home has only temporary materiality, because Kurds have had to watch their homes destroyed over and over again, building new ones only to see them also destroyed. In this sense, unlike the home of the Black community, Kurdish home cannot be seen as a refuge from racial violence, because the state specifically targets homes to discipline and even eradicate the Kurdish population. The precarity of home and the bodies attached to that home inevitably marks the Kurdish home as a space of conflict and political contestation. In other words, the Kurdish home is not “away from the eyes and whip of the overseer” but is the spot where the overseer’s gaze is fixated.¹¹⁵ This section interrogates the politics and practices of mothering under a system of racialization which *literally* explodes the distinction between the public and private through constant attacks on Kurdish homes. The constant state of exception or racial caesura placed on the Kurdish people turns their homes into a war zone.

¹¹⁵ Davis, *Women, race and class*, 87.

The destruction of Kurdish homes and the killing of Kurdish people happened so many times that the theme came up in the interviews repeatedly almost as a mundane backdrop of the stories of forced migration. I have yet to meet a Kurdish person during my field work both in Istanbul and Diyarbakir who has not lost their house at least once to state racism.

Mother Akrime: I was born in Lice, Diyarbakir. Between 1987 and 1993, we had to constantly run away from the enemy. Because of the system, we had to leave our dough in the basin, our ayran (a drink made with yoghurt mixed with water and salt) in the churn (ayran is made in a wooden churn) and our milk boiling on the stove and flee.¹¹⁶

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the destruction of Kurdish villages and forced migration as a strategy to Turkify the Kurdish region of Turkey peaked in the 1990s, but this tactic dates back to the 1910s. Between 1915 and 1916, 1.2 million Armenians were expelled from their land with only hours of notice and either died of exposure or were executed on the road. Again, in 1913-1914, approximately 1.5 million Ottoman Greeks were forcibly sent to Greece after thousands were executed and Christian Greek villages were burned down in the Aegean Region of Turkey. The following photo was taken in the aftermath of an attack on a house in Sur, Diyarbakir on January 3rd 2016, which killed a Kurdish mother eating breakfast with her children.



Image 5: Scene of destruction in Kurdish home¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Mother Akrime, oral interview, November 2019. By “system,” Mother Akrime means the state. It was a term shared and used by everyone I interviewed.

¹¹⁷ “Üşümek için battaniyeye sarılan kadın evinde mermiyle öldü,” <https://www.odatv4.com/guncel/usumemek-icin-battaniyeye-sarilan-kadin-roket-mermisiyle-oldu-0301161200-87380>.

In this chapter I argue that by looking at the sites that have traditionally been treated and studied as sites of biopolitical power where life is made, we can see how deeply necropolitical power seeps into the private sphere, creating an intimate temporality where the linear flow of the capitalist homogenous time is broken. This temporality, which I call *subaltern time*, emerges out of the racialized maternal grief of Kurdish reproductive body. In Chapter 3, I examine the ways in which Kurdish women operate in this subaltern time to produce bodies and spaces of violent insurgency. In order to properly understand how this insurgency works, I present in this chapter interview extracts, images and archival documents to investigate in this chapter the necropolitical practices of the Turkish State that are responsible for the creation of subaltern temporality and an alternative form of mothering which I call *necropathy*.

Benjamin offers a critique of historicism through a redemptive historical approach. For him, modernity replaced messianic time which operates on the redemption rhetoric with a homogeneous empty time organized by capitalism which sees history as a continuum flowing into an inevitable progress. Walter Benjamin refers to a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus* in his essay “On the Concept of History” to explain what the historical materialism he is calling for looks like. He interprets the image in the painting as the angel of history whose “face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe.”¹¹⁸ The angel has the capacity to see the past as destruction and he has the desire to rehabilitate it, however a storm of progress is blowing from Paradise and he is irresistibly being dragged into the future. For Benjamin, the past is a catastrophe and the futurity as progress is both the reason for this catastrophe and the obstacle before the redemption. The possibility of redemption does not rest in a dream of a better future, but it is predicated on an active engagement with the memory of the

¹¹⁸ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

past through the act of remembering by the oppressed. While this allegory of Benjamin's is useful in understanding the relationship of the oppressed to the past, the alternative approach to history he presents fails to comprehend how past works for the ones who are constantly being subject to the violence of modernity. For Benjamin, "the true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again" so "articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was." It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.¹¹⁹ Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger."¹²⁰ I think this formulation is problematic because it fails to attend to what I would call subaltern temporality, in which the distinction between the past and the present blurs, they coexist. Subaltern death is at the center of this coexistence and it pushes me to ask: what if we treat the past not as a temporary rupture in the homogeneous time but as a permanent component of the eternal temporality?

The following cases illustrate the ways in which state racism creates violent regimes of cohabitation of the dead and the living and how this intimate relationship between the past and the present challenges the homogenous time of Capital and restructures family and mothering.



Image 6: Muharrem's father setting out with his son's body.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 391.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 392.

¹²¹ Meri Tek Demir, "2014: Not 'a Great Year' | Agos," Agos, December 27, 2014, <https://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/10084/2014-not-a-great-year>.

In winter 2014, in a small village of Kurdistan, two-year-old Muharrem got sick in the afternoon. He ran a fever and was coughing badly. The village they lived in was completely cut off from the city center due to the snow. His family called the hospital and asked for help, which never came. Shortly afterwards, the boy died, and his family, a family of seven, waited there with Muharrem's dead body until morning. The next day, they waited for the "devlet" (the state) to come, but nobody did. The father was left with no other choice but to walk for four hours through the snow carrying the boy's body in a sack on his back to the nearest town. This incident dramatically exposed infrastructural state racism against Kurdish population. Kurdistan is the region with the harshest weather conditions, the least fertile land for agriculture, and the fewest job opportunities in Turkey. It has been under the economic embargo of the state for almost a hundred years. Public services of any sort are extremely limited and private investment is discouraged due to the constant chaos created in the region. In the Introduction, I talked about economic subjugation as a form of internal colonization. Muharrem's case is only one of the consequences of state racism against Kurds in modern Turkish history. Kurdish villages are often cut off from the rest of the country for the whole winter. Snow blocks the roads for months and stay blocked the whole time due to intentional negligence of the state. There is no electricity, no health services, no educational services. Infrastructural racism not only killed Muharrem, it left his death pending at home. Muharrem's village is an example of a "non-violent" "state of exception," or a state of "non-emergency" would be more accurate. It is a biopolitical site where the state exercises its right to "let-die." Letting Muharrem die is an obvious manifestation of the kind of state racism we have globally witnessed countless times before. States have killed, and continue killing, the people they racialize with impunity. What I am more interested in is what happens in the peripheries of the death: the temporal and spatial rearrangement of grief. The following

examples of coerced coexistence of the living and the dead are sites of necropolitics, violent exclusion from the homogeneous temporality and militarized racial “caesura” in Foucault’s words.¹²²

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, after the unprecedented victory of the Kurdish HDP party in the general elections in 2015, the Turkish government resumed its genocidal practices in the Kurdish region. After August 16th, the authorities declared thirty-two curfews in eight Kurdish districts. Cizre was the most destroyed city in the region and remained under siege for seventy-nine days. During this period, which evoked memories of the genocide attempts of Turkish nation state under the Kemalist regime against Kurdish population in 1990s, the boundaries between the dead and the living were exploded. The “Cizre basement massacre” stands out as one of the most striking examples of this cohabitation of the dead and the living. People who were running from the attacks by Turkish armed forces took shelter in three basements in Cizre. These basements were raided by Turkish soldiers, who attacked the refugees. Ambulances and paramedics were banned from tending to the injured, and a hundred seventy-six people died in these basements. The dead, the injured, and the healthy stayed there, side by side for days. “During the Cizre siege, 251 people, including 176 who died in the basements of horror, were slaughtered mercilessly. Some of these people were killed in the middle of the street, others in the living rooms or the kitchens of their own houses.”¹²³ This “state of exception” or “racial caesura” turned home into a war zone, a zone of conflict. Dead bodies literally became a part of the household, kept being family members,

¹²² Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 254-255.

¹²³ Halkların Demokratik Partisi, “Mazlumder Conflict Investigation And Resolution Group Curfew Imposed On Cizre Town Of Şirnak Province Investigation And Monitoring Report Covering December 14, 2015 – March 2, 2016,” (The People’s Democratic Party (HDP), 2016).
<https://hdp.org.tr/Images/UserFiles/Documents/Editor/MazlumDerCizreReport.pdf>.

for days. This violent reorganization of time and space by the state inevitably generated an alternative formation of grief which is inextricably attached to Kurdish motherhood.

Mother Emine is only one of the mothers who lost their kids during the Cizre siege. Her ten-year-old daughter, Cemile, was shot while she was playing in their garden. Because of the curfew and constant gunfire on the streets, the family could not bury her. Her death could not be “officialized” for days. Mother Emine had to keep Cemile’s body in the freezer for seven days (Image 7). The whole family lived with Cemile’s dead body. This cohabitation of the dead and the living transforms the ways in which memory and grief works for good.



Image 7: Cemile’s body¹²⁴

Just like the mothers in Amed who would hear the groans of their dying children from the dungeons of the city walls, Mother Emine lives with the specter of her daughter’s death in her kitchen: “We have kids who we keep in the fridge, who died in our basements. [...] What are we

¹²⁴ “15 yıl önce buzdolabında öldürülmüş çocuk saklamıyorduk Erdoğan! - Tr724.” Tr724, June 23, 2018. <https://www.tr724.com/15-yil-once-buzdolabinda-oldurulmus-cocuk-saklamiyorduk-erdogan/>.

supposed to forget, huh? Our basements, which became our kids' graves? I open the door of the freezer 20 times a day, I see her body every time."¹²⁵

Mother Taybet's son, Mehmet, describes what it is like to be stuck in the time lag where life and death spills into each other:

Mehmet: Every time we open the front door to go out, I see the spot where my mom was murdered. Whoever visits us first stops at that spot for a few minutes, just stands there before coming inside. I cannot help but stand at that spot for a while before walking past it. There is war and conflict everywhere in the world but nowhere else would a body lie on the street for seven days and nights. No one can explain that to me. No one.¹²⁶

Like Mother Emine, who sees her daughter's dead body every time she opens the freezer, Mehmet is stuck in the necrohabitat where his mother's body never leaves, becoming a lost subject that resurfaces every now and then.

Mehmet: They turned us into the living dead. Everything changed fundamentally for us after that day. I will never leave this street, this neighborhood, this city. Ever. My mom's memory lives here. We will continue living here no matter what. We never go to sleep without looking at that spot and it is the first thing we do when we wake up in the morning. How on earth can we leave?¹²⁷

The insistence on not leaving the necrohabitats and not getting rid of the reminders of the loss such as the freezer reveals that the act of remembering is a deliberate one. Necrohabitats might have been created by state violence but their preservation, which informs the operation of racialized grief, is a transformative act that turns necrohabitats into sites of insurgency.

I coined the term "necropathy" to mean "feeling the dead." The "feeling" part in necropathy goes beyond grieving the death of a person with a deep sense of melancholia. State violence makes Kurdish mothers physically *feel* the dead bodies of their children for extended periods of time. The

¹²⁵ Dicle Muftuoglu and, Fendik Zozan, "Cemile Çağırğa'nın annesi: Nasıl 'evet' diyelim?" trans. Mediha Sorma, *Evrensel*, April 07, 2017. <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/315142/cemile-cagirganin-annesi-nasil-evet-diyelim>.

¹²⁶ Hacı Biskin, "Taybet İnan'ın oğlu Mehmet İnan: Kapımız annemizin vurulduğu yere açılıyor," trans. Mediha Sorma, *Gazete Duvar*, December 12, 2022. <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2017/12/22/taybet-inanin-oglu-mehmet-inan-kapimiz-annemizin-vuruldugu-yere-aciliyor>.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

violent intimacies established between dead/dying children and their mothers have been a part of Kurdish history and collective Kurdish memory for decades. A lot of the mothers I interviewed in Istanbul and Amed referred to certain images embedded in this collective memory and constantly reproduced in the present through racialized maternal grief. The image of Ceylan Önkol, a 14-year-old shepherd girl who killed grazing her animals (Image 8), is one of them. The officials claimed she stepped on a land mine, but her family and local NGOs believe that she was hit by a mortar round fired from a military base. Upon her death, Ceylan immediately gained historical significance due to the fact that it powerfully lays bare the violent intimacy forcibly created by state violence between Kurdish mothers and their dead children. Ceylan's is a case where both aspects of necropolitics I have discussed so far converged. Her dismembered body was placed in the front yard of the gendarmerie (rural police force) station, not covered, displayed publicly (spectacularized) and her family members were questioned right by her body parts for 4 hours. After the questioning, Ceylan's mother, Saliha Önkol picked up the pieces of Ceylan's body, put them in her skirt and carried her home. The following image is one of the renditions of the incident created by a local artist.



Image 8: Artist's rendition of Ceylan's mother bringing her body home.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ "Serpil Odabaşı: Ben artık 'bu bizim acılarımız'ı gösteren ressam değilim." Adil Medya, February 11, 2020. <https://www.adilmedya.com/serpil-odabasi-ben-artik-bu-bizim-acilarimizi-gosteren-ressam-degilim/>.

The violent reorganization of time and space was a recurring theme in the interviews I conducted. The narrations of first-hand experience of caring for the dead from Kurdish mothers I talked to blended with shared memories from the larger Kurdish imaginary, such as Ceylan's dismembered body, Mother Taybet rotting on the street or the Turkish soldier posing for the camera with his machine gun in a displaced Kurdish couple's bedroom. The state turns spaces of care and intimacy, as well as the reproductive body, into sites of necropolitical power. The militarization of the private sphere and reproductive body reorganizes Kurdish mothering from being an affective practice into an act of militancy. The following extract is from an interview with a Peace Mother I talked to in Amed:

There were three brothers in our village. Their mother was disabled. When the soldiers raided their village, they hid under the skirt of their mother. Their mother said: "They took my two kids from me; they dragged my kids in mud. They had them lie on their face and raked them. In front of my eyes... I realized two of my sons were dead but the bullets missed the other one. I immediately got some blood from my dead sons to rub it onto my alive son to make them think he was killed, too. If they knew he was alive, they would kill him, too. Can you imagine rubbing your dead sons' blood onto your alive son's body to make sure he survives?"¹²⁹

In this case, necropolitical intimacy goes three ways. The mother *feels* the dead bodies of her two sons: she grabs their blood and rubs it onto her other son, who was still alive. She extends death onto a living body to make that body live. She not only had to watch her sons get killed but she also had to immediately navigate their death in a productive way to save her other son. She used her "power over death" (necropolitics) to "make (her son) live" (biopolitics) complicating the established distinction between them. As evidenced in the case above, necropolitics and biopolitics collapse into each other not only as technologies of governmentality used by the state but also as strategies of survival and resistance used by the racialized subjects. Claiming death temporarily to survive genocide has been embraced as a survival strategy by Kurds and other ethnic and religious

¹²⁹ Peace Mother, oral interview with author, November 2019.

minorities in Turkey for over a hundred years now. There are witness statements from the survivors of the Dersim Massacre, Armenian Genocide, and Zilan Massacre that they had to pretend to be dead, in some cases for days, in a pile of dead bodies, most of whom belonged to their loved ones. These experiences of coerced adjacency of the living with the dead are now part of the intergenerational collective Kurdish memory. Racialized grief is at the center of this memory and due to the radical and violent reorganization of death into an active/living part of the present, remembering operates in a temporality where there is no “aftermath” of death. Death is always already in the present, either literally or figuratively, leaving no distance, spatial or temporal, between the dead and the living for the latter to mourn the former. Just like the intimate operation of the private sphere is violently interfered with state terrorism, Kurdish memory becomes a conflict zone and remembering becomes a militant act. As Douglas Crimp states in his article “Mourning and Militancy,” when the grief is interfered with, “mourning becomes militancy.”¹³⁰

The Kurdish mode of remembering is inevitably a politics of pain, and it speaks from subaltern grief, which defies the norms of the time of the Capital. Kurdish maternal grief creates temporal and spatial zones outside the capital “by insisting that emotional attachment had its own pace—a slower and essentially nonlinear relation to the value of human existence that defended it against the increasingly rapid pace of progress by providing avenues of return to the sacred truths that both preceded and exceeded history as such.”¹³¹ Dana Luciano suggests that grief generates an alternative temporality when she says, “the conceptualization of human time according to the foundational truth of emotional attachment alters the body’s status as a timepiece, rendering it the measure less of mortality than of memory.”¹³² This affective time disrupts the vision constructed

¹³⁰ Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” *October*, no. 51 (1989): 7.

¹³¹ Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 2.

¹³² *Ibid.*

by “the radical reorganization that we understand as the advent of modernity” which sees time as “linear, ordered, progressive, and teleological.”¹³³ Luciano centralizes the “feeling body” whose grief operates on “a sensibility that sought to provide time with a “human” dimension, one that would be collective rather than productive, repetitive rather than linear, reflective rather than forward-moving.”¹³⁴

The following is an excerpt from the Cizre report by HDP (People’s Democratic Party) which demonstrates how grief becomes a powerful source of collective memory in response to the continuous attempts of the state to “efface this memory” and “destroy the truth.”

The committed massacres and the basements of horror will remain imprinted in the collective memory of the people of Cizre. So much so that, when the siege was lifted, people visited the basements before checking upon their houses to commit the sight to their memories and never forget what happened. Against the state’s policy of effacing this memory and destroying the truth, the people of Cizre have been resisting to preserve their memory. As a symbol of this memory, people of Cizre have been demanding to turn the basements of horror into sites of memory with the aim of preventing new massacres from happening and seeking justice for the committed massacres.¹³⁵

Kurdish people relate with/are exposed to death in such intimate ways that the modes of grief and mothering practices they create are not readily recognizable within the temporality of capitalist modernity. Since Kurdish death does not operate on a linear, progressive time and since “death is intrinsic to life” as the opening quotation suggests, “the image of the past” does not “unexpectedly appear to the historical subject in a moment of danger” for the Kurdish people.¹³⁶ Danger is not instantaneous but a permanent and indispensable component of the subaltern everyday life. The following and last subsection of this chapter makes a seemingly contradictory argument about Kurdish death. After discussing the violent regimes of visibility that turn death

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 6.

¹³⁵ HDP Cizre Raporu, (HDP 2016, 242) https://drive.google.com/file/d/11MZFG1fxeIAa_rqoGaWGqRBXOfEs9s-N/view

¹³⁶ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

into a spectacle, the following section talks about how death is made invisible and bodies are made anonymous as opposed to Ceylan in her mother's skirt or Cemile in her mother's freezer. I do not believe, however, that we should reduce visibility to something that is visible to the physical eye. As I argued earlier in this chapter, necrography constitutes and is constituted by a collective racialized memory. Kurdish memory is freighted with so many strikingly similar stories of violence that has been repeated on millions of bodies over a hundred years that it is impossible to make any death "invisible." When Ceren, the daughter of one of the Peace mothers, helped me translate an interview in Kurdish, she had to read about an experience of a mother who she did not know personally, whose daughter was tortured by the police. Ceren's own sister has been in prison since she attempted to join PKK at the age of 14. The sister never talks about what happened to her when she "disappeared" in police custody for months. Ceren's response when she finished the translation was: "So that's what happened to my sister." In the following section, I argue that the physical invisibility of death and violence does not necessarily erase the memory of the dead because the dead are replicated and proliferated in the collective Kurdish memory through necrography.

Forced Disappearances: "Invisible" Death and the Hidden Sites of Necropolitics

Enforced disappearances and "murders by unknown actors" is the last necropolitical site I will be examining in this chapter; the third site where Kurdish maternal grief emerges. As discussed earlier in the chapter, violent regimes of visibility lead to the spectacularization of Kurdish death, coerce the adjacency of the dead and the living, and produce and reproduce corporal subjects of necrography in the collective Kurdish imaginary. The names and stories of the hyper-visible and "overqualified" dead Kurdish bodies are repeated and remembered collectively. The violent regimes of invisibility as seen in enforced disappearances, mass graves and prohibition of

Kurdish funerals, on the other hand, produce noncorporeal subjects of necropathy. In other words, necropathy operates beyond the corporal configuration of the five senses and undermines the core objective of the enforced disappearances: erasure.

In her article “Sovereignty as Erasure” Banu Bargu critiques Foucault for being “too hasty to relegate Sovereignty to a shadow play,” where corporal punishment gets “enveloped, increasingly, by the non- corporeal nature of the penal system.”¹³⁷ Foucault argues that “the old power of death that symbolized Sovereign power . . . now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life.”¹³⁸ One of the consequences of the development of bio-power is that the significance attached to the action of the norm has grown “at the expense of the juridical system of law.”¹³⁹ Foucault cautions us, however, that the Sovereign power to kill has not vanished. He states that the law has to be armed and “its arm, par excellence, is death; to those who transgress it, it replies, at least as a last resort, with that absolute menace.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, he acknowledges that law did not fade into the background and the institutions of justice did not disappear. Bargu’s critique of Foucault (that he relegated Sovereignty to a shadow play) then has to be problematized. The critique here ought to be directed towards the geographical and temporal constraints of Foucault’s work, which he acknowledges multiple times in his writing. The problem, which is a recurring challenge for scholars from the Global South like Bargu and myself, is that we are trying to apply a theory emerged from the Global North for the Global north based on the historical developments that happened in the Global North to our scholarship that is concerned with a very specific context in the Global South. The institutions of modern power that Foucault discusses in his work have never been fully established in our context.

¹³⁷ Bargu, “Another Necropolitics,” 49. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 16.

¹³⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 144.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 144.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

The theoretical impasse we so often find ourselves at results from an unquestioned assumption that histories of the places that are at the top of geographical hierarchy can inform the knowledge production about the ones at the bottom. Scholarship that emerges from the contexts such as mine has the potential to expose the contradictions of modern statecraft particularly because they are currently and actively witnessing the seemingly conflicting convergence of Sovereign and modern power that institutions of the knowledge production of the Global North are trying to reconcile.

The analysis of the enforced disappearances in Turkey offers a powerful rubric to complicate the dominant narratives regarding political dissidence and state of exception. As Bargu aptly argues, echoing Agamben, “the state of exception should be understood not as simply an aberration and abuse of Sovereign power but rather as a constitutive and structural feature of modern state Sovereignty.”¹⁴¹ A lot of the scholarship on enforced disappearances in Turkey tends to limit the term to the kidnapping, torture and killing of political dissidents during three consecutive military coups in 1960, 1970 and 1980. This limitation leads to an understanding of enforced disappearances as exceptional phenomena that happen in states of exception or under state of emergency regimes when “emergency legislation is utilized to suspend constitutional protections or the rule of law is temporarily or altogether abrogated while Sovereign violence is unleashed in the service of securing the existing order or pursuing related security objectives.”¹⁴² As evidenced in the archive, from the last years of the Ottoman Empire in the 1910s until today, enforced disappearances has been one of the tactics of population management of the state to destabilize homogenously non-Turkish regions through Turkification efforts. To be more specific, the origin of enforced disappearances can be traced back to the Armenian Genocide in the early

¹⁴¹ Banu Bargu, “Sovereignty as Erasure: Rethinking Enforced Disappearances,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 23, no. 1 (2014), 42.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

20th century. April 24, 1915, marks the day when the Armenian Genocide started. 262 Armenian intellectuals, politicians and notables who were living in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire at the time, were taken into custody. There is still no record of what happened to most of them. The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the immediate aftermath was characterized by Turkification efforts of the state to create an ethnically homogenous country. Enforced disappearance was one of the tactics used by the state towards that goal. According to “A Comparative Analysis of Enforced Disappearances and the Missing in MENA and Caucasus” by Ozgur Sevgi Goral, published by the Truth Justice Memory Center of Turkey, enforced disappearance has become increasingly more systematic since the September 12, 1980 coup d’état. It would not be an overstatement to say that the 1980 coup is the most significant political event since the establishment of the Republic. The 1960 coup led to the execution of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Fatin Rüştü Zorlu, and Minister of Finance Hasan Polatkan. However, the impact of the 1980 military coup on the political climate of Turkey was considerably bigger. Following the 1980 coup:

The Grand National Assembly of Turkey was closed down; the constitution was abolished; political parties, trade unions and several other institutions were closed down and their properties were confiscated; 650,000 people were detained; 230,000 people were tried; 517 people were sentenced to the death penalty, 50 of these sentences were executed; 14,000 people were deprived of citizenship rights; 171 people were documented to have been killed by torture, and a total of 299 people died in prisons.¹⁴³

The 1980 coup was also the foundation of a police state, the hyper-militarization of Kurdish regions, and the consolidation of Turkish nationalism as the organizing principle of the state. It also marks the beginning of implementation of enforced disappearances by the state as a disciplinary mechanism in a more systematic fashion. Leftist students, unionized workers,

¹⁴³ Özgür Sevgi Göral, “Turkey - A Comparative Analysis of Enforced Disappearances and the Missing in Middle East, North Africa and Caucasus,” December 12, 2018.
<https://enforceddisappearances.dealingwiththepast.org/turkey/>.

oppositional journalists, trade unionists, and militants of the radical/armed leftist movements were many of the dissidents who were forcibly disappeared by the military and paramilitary forces of the state. The strategies used by the state in response to isolated incidents or states of exception until the military coups became fully integrated into the arsenal of intimidation tactics of the state and institutionalized as tools of “invisible punishment.”¹⁴⁴ These tactics include: “stop and search, beatings, arbitrary and indefinite, detainment, torture under custody, sham trials, systematic deprivations (of food, drinking water, housing, health care), house demolitions, forced displacement, and extrajudicial executions, among others.”¹⁴⁵ Enforced disappearances can and mostly do occur alongside these other tactics.

Bargu discusses several characteristics of enforced disappearances. According to Bargu, enforced disappearance is “not a simple but an agglutinative human-rights violation; it violates different rights both simultaneously and serially.”¹⁴⁶ Enforced disappearance is also a “concentric human-rights violation” that targets both the disappeared and others connected to them and the public in general. Bargu argues that enforced disappearance as a state tactic “intimidates, demobilizes, depoliticizes, and ultimately reduces individuals to passivity with the threat of disappearance.”¹⁴⁷ Bargu’s analysis aptly explains how enforced disappearances are designed to operate by the state. Unlike Bargu who, drawing from the Kurdish context, examines how enforced disappearances work for the state in a global scale, I choose to turn to the actual cases of forcibly disappeared Kurds to investigate how enforced disappearances work for the racialized subject. Treating enforced disappearances not as individual cases and by historicizing them as part of a circular spectrum of state violence full of repetitions and devoid of resolutions challenges the

¹⁴⁴ Bargu, “Sovereignty as Erasure,” 42.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 41.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 43.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

equation of disappearance with erasure and anonymity becomes a ruse. When we stop framing visibility from the perspective of the state, we realize that death is never invisible and bodies do not really disappear. Necrography is also a theoretical register that refuses the superiority of the eye as the primary site of sense and creates a new regime of recognition and legitimacy that relies on memory. Necrography opens up a realm of resistance (memory) which is beyond the physical reach of both biopolitics and necropolitics because it is outside the corporal limitations of the national body. No individual mother is the epicenter of Kurdish memory. Killing a mother does not kill the memory or the grief that resides in it.

The following lengthy extract demonstrates how state racism is repetitive and has an intergenerational impact. I picked this particular piece because it is the most compact of the strikingly identical stories of forced migration I heard from the Kurdish women I interviewed and it accounts the state racism in a larger time span. It also explains why anonymity of Kurdish death is not possible.

Mother Güler: I would always say I would never leave Diyarbakir not even as a corpse. I am very loyal to the city but the State did not leave us alone. They threatened my son who is disabled. I loved Diyarbakir so much, not just the city center, its villages, its nature, everything. I had to leave for my kids. The city was on fire, you would remember, in 1993. We couldn't take a step without being surveilled. We were being followed, shot, killed. You cannot even stop to look at a dead body. They would kill those who did. We couldn't pick the dead up and claim them. They would kill you for claiming the bodies. [...] Lice, where I am from was particularly bad. They destroyed Lice three times when I was there. They burned it down. [...] They lined up 18 young men at around 20 years old. They got executed by a firing squad. They put the bodies in a container. Why am I telling you this? This happened in thousands of villages of Kurdistan. They put them in a container and dumped them in the mountains and claimed that they killed terrorists. [...] The torture that is forced migration still continues today. Everything I told you about is still happening. Persecution continues, oppression continues, denial continues, execution continues!¹⁴⁸

Mother Güler is only one of the mothers who tells their stories of forced migration or state violence in Kurdistan in the first-person plural. “We were being followed, shot and killed,” she

¹⁴⁸ Mother Güler, oral interview with author, November 2019.

says, like almost everyone else I interviewed. “We have kids we keep in the freezer, who died in our basements,” says Mother Emine, for instance, who had to keep her daughter Cemile in the freezer for days (Image 7). “We collected hands, heads, breasts from the dumpsters,” says Mother Akrim. “So that’s what happened to my sister,” says Ceren, when she heard about the story of another woman’s daughter tortured and killed in in police custody.

After over a hundred years of torture and debasement, the Kurdish dead body loses its significance as a corporal subject but gains significance as part of a larger body that constitutes the source of a collective memory. During field work, I have heard multiple stories from the Peace Mothers of Kurdish bodies eaten by rats and dogs on the streets because the state did not let anyone claim and bury them. I discussed this at length in the section on spectacularization of Kurdish death. The following picture is an example of the extreme dehumanization of Kurdish body. Meryem Sune, mother of seven, was shot in front of her house on September 9th 2015 by an armored vehicle. She was left out on the street internally bleeding until she died. Her family wasn’t allowed to take the body to bury her, and her body had to be kept in the cold storage room of a chicken shop nearby for two days. Kurdish resistance abounds in stories like Meryem’s.



Image 8: Meryem Sune’s body in cold room of a chicken shop¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ “Cizre’de Meryem Süne’nin defnine izin çıkmayınca bedeni 2 gün tavukçunun soğuk hava deposunda bekletilmiş!” T24, September 10, 2015. <https://t24.com.tr/haber/cizrede-meryem-sunenin-defnine-izin-cikmayınca-bedeni-2-gun-tavukcunun-soğuk-hava-deposunda-bekletilmiş,309212>.

The history of Kurdish resistance is fraught with mass graves, unsolved murders and enforced disappearances. The 90s in Kurdistan was an era of “unmarked white Toros Renault cars”; cars that everybody knew led to torture and death. The state of emergency regime that started in 2015 and continues to this day is also defined by unmarked vans and murders of Kurds with impunity. And yet nobody I interviewed, not even little kids, failed to remember the names of the disappeared and their stories from the 90s. Dozens of people from different cities and different generations who have never met in person told the same stories and uttered the same names. Banu Bargu describes enforced disappearances as “a kind of violence that seeks not only to eradicate the person who is the target of enforced disappearance but also to erase the fact that the person ever existed.”¹⁵⁰ She reads the invisible violence that characterizes enforced disappearances as a manifestation of the new modulation of power identified by Foucault. For her, they are a symptom of “the transition from punishment as a corporeal public spectacle to punishment as confinement in a prison, hidden away from sight.”¹⁵¹ The forcibly disappeared Kurdish bodies become integrated into the “invisible penal architecture of the present.”¹⁵² At the end of “Sovereignty as Erasure,” Bargu acknowledges the power of memory against the erasing violence of the state. Referring to Saturday Mothers, Bargu states, “[I]t is through their agency that the disappeared insistently establish their presence and point to the profound impossibility of Sovereignty’s ultimate closure into a totality.”¹⁵³ Through their maternal grief, Saturday Mothers reproduce “a subject who refuses to die, a subject who has been reembodyed and now cannot be killed.”¹⁵⁴ Departing from Bargu’s approach, my research historicizes Kurdish maternal grief by looking at

¹⁵⁰ Bargu, “Sovereignty as Erasure,” 43.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 44.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 66.

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer Schirmer, “The Claiming of Space and the Body Politic within National- Security States: The Plaza de Mayo Madres and the Greenham Common Women,” in *Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 198.

the conditions that created the unique Kurdish memory, which paradoxically centers death and loss as the source of grief while simultaneously *banalizing* torture and death not only for past deaths but also for future ones. I believe this radical embrace of physical death explains what I witnessed in my fieldwork in Amed (Diyabakir). While we were protesting the impeachment of elected Kurdish mayors from the office and their replacement by the government appointed trustees in Diyarbakir, I repeatedly witnessed Peace Mothers getting violently arrested. We did not hear from them for a day or two, and then they showed up with signs of torture on their bodies. The first thing they did upon their release was to rush back to the protests. Almost all of the Peace Mothers I interviewed in Diyarbakir were incarcerated and tortured in police custody multiple times. They watched their sons and daughters get tortured. As Gunes said in the opening quote, “Death is a part of [them]. This is the philosophy.” Death as a non-threatening, mundane part of the Kurdish cultural fabric is also the foundation of the manifestations of violent insurgency such as suicide bombings, self-immolations, death fasts, and guerilla resistance, which I will examine in the following chapters.

After I transcribed the interview data and read them all at once, I faced a troubling contradiction. On one hand, there were the Saturday Mothers, who are a group of mothers that started the peaceful sit-ins in front of Lycée de Galatasaray in 1995 to claim the remains of their family members who were forcibly disappeared under police custody during 1980 military coup. They seek justice for their disappeared family members, asking the perpetrators to be brought to justice, but their primary demand is to bury their loved ones. They even had placards saying, “We want the bones.” Unlike the Saturday Mothers, I never, not even once, heard from a Peace Mother I interviewed or casually talked to ask for the remains of their children, guerilla or civilian, as evidenced in the extracts I presented above. Looking more closely into the literature on Saturday

Mothers and Peace Mothers, I identified a pattern that conflates the two mothers' organizations, using them almost interchangeably. Two studies from 2009 and 2010 contain interviews with Saturday Mothers and Peace Mothers where they emphasize their collaboration over more than a decade. What is interesting is that one of the Peace Mothers interviewed in these studies is a Peace Mother I interviewed in 2019, and it is very clear that there was a shift in the Peace Mothers' political rhetoric after the events that occurred in Turkish Kurdistan in 2015. This is what Mother Nuran says in the 2009 interview with Emine Rezzam Karaman:

Nuran Ana: There are ethical rules in all wars but there's no rule in Kurdistan.... You [the military] kill someone, you cut his/her head, you take off his/her eyes.... You throw these corpses wherever you want.... You're free with your deeds.... You always justify your violations... OK! You kill!! OK! You have made me understand this.... But respect the corpses.... They don't only kill our fighters but they also try to break our motivations... Give us bones!¹⁵⁵

And the following interview extract is the response I got from the same Peace Mother when I asked her what the difference was between them and Saturday Mothers.

Nuran Ana: We are Kurdish Mothers. That is the difference. We want peace. Democracy and peace. If you asked a mother what kind of a world you want to leave to your children, they would say a peaceful, democratic world. That is at the core of our resistance. We are Kurdish mothers. Saturday Mothers focus on the forced disappearances. Of course, we support them but yeah our focus is different. We say peace, they say bones. They ask for a resting place for their children. But State doesn't work that way. It neither gives us peace nor bones to them.¹⁵⁶

Here I had two mothers' organizations protesting state terrorism with separate pleas and experiencing the same pain. Then I realized that the 90s "dirty war" created a paradigm shift in Kurdish resistance and the narrative Kurdish women use to articulate their cause changed dramatically. This shift, I believe, also explains the difference in discourse between Saturday Mothers and Peace Mothers. The original cause Saturday Mothers mobilized around was their

¹⁵⁵ Emine Rezzam Karaman, "Remember, S/He Was Here Once: Mothers Call for Justice and Peace in Turkey," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 12, no. 3 (2016): 392. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26571786>.

¹⁵⁶ Mother Nuran, oral interview with author, November 2019.

demand for the remains of the forcibly disappeared. They were ethnically heterogeneous. A lot of Kurdish mothers were part of the group and some still are. They joined them in the sit-ins and asked for their forcibly disappeared family members. Saturday Mothers, however, never defined themselves as a Kurdish mothers' organization. They do not center race in their narrative. When I asked Peace Mothers how they differed from Saturday Mothers, they said they were Kurdish. I think the resurgence of explicit state violence during the period started in 2015 after the general elections led to the shift in rhetoric. I believe that the state of exception Kurds have been living in for over three decades now has enabled them to articulate grief as a normative state, not an exception which can be ended with closure. And that is why they are not asking for closure. The 1980 military coup was a state of exception in the conventional sense. It was violent; the rule of law was suspended and the Sovereign power took over to secure the order, but it was temporary. It is true that it had a long-lasting impact on the political climate of modern Turkey, but the Sovereign power hid itself away after the threat was averted. The 1980 coup was a textbook example of what Bargu called "invisible penal architecture" by which she meant "the more informal and flexible, even temporary and mobile detention centers and captivity sites that are impervious to public knowledge, whose surreptitious existence is officially denied, and whose inhabitants, often covertly abducted into indefinite captivity, are also undisclosed."¹⁵⁷ The enforced disappearances of 1980 coup can be read as the "hidden" site where Sovereign power could reign "legitimately." If modern prisons de-corporealized punishment and made Sovereign violence invisible, the clandestine prisons and enforced disappearances of 1980 coup were where Sovereign power reared its ugly head again. Going back to my question as to why Saturday Mothers and Peace Mothers differed in discourse, I believe the answer lies in the difference

¹⁵⁷ Bargu, "Sovereignty as Erasure," 45.

between two states of emergency that shaped their experience. The difference is a temporal and spatial one. First of all, the Sovereign violence that happened during the 1980 coup was temporary and nationwide. The entire country lived under a junta regime for nine years, and then it ended. The state of exception Kurds have been living in is regional and permanent. I remember hearing multiple protesters during the Gezi Park demonstrations in 2013 say “so this is what happened to Kurds in 90s?” as a statement of revelation. What they were referring to was the violence that Sovereign power exercised on its own people with full impunity in Istanbul. Gezi Park is the most recent example of a state of exception on a national scale. There were protests in all but two cities. The epiphany experienced by the protesters in the biggest metropolis of the country was because the Kurdish state of exception in 1990s was invisible to the rest of the country. Foucault’s term “racial caesura” is useful here especially taken not only as a racial but also a spatial caesura. It is spatial not only because the Kurdish region was marked for destruction as a state of exception but is also spatial because of the spaces where Sovereign power penetrated. The state used familiar tactics such as clandestine detentions, unsolved murders, enforced disappearances in police custody or public executions of people by soldiers in unmarked cars. However, what distinguishes Kurdish state of exception from the 1980 coup or Gezi Park is that the Sovereign violently entered the private sphere. Based on the interview data I collected, the torture and killing that usually comes after the enforced disappearance happened at home in front of family members before the victim “disappeared.” Every person I interviewed had disturbingly too much firsthand experience of torture, death and vanishing. As I discussed in section two of this chapter on cohabitation of the dead and the living, Kurdish domestic space has always been the target of the necropolitical state. Kurdish state of exception that has been in place since 1990s is also different because of the frequency of state terror. I interviewed mothers who lost three, five, or even six children to state

racism and have many in prison. I talked to Kurdish women who lost entire families to police brutality gradually in 20 years. I was told stories where counter-insurgency units torture children in their bedrooms for information about their parents in front of the entire family. Some had to watch their villages be destroyed four times in ten years. Almost all of them have multiple family members whose whereabouts they don't know. I heard the names and stories in detail of the disappeared and killed family members from every participant but not even one of them mentioned the names of the perpetrators. None demanded answers about what happened to their loved ones. For them it is not about the individual murderers. Perpetrators become irrelevant. They know it is the state itself that kills them. Unlike Saturday Mothers, they do not seek justice or closure from the state. What Peace Mothers do with their discourse is that they invert the so-called "erasing power" of the enforced disappearances by making the victims hypervisible through necrography and individual perpetrators anonymous and by doing so, they expose the Sovereign who tries to hide itself behind institutions and titles as the actual perpetrator of war crimes.

In this chapter, I discussed three interconnected forms of necropolitical power centering the sites traditionally dismissed as necropolitical sites such as home and reproductive body. I examined the spectacularization of Kurdish death, coexistence of the dead and the living and the enforced disappearances spanning over a hundred years as conditions that exposed the convergence of the Sovereign power and modern power. Kurdish mothers created a unique register of grief out of these necropolitical sites. By de-corporealizing memory and grief through necrography, Kurdish mothers neutralize the Sovereign's power over death. They reshape the boundaries of the state's necropolitical power. The state retains its power to kill, but the reach of its necropolitics ends when the body dies. Through their deliberate devaluation of the dead body as a necropolitical strategy, Kurdish mothers not only free the Kurdish body from being a

disciplining tool against the living but they also create an insurgent memory that operates in a subaltern temporality which is transcendental, collective, repetitive and free from the anticipation of closure.

Chapter 2

Mothering *for* the State: Mothers as Nation Builders and Terrorist Makers

The Turkish and Kurdish reproductive body has been intimately regulated as the primary site of nation building in the making of modern Turkey. This chapter presents a historical account of modern Turkey that seeks to expose the legacies of European colonialism which shaped the population politics of the Turkish state during the late Ottoman and early Republican period. Focusing on this time period, the first section of the chapter examines the Turkish take on “race” which was redefined for the purposes of Turkification of the nation and examines how gender factored in as a significant component of the military and educational practices of this Turkification process. In the second part of the chapter, I analyze how a newly emerging group of female Turkish intellectuals in the early years of the Republic took on a national motherhood duty that divorced motherhood from biological reproduction and reinforced an understanding of the “Turkish” race as culturally reproducible. In other words, what was at stake in this transition period was the preservation of the Turkish race and control over the reproductive body was at the core of Turkish nation building.

The third section looks at how the Kurdish female body has historically been treated as a site of sexual state violence where Turkishness and Turkish racial superiority can be reproduced. Lastly, the fourth section looks beyond Kurdish womanhood as a site of state violence and focuses specifically on the Kurdish reproductive body and motherhood to complicate the gendered aspect of state racism and to push back against the Turkish national rhetoric of race as culturally reproducible. Here I seek to expose the violent state practices that continued/s to operate on biological racism in spite of the claims of a cultural understanding of race.

Rethinking Race: Killing Kurdishness in a Cultural Genocide

The construction of modern Turkey following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire was characterized by multiple contesting national identities and the emergence of a unique understanding of race. Social scientific ideas of race gained particular significance in the making of modern Turkey. Ziya Gökalp, the most influential ideologue of the Young Turk movement and the figurehead of the shift from Ottoman patriotism to Turkish nationalism, based his philosophy “on a rejection of Ottomanism and Islamism in favour of a unique synthesis of a Muslim Turkish nationalism.”¹⁵⁸ This rejection meant “a collective disidentification with non-Turkish Muslims such as Albanians, Arabs, Kurds, and Persians living in the Ottoman Empire.”¹⁵⁹ In 1915, the Istanbul University Department of Sociology department was established for him and he became the chair. He supervised the translation of many works by Durkheim, his nephew Mauss, Lévy-Bruhl, and Fauconne, into Ottoman Turkish and the first sociology textbook was published. Gökalp used sociology to change the fact that Ottoman society was not a homogeneous nation state, a fact that deeply frustrated him. He called for a “monolingual and homogeneous Ottoman nation.”¹⁶⁰ The production of a Turkish identity that would create the “monolingual and homogenous Ottoman nation” was a focus of Gökalp’s job description at the Department of Sociology. For Gökalp, “national ties lie in upbringing and culture”; he refused “geographic, racial, imperial, and individualist definitions of Turkish nationhood.”¹⁶¹ His philosophy relied on the primacy of culture over nature in the establishment of national identity resulted in social engineering that went hand in hand with the enforced socialization of Turkish culture. Gökalp argued for changing the composition of society and, as part of the political elite, he felt himself in

¹⁵⁸ Ümit Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 31.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 35.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*.

charge of this change. After 1913, the “Turkification” of the Ottoman Empire was imposed on the society through the imposition of Turkish language and culture on all the citizenry. This imposition was thought of as key to the construction of a nascent Turkish nation state.

One of the practices of Young Turk population politics based on colonial utilization of social science was related to administrative power. The interest in the ethnic composition of the empire increased and Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) ordered the creation of ethnographic knowledge on the ethnic structure of Ottoman society.

The Young Turks were aware that national self-determination or ethnic majoritarianism was becoming the decisive legitimizing principle in the expanding, Europe-led nation-state system. They understood decades of territorial loss to be a result of the fact that Ottoman Muslims could never lay claim to those territories since they never constituted a compact majority in any of them.¹⁶²

To lay claim to Ottoman territories entailed Turkification and sedentarization of nomadic peoples, which required detailed classification of who is what. The Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants was established to operate as the bureaucratic apparatus to carry out this mission of classification. The Directorate had four branches: Settlement, Intelligence, Transport, and Tribes, and it also formed a “Scientific Council,” headed by Ziya Gökalp, the primary aim of which was to open the “closed box” of Anatolia, and to learn the contents of it to operate on it. Anatolia became a site for research on ethnic communities. These “ethnic experts” produced dozens of volumes of research on virtually every Anatolian group.¹⁶³

Using sociology as a state apparatus is a form of governmentality in a Foucauldian sense. Collection of statistical data on the “conduct” of people, their culture, language, religion, traditions, political stances, everyday lives, relations with each other and other groups is about

¹⁶² Ibid, 36.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 37.

keeping a detailed record of the targeted “savages”, establishing a system of classification. By producing a “quantity of discourse” about these peoples “in the form of analysis, stocktaking, classification, and specification, of quantitative or causal studies,” the CUP turned them into units of governmentality.¹⁶⁴ The researchers not only collected data but also offered methods of population politics. The two-part book, *The Settlement of Migrants: The International Method of Assimilation* by Von P. Gotz, which was published in Turkish in 1918, is an example that illustrates the influence of the Western colonialism on the population politics in Ottoman society.¹⁶⁵ The first part presents methods of assimilating conquered and colonized peoples based on American, British, Dutch, French, German, and Russian history. The second part examines how to legislate the reception of immigrants in a given society. The author’s discussion of external and internal colonialism informed the population politics of Young Turks. Gotz recommends British colonial methods for external colonialism and American methods for internal colonialism. “Internal colonization can include the deportation of populations from one region to another, importing kin ethnic groups living abroad, and assimilating immigrant labourers. For this type of internal colonization, American methods are recommended.”¹⁶⁶ Many of these techniques of internal colonization were carried out throughout the four decades of Young Turk rule on ethnic and religious minorities. The Young Turks continued gathering ethnic data on minorities well into the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940. The data yielded two results. For Ottoman Muslims, their Muslim identity trumped their ethnic identity. And those that identified with an ethnic group considered Turkishness as inferior. This lack of Turkishness was a significant concern for Young Turks. This concern laid the foundation of the Young Turk dictatorship which launched a project of population

¹⁶⁴ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 23-24.

¹⁶⁵ Ümit Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 37/

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 38.

politics to turn the East into “a powerless object of power-over-others wielded by the center.”¹⁶⁷ The ethnographic data collected was used as the basis on which Young Turk internal colonization policies were built. According to Yadirgi, the cornerstones of the Turkification strategy of the Republican era is threefold: The underdevelopment of the areas predominantly inhabited by the Kurds; the forced deportation of the Kurds from their native lands; and the assimilation of the Kurds into Turkish identity.¹⁶⁸

The Young Turks’ emphasis on culture and education and the narrative around the cultural and educational policies of Turkification indicates a distinction between European colonial understanding of racism versus racism in the Turkish context. The Young Turks abandoned the model of biological race for that of racial culture. The question asked by the Minister of Education Hamdullah Suphi (Tanrioever) at the First General Congress in 1924 illustrates this adoption of culture over race as the basis of Turkish nationalism:

Do you want a Turkishness based on race and blood? Are you going to draw blood and send it to chemists for analysis? They will say it consists of 5% Armenian, 16% Russian, and who knows what percentage Circassian, Albanian, and Turkish blood. You have to choose one of the two paths. Either you accept race, or culture.¹⁶⁹

The question asked above reveals that Turkish state was conscious of the difficulty of claiming racial purity in a biological sense. The port-Ottoman Turkish identity was to be built on a race=culture formula rather than a race=blood formula. The Young Turks regime used European colonial discourses to construct Kurds as savages but at the same time they see them as “Turkifiable” through cultural assimilation. In a period after 1931 the official state discourse made direct references to Africans and Native Americans in the discussion of Kurds who were likewise

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 49.

¹⁶⁸ Veli Yadirgi, *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 143.

¹⁶⁹ Ümit Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 13.

seen as savages characterized by “primitivism, childishness, and collective mental, intellectual, and emotional deficiency.”¹⁷⁰ The following two quotations are examples of this discourse. The first is from the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, the mouthpiece of the Kemalist party-state, and the second is from the nationalist journalist Yusuf Mazhar:

[Kurds] allow their emotions and brains to be led by simple instincts like ordinary animals and therefore can only think crudely and foolishly...there is absolutely no difference between African barbarians and cannibals and these creatures who mix raw meat with cracked wheat and eat it just like that. Even though they may be more capable than the redskins in the United States, they are—history is my witness—endlessly bloodthirsty and cruel...They are completely bereft of positive feelings and civilized manners. For centuries, they have been a plague for our race...Under Russian rule they were prohibited to descend from the mountains, where they did not lead humane and civilized lives, therefore these creatures are really not inclined to profit from civilization...In my opinion, the dark spirit, crude mental state, and ruthless manners of this Kurdish rabble is impossible to break.¹⁷¹

Paradoxically then, Kurds were seen both inherently barbaric and assimilable simultaneously. Their assimilation would be done through enforced integration of the Kurds into national education system and acculturation into Turkishness.

Mothers as nation builders: Maternal colonization of Kurds through the assimilation of “Mountain Flowers”

The cultural understanding of race and the belief in the Turkifiability of ethnic and religious minorities attached a special importance to mothers and social reproduction. While Turkish women became the vessels of Turkishness and the distributors of the newly adopted Western values of the new republic, racialized women became the obstacle to the establishment of “a single nation unified around the same language, the same culture, the same collective memory, and the same religious belonging” (Arakon 2014, 144). With her increased presence in the public sphere and her significance in the nation building process, the “New Woman” constructed by the male ideologues

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 16.

¹⁷¹ Ümit Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 184.

and leaders of the young Republic was designed to represent the Republic's break from its Ottoman past and to be the primary signifier of its Westernization. The young Republic utilized Turkish women to create an identity for the Republic and to reproduce its new aspirations. The role of women in the making of modern nation states have been studied extensively before. Yuval Davis, for instance, complicates the relation of women to the state by exploring five major ways in which women relate with the state: "(a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; (d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences- as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories; (e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles."¹⁷² As Davis points out, it is "important to emphasize that the roles that women play are not merely imposed upon them. Women actively participate in the process of reproducing and modifying their roles as well as being actively involved in controlling other women."¹⁷³ The most famous case of women actively participating in the making of modern Turkey is Sabiha Gokcen, who was given the honorary title of the world's first female fighter pilot. She was known for her celebratory remarks regarding her major role in the aerial bombing of Dersim (a region historically known for its Alevi Kurdish population). Sabiha Gokcen, who was also Ataturk's adopted daughter, expressed the joy she felt during the Dersim massacre in an interview: "My flights over Dersim were the most exciting ones. I would drop the bombs first and if I saw any survivors, I would resort to machine guns. I will never forget my excitement during the first Dersim bombing."¹⁷⁴ Gokcen's obvious excitement over destroying

¹⁷² Yuval Davis, *Gender and nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 7.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁷⁴ "Sabiha Gökçen: Dersim'deki ilk bombardıman heyecanını unutamam." *T24*, December 22, 2012. <https://t24.com.tr/haber/sabiha-gokcen-dersimdeki-ilk-bombardiman-heyecanini-unutamam,220208>.

a land and massacring people is a manifestation of the state's war on terror rhetoric. Like the national gazette headlines that covered the "spectacular" war in Zilan where "Zilan River ran red," Gökçen joins in on the national consumption of Kurdish death for pleasure.



Image 9: Sabiha Gökçen holding a bomb before the bombardment operation over Dersim with her Breguet 19¹⁷⁵

Gökçen was an exception with her active military role in the internal colonization of the Kurds. Referring back to item (c) of Yuval Davis's list, "participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture," Turkish women participated in the "civilization" of the Kurds more with their social reproduction and educational skills. The Young Turk regime had begun to create a new class of women intellectuals and educators before the Republic was officially established. Most of these women studied in Europe and adopted colonial approaches to education and culture, and were then recruited by the state to Turkify the nation. Halide Edip Adivar was a prominent figure of Turkish feminism in the late Ottoman and early Republic periods. The fact that she was referred to as "The Mother of Turks" demonstrates the Republic's dependence on women's reproductive capacity, both biological and social, to build

¹⁷⁵ Ruwayda Mustafah, "Why Did Erdogan Apologise For The Dersim Massacre?" HuffPost (blog), December 7, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-did-erdogan-apologise_b_1113732.

a culturally homogenous nation. Zeynep Turkeyilmaz borrows the term “maternal colonization” from the US indigenous feminist literature to explain the role of Sidika Avar, “an archetype of ‘national heroines’” as another member of the newly emerging intellectual class of Turkish women “who dedicated their lives to the civilization of Kurdish girls.”¹⁷⁶ The fact that Avar left her own biological daughter behind to take the job as the principal of Elazig Girls’ Institute was called an “intriguing decision” by Turkeyilmaz in her book on Avar. For Turkeyilmaz, Avar’s decision to abandon her own child “was not only emotionally distressing but also at odds with the republic’s newly redefined and gendered spheres of social roles and duties.”¹⁷⁷ I, on the contrary, believe that her decision accords perfectly with the image of the New Woman of the Republic who took on motherhood duties that went beyond the biological understanding of the term. Sidika Avar’s case is a great example to study not only because it exemplifies the success of the Republic’s project to create a new intellectual class acculturated into the European colonial methods of cultural genocide, but also it exposes the oft dismissed slippage between the military and educational practices of the colonial state. The missionary journey of Sidika Avar which she embarked on to civilize the “savage girls” of Dersim (her “mountain flowers”), started immediately after a bloody military operation. Dersim massacre in 1938 was a result of a decade long reform practices executed by the “Commission for Reform of the East”. The commission was established in 1925 to address the “Eastern question”. The commission put together a report as part of the reform plan for the East which proposed that the Eastern provinces be treated as colonies and a permanent state of emergency be declared to facilitate the Turkification project in the region. Dersim was particularly targeted for not only their Kurdish identity but also for their Alevi religion. The 1931

¹⁷⁶ Zeynep Turkeyilmaz, “Maternal Colonialism and Turkish Woman’s Burden in Dersim: Educating the ‘Mountain Flowers’ of Dersim,” *Journal of Women’s History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 162. doi:10.1353/jowh.2016.0029.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 164.

special report on Dersim issued by the Interior Minister Sükrü Kaya (1883-1959) “proposed a two-stage plan: in the first year of a future campaign, the aforementioned problems would be violently overcome. In the following years, education and deportations could then complete the Turkification process.”¹⁷⁸ After the Dersim problem was “violently overcome” in one of the bloodiest massacres against Kurds in 1937-1938, the cultural genocide under the name of Eastern reform was officially launched. The official reports state that thirteen thousand people were killed and around twelve thousand people were exiled during the Dersim operation. The exact number of Kurdish people killed and exiled is still unknown. The documentary “Two Locks of Hair: The Missing Girls of Dersim” traces the Kurdish girls who were taken away from their families during the Dersim massacre. These Kurdish girls, whose families were executed, were either taken by Turkish soldiers and bureaucrats and raised in Turkish families as Sunni, Turkish children or they were sent to boarding schools. Sidika Avar’s school was one of them. The following quotation is from one of women interviewed for the documentary:

My sister was 2-3 years old. Her name was Xece (Hacer). They were taking us from Ovacik to Elazig through Hozat in multiple groups. Thousands of people. All injured, starving, dehydrated, wretched. I was 13 years old. I remember every as vividly as it was yesterday. Turkish military officers were looking for pretty Kurdish girls to take with them. My sister was beautiful. One of the officers wanted to take my sister from my mother forcefully. My mother didn’t let her go. We stopped on the Pertek Bridge to take a break. The same officer came again and snatched my sister from my mother. My mother cried her eyes out but he took her anyways. He said “I am gonna adopt her. I will take care of her.” It wasn’t only my sister who was kidnapped, of course. A lot of girls were taken. My cousin was also taken. Her name was Tege.¹⁷⁹

The documentary and the book, based on the same data, trace hundreds of girls from Dersim who were taken away from their families during the Dersim massacre. Some of these girls

¹⁷⁸ Uğur Ümit Üngör Interviewed by Ewout Klei: “The Dersim Massacre - Then and Now (Part I): Was It Genocide?” Ahval, June 7, 2020. <https://ahvalnews-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/ahvalnews.com/dersim-massacre/dersim-massacre-then-and-now-part-i-was-it-genocide?amp>.

¹⁷⁹ “Two Locks of Hair: The Missing Girls of Dersim,” directed by Nezahat Gündogan (Yapim 13 Film, 2010), 60:00.

were sent to boarding cities to be acculturated into Turkishness. The educational operations of the Republic as part of the project to culturally homogenize the nation have been studied before in the literature on modern Turkey in relation to the US. residential schools for indigenous children. Boarding schools are particularly important in the Kurdish context because they illustrate the gendered aspect of the Turkish nation building process. In 1937, Interior Minister Sukru Kaya sent a circular to the Ministry of Culture as part of the establishment of boarding schools:

Boarding schools for girls and boys need to be opened and girls and boys from the age of five need to be brought into these schools for education and upbringing. These boys and girls need to be married to each other and settled dispersedly on property inherited from their parents where they can establish a Turkish Nest so that Turkish Culture can be thoroughly implanted [in the region] ... Therefore... it is necessary and essential that small children be placed in this type of boarding schools.¹⁸⁰

The rhetoric of this circular reveals the complex interplay between the cultural and the biological. Kurdish girls are culturally assimilated in order to be made into biological transmitters of culture. The emphasis on the integration of Kurdish girls into the boarding school system speaks from the fact that girls were viewed as future mothers who would become, through education, “the carriers of the Kurdish culture that needed to be exorcised from their minds.”¹⁸¹ Atatürk himself expressed his determination to implement a policy that would prevent mothers from raising their children with languages other than Turkish. As Üngör points out, “The road to the nation was as coercive as it was gendered: women were seen as carriers of national reproductivity, vessels of national identity, and transmitters of culture.”¹⁸² The boarding school policy resonated with the state’s adoption of culture over biological race as the basis of national belongingness. In “cultural socialization.” unlike biological racism, the primary focus of the gender policies of the state is on social reproduction rather than biological reproduction of bodies. This is quite different from the

¹⁸⁰ Ümit Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 37.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

sex-specific laws of the Ottoman Empire. In the Ottoman Muslim state, as a patrilineal society, rules governing reproduction were meant to ensure the demographic advantage of Muslims over non-Muslims and sustain the symbolic superiority of Islam over other religions.¹⁸³ The Republic of Turkey, which evolved in three phases from Ottoman patriotic citizenship” to “Muslim nationalist activism” and finally to “Turkish nationalist hegemony,” utilized reproduction and mothering as state apparatuses to reproduce Turkishness, which has no biological basis. The culture-based racism adopted in late Ottoman period had a unique impact on Kurdish girls. While Turkish women were treated as vessels of Turkishness and recruited as missionaries to disseminate Turkishness across the country as the “mothers of the Turks,” Kurdish mothers were seen as obstacles before the Turkification of the country for their reproductive and social reproductive capacity. In other words, Kurdish mothers were not only unsalvageable with their Kurdishness embedded too deeply, they were also dangerous in the sense that they could generate Kurdishness in their children. Kurdish girls, on the other hand, were still Turkifiable on condition that they were entrusted to Turkish mothers/teachers. The belief that Turkish race is socially reproducible saved Kurdish girls from genocide in some cases while making them the primary target of assimilation projects. The Dersim massacre is a striking example of how the discourse around assimilation violently incorporated Kurdish girls into the national body. The fact that it was Kurdish girls, not boys, that were taken by the Turkish soldiers, bureaucrats, and politicians during multiple massacres indicate that Kurdish girls were the primary subjects of assimilation efforts not necessarily because they were young and impressionable but also because they had the capacity to be shaped into Turkish mothers. In a way, their Kurdishness could not be fully exorcized until they were penetrated by a Turkish penis and had gestated Turkish children. No matter how much

¹⁸³ Lerna Ekmekçioğlu, *Recovering Armenia: The limits of belonging in post-genocide Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 9.

emphasis was put on the socially reproducible aspect of race by the founders of the republic, it is clear that social reproduction of Turkishness and social elimination of Kurdishness were always suspect. The success of these two mutually constitutive processes had to be secured by physical reproduction of Turkishness out of the Kurdish reproductive body, which brings sexual state violence into the picture.

“Touched by the hand of the state”: Kurdish reproductive body as the site of sexual warfare

As in any colonial context, sexual violence has always been common practice in the Turkish state’s Turkification projects and genocidal attempts against Kurds. There was almost no interview I made with Kurdish women where rape wasn’t mentioned. The rhetoric around sexual violence in Turkish nationalist circles revolve around two tropes: 1) Kurdish guerillas as hypersexual, promiscuous beings and Turkish male entitlement to these “horny animals” and 2) the Turkish state destroying Kurdishness through a phallic war on terror. Similar to the practices of boarding schools where Kurdish girls were set to be Turkified by mating with Turkish boys, the Turkish war-on-terror rhetoric relied heavily on extermination of Kurdishness through rape. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the racialization of the Kurds at the onset of the Turkish Republic relied heavily on the colonial archives studied by the Young Turks scholars. Since U.S. colonialism was picked by the Young Turks as the right form of colonialism to assimilate Kurds, these two tropes are clearly informed by the U.S. colonial rhetoric regarding native Americans and enslaved Black people. During the interviews that I conducted with Kurdish women and Kurdish women’s rights organizations, I heard countless stories of sexual violence against Kurdish women in general and especially against mothers of guerillas in police custody and/or in prisons. One thing that came up repeatedly is the rape jokes they were subjected to that went along the lines of “We will fuck you so good that you will worship the state” or “I will rape you so hard that you feel the power of

the Turk inside of you.” As evidenced in these jokes, rape as a weapon of war is not only about domination and intimidation but it is also about planting Turkishness into the Kurdish female body. In the following section, I will examine the ways in which the Kurdish reproductive body that has been constructed as terrorist maker is “touched by the hand of the state.” The phrase “Devletin eli degdi,” which I translated as “touched by the hand of the state” was used multiple times by multiple Kurdish mothers I interviewed. By “Devletin eli degdi,” they not only meant the literal, physical touch of the state in the form of torture and rape but also the trauma that reaches into the collective Kurdish memory.

Since the state of emergency rule was declared in Turkey’s Kurdistan by the Turkish government in 2015, Kurdish women have once again become bare lives that can be killed and raped with impunity in the name of “war on terror.” Sexual state violence exercised on Kurdish women exposes the fact that the Turkish state recognizes no distinction between civilian Kurds and Kurdish guerillas. The current state of emergency regime in Turkey’s Kurdistan is a re-manifestation of the 90’s bloody crackdown on Kurds. The Turkish army, extremely militarized police, and local armed rangers (Korucular) constitute the war machine which can turn every building or structure in Kurdistan into clandestine prisons. In other words, all of Kurdistan has become the “invisible penal architecture” Banu Bargu refers to in her article “Sovereignty as Erasure.” Mother Seher is one of the mothers I interviewed in Amed who has a long history of imprisonment and torture. In the following extract, she describes a place where she was kept and tortured for days.

Mother Seher: They blindfolded me and threw me in a cell. When they took the blindfold off, I noticed I was in a basement. There were holes in the ceiling and I could see and hear roasters above. When their shift started in the morning, they blindfolded us again and took us somewhere else and then somewhere else. They tortured us there, as well.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Mother Seher, oral interview with author, November 2019.

All the mothers I interviewed told similar stories of torture in police custody where they were blindfolded and moved around to places which were not official police stations. Besides, the statements from family members indicate that when the mothers were arrested either publicly during a protest or in their own home, the family members could not reach them for weeks sometimes because the official police stations had no record of them. This system was in place during the three military coups in Turkey and especially in the 1980 coup, thousands of people were arrested as political prisoners and then were “disappeared” in similar clandestine prisons. Sexual violence and torture in police custody against Kurdish political prisoners has been common practice. In recent years, however, systematic rapes of Kurdish girls and women who have no known affiliation with the Kurdish resistance by state officials have been exposed in social media revealing the extent of state sanctioned sexual violence against the Kurdish reproductive body and the rape culture deeply rooted in Turkish nationalism.

Ipek Er was an 18-year-old Kurdish girl from the city of Batman. She committed suicide on July 16th, 2020, leaving a suicide letter behind. In the note, she detailed how she was kidnapped by a Special Sergeant named Musa Orhan and kept in an apartment for fifteen days where she was continuously raped. After her suicide letter was leaked on social media, a powerful campaign was launched by women’s rights activists and Kurdish human rights lawyers to call for Orhan’s arrest. While he denied the allegations of rape and stated the intercourse was consensual, his text messages about Ipek to a friend of his were leaked. In the thread, his friend, who is also a soldier, asks about what Musa did to the girl and he brags about how he has been raping her for days and he is bored of raping her. Then the friend warns him about the consequences and Musa nonchalantly tells him that nothing will happen to him and that it isn’t his first time. Then the friend asks Musa to send the girl over to him so that he can rape her too, and Musa says he will

think about it. The “nothing will happen to me” part in the thread gained importance when Musa Orhan was released by the court pending trial. With her publicly circulated suicide letter, Ipek Er became the face of sexual state violence particularly because of the case’s high visibility on social media and mainstream media. Kurdish feminists/activists, however, warn against the exceptionalization of Ipek’s case by pointing at the sexual war crimes that have been committed by the Turkish state for decades. Kurdish journalists and human rights lawyers have been speaking out about sexual violence against Kurdish girls and women even more vocally since the invasion of Afrin by the Turkish state in 2019. In August 2020, the security forces affiliated with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria caught a member of the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT), İbrahim Beşar Diveka, in the Euphrates region and he confessed to the crimes he committed in Afrin under Turkish occupation:

They asked me to go to the villages with a group of gangs to kidnap children and women. Every day, we kidnapped nearly 50 women and children at gunpoint. When we brought the abducted women to the bases, the women were distributed among the gang leaders. These women were being raped. Sometimes I was raping some women too. I raped about 20 Kurdish women while I was with them.¹⁸⁵

The most recent case of systematic rape of Kurdish civilian women broke out at the time of writing this chapter. On December 6th, 2020, I woke up to a Twitter hashtag trending in Turkey #GercusteNeOluyor (#WhatisHappeninginGercus). Reports about the rape of a 15-year-old Kurdish girl by twenty-seven state officials including special sergeants and village rangers in Gercus, Batman had hit social media. The government immediately intervened and imposed a broadcast ban on the news. Authorities from HDP (The Kurdish party) and local women’s rights activists already call this “the second Musa Orhan case” referring to the rape of Ipek Er I mentioned earlier by a special sergeant in July 2020. News about sexual violence against civilian Kurdish

¹⁸⁵ Retrieved from: <https://www.nuceciwan50.com/en/2020/08/17/turkish-intelligence-agent-confesses-i-raped-about-20-kurdish-women/>. Taken offline as of 8/3/2023.

women and children have been flooding in from all over Kurdistan since the declaration of the state of emergency rule in 2015. I believe that these cases should be read from multiple angles. First, from a spatial perspective, they signal a new form of warfare where an entire region is made into an “invisible penal architecture” which operates not by directly punishing political dissent but by punishing Kurdishness per se. Second, the primary site of this punishment is the Kurdish woman because she is treated as the source for reproducing Kurdishness into the future. Sexual state violence exposed by these cases also indicates a radical shift in the state’s attitude towards racialization. After a seven year-long peace process which fell apart in 2015, we are witnessing a resurgence of the 90’s war on terror rhetoric which relied on the discourse of “The best Kurd is a dead Kurd.” Killing the Kurd in this rhetoric goes beyond killing the physical body of the Kurd but a sustained killing of Kurdishness through multiple necropolitical practices I discuss in Chapter 2. The following is a case that reveals the sexual nature of necropolitical state violence against the Kurdish reproductive body.

On August 15th, 2015, the image of the dead body of a female PKK guerilla stripped naked and photographed in public in broad daylight was circulated on social media. In the picture, three men who were claimed to be members of the Turkish army by local NGOs were standing around the naked body of the dead woman. The guerilla fighter was Kevser Elturk, code name Ekin Van and she immediately became the symbol of the state violence that peaked during the state of emergency rule declared after the general elections of 2015. The public display of Kevser’s body and circulation of the image on social media is one of the many examples of Kurdish death spectacularized by the Turkish state, which I discuss at length in Chapter 2. More importantly, Kevser’s case exposes the gendered and sexual aspect of Turkey’s hundred-years-old project to colonize the Kurds through violent seizure of the female body. Turkey utilized multiple tools to

assimilate and/or exterminate Kurdish body such as kidnapping of the girls to be raised by Turkish families, sending them to assimilation schools, destroying Kurdish villages and towns, mass displacement and slaughtering Kurds in masses. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the official rhetoric behind the internal colonization of the Kurds is strikingly similar to the U.S. settler colonial rhetoric of extermination through either genocide or forced assimilation. The hyper-sexual Kurdish female guerilla figure also draws on another tradition, that of the Jezebel stereotype that portrays Black women as inherently lascivious and lacking self-control. Similarly, the hypersexual, animalistic Kurdish woman stereotype regularly manifests itself in mainstream Turkish media, where Kurdish guerillas are portrayed as sex-crazed, immoral, sinful creatures. On October 2013, after a PKK camp was raided and their belongings were photographed, multiple prominent Turkish media sources portrayed the discovery as “shocking” and the headlines read “30 thousand dollars’ worth of condoms to Qandil,” “Worse than the Devil. Condoms in PKK caves” and “30 thousand dollars’ worth of condoms and birth control pills for PKK.”¹⁸⁶ Hypersexualization of Kurdish women and their portrayal as godless promiscuous animals underpins the sexual state violence against them and rape rhetoric. In her article “Kurt Kadın Hareketi Deneyimine Bir Bakış” (A Look at the Kurdish Women’s Movement Experience), a female guerilla with the code name Sakine Zagros (a member of the Partiya Jina Azad, PJA, (Free Women Party)) provides an insider’s account of sexual violence Kurdish female guerillas are subjected to. She discusses the case of Ayten Bagok, a female PKK guerilla who was killed in 1993. Bagok had been in the Kurdish army for seven years when she was captured and killed by the Turkish army. Her naked body was thrown from a military helicopter and then taken by the state officials for a

¹⁸⁶ “Kandil’e 30 bin dolarlık prezervatif!” <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/884632-kandile-30-bin-dolarlik-prezervatif>. “Mağaradan çıktı! Şeytanın aklına gelmez” <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/magaradan-cikti-seytanin-aklina-gelmez-2751629>. PKK’ya 30 bin dolarlık prezervatif. <https://www.ensonhaber.com/gundem/pkky-30-bin-dolarlik-prezervatif-2013-10-10>.

virginity exam. Virginity exams on both dead and captured female guerillas are a common practice deployed by the state to prove the hypersexuality and the lack of morality of the female guerillas. Zagros talks about a ritual among female guerillas to stand against the sexual humiliation they face.

In armed conflicts, when the dead bodies of the female guerillas are captured by the Turkish army, their sex organs and their breasts which are seen as the symbols of their womanhood are cut off and their corpses are raped. Then the corpses are put through virginity exams. If they happen to capture a guerilla body that has a hole in their panties, they joke about how she got the hole from being fucked too much. They make pages of rape jokes about her in their circles. In that sense, every guerilla woman has a story with panties. There is a ritual among female guerillas. In a military action, being on the attack group means to be the closest to death and it requires to be prepared for death. Women in these attack groups are given by the other women in their troop the most durable panties in their bags. This is a symbolic action taken by guerilla women to prevent the images of their dead bodies from being displayed publicly with hole in their panties.¹⁸⁷

Many of the women I interviewed claimed that virginity exams on dead guerillas is a common form of necrosexual violence against Kurdish women and they are one of the ways in which the Kurdish reproductive body is “touched by the hand of the state.” As evidenced in the cases I discussed earlier in this section, the “touch” of the state often takes a penile form. The Kurdish girls forced to mate with Turkish boys in boarding schools, the soldiers “fucking the Kurdishness out of Kurdish women,” and the Kurdish corpses raped by Turkish soldiers are examples of the gendered and sexual practices of the internal colonization of the Kurds. Many Kurdish feminists I talked to called Turkish state a “sexual fascist state” referring to the sexual violence committed by the Turkish state against the Kurdish reproductive body, dead or alive. Sexual violence committed in the name of the nation to erase Kurdishness by destroying or torturing the reproductive body blends with the rhetoric of the Turkish sexual prowess. After the 1980 military coup and at the onset of the re-establishment of the multi-party system, Turkish

¹⁸⁷ Sakine Zagros, “Kürt Kadın Hareketi Deneyimine Bir Bakış,” *Ayrıntı Dergi* no. 14 (2016).

journalist Ümit Zileli interviewed Turgut Sunalp, a general who was in active duty during the military coup and asked him about the allegations that female political prisoners were raped with batons in custody. His answer demonstrates how nationalism and toxic masculinity collapse into each other and the superiority of the Turkish race is constructed through the sexual prowess of the soldiers. When he was asked about the young women raped by batons in military prisons during the coup, his response was “Who needs batons? We have soldiers as strong as lions” (Copa ne gerek var? Aslan gibi çocuklar var). The brazenness of this statement that does not even bother to deny the allegations not only reveals the feeling of Turkish male entitlement to the Kurdish body but it also powerfully exposes sexual violence against Kurds as a matter of national pride. Another example of this violent intimacy between Turkish nationalism and sexual violence is the case of the Pozanti Children’s Prison. When news about rape, sexual abuse, and torture of Kurdish boys who were political prisoners in Pozanti Children’s Prison broke in 2011, it became clear that the penile touch of the state is extended to Kurdish boys. A disturbing detail provided by one of the victims reveals the nationalist aspect of state sexual violence. He stated that he was raped by multiple guards and judicial prisoners while he was forced to kiss a Turkish flag. This eleven-year-old Kurdish boy was arrested for attending a protest. As the report on the human rights violations in Pozanti children’s prison states, “While delivering the children arrested by the Anti-Terror Law (TMK) to their wards, the TMK officers said to the guardians: ‘We have brought PKK members. We are handing them over to you’ which the children would later learn meant the guards were free to do whatever they wanted to them.”¹⁸⁸

State violence does not gain a sexual element only when it is physically sexual in nature. As I discussed in Chapter 2, non-sexual state violence against Kurds is spectacularized on social

¹⁸⁸ “Report into sexual abuse at Pozanti Prison released,” December 3, 2012. <https://www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/report-into-sexual-abuse-at-pozanti-prison-released/>.

media with heavily sexual references. Since the emergency rule declared in 2015 in Turkey's Kurdistan, countless images have been circulated in press and social media which involved Turkish soldiers expressing their joy at destroying Kurdish homes and killing Kurds with almost sexual satisfaction. In the previous chapter, I analyzed an image of a Turkish soldier posing proudly with his machine gun in front of the dresser in the bedroom of a Kurdish couple, who were either killed or violently arrested during the raid. He had written "Ask Yuksekova'da yasaniyor, guzelim" (Love is in Yuksekova, sweetheart!) with red lipstick. The tremendous proliferation of these images with references to "making love" in sites of necropolitical violence reveals the eroticization of Kurdish death in the Turkish national imaginary. The rhetoric used by Turkish soldiers to display Kurdish death publicly associates killing Kurds with "making love". In other words, the destruction of Kurdishness is experienced by Turkish soldiers or police in the form of sexual release.

Kurdish Mothers as Terrorist Makers

The myth of Kurdish women's lack of morality and promiscuous nature and the myth of Turkish sexual prowess and Turkish penis as the source of Turkishness and national pride underpin the operation of the "sexual fascist" Turkish state. I mentioned earlier that the hypersexual and immoral Kurdish woman stereotype is a colonial import from the U.S. However, a related American stereotype about Black women – the desexualized, elderly Black mammy trope – does not translate into the Kurdish context. Historically, elderly Kurdish mothers have been excluded from the asexual, "sacred mother" category. Kurdish mothers are directly targeted by the state for their motherhood and/or reproductive capacity in three intimately connected ways: sexual, discursive and necropolitical.

One of the manifestations of sexual state violence exercised directly on Kurdish mothers is the attack on their religious integrity through the violation of their right to cover body parts that are religiously deemed private.

Mother Asuman: They had arrested my mom earlier. Even I hadn't seen my mother's hair till that day. She never took her head scarf off, not even when she was sleeping. They arrested my mother in her undergarment. She was also paralyzed. They dragged her out of her bed and arrested her. They took all her privacy from her. My mom who never showed an inch of her hair. It is humiliation. How am I supposed to love this state? We still remember like yesterday how they dragged our men and women naked in front of us. When I see one of us get humiliated, I remember my mother, my daughter. I will never forget.¹⁸⁹

What Mother Asuman's mother experienced during this police raid was not only invasion of privacy, but also the de-legitimization of Kurdish Muslim identity. It is a case where the police publicly questioned or maybe even invalidated her chastity and piety through the public display of one of her most private parts. For a lot of elderly Kurdish women, their hair is as intimate as their genitals. This act of violence against her hair plays into the myth of Kurdish women's sexual degeneracy. It marks them, once again, as sexually impure. Mother Asuman's mother's getting arrested in her undergarment and with her hair exposed is an act of sexual violence and of humiliation which she will remember forever just like she will remember "how they dragged [Kurdish] men and women naked in front of [them]." As Mother Asuman's account makes clear, the state's attack on Kurdish Muslim identity is sexual in nature. The following interview extracts make the religious underpinnings of sexual state violence against Kurdish mothers apparent.

When I interviewed Mother Seher in Amed in November 2019, she had just been released from prison and memories of torture and sexual violence were still fresh. Mother Seher is a 67-year-old Kurdish mother who has been repeatedly targeted by the state for making terrorist children.

¹⁸⁹ Mother Asuman, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Mother Seher: They tortured us there (in police custody) for days. When they couldn't make us speak with beating, they shocked us with electricity. They connected the cable to my thumb and my nipples. They shocked us. I was blindfolded first. Then they took the blindfold off. There was a table in the room and there were cables on it. Anyways, they shocked me. I screamed and collapsed. I don't remember how long I was on the ground unconscious but when I came to, I was in a pool of water. It was a basement. My clothes were all wet and I was freezing. That's when I gained consciousness back. Then they said, "We are gonna rape you." I said, "I am old enough to be your mother." It was 1998. The chief told me to take my clothes off and said he was gonna call the other officers to rape me. I said, "No, I won't take my clothes off." My clothes were still wet and cold because they keep torturing us with pressure water. One of my feet has been numb since then. It is ice cold day and night. I don't feel it. When I refused to take my clothes off, the torturer reached to my dress and tried to take it off forcefully. That is when I fainted again. When I came to, I was wet still, soaking wet. When he ripped my dress off, I clung onto my undergarment before I collapsed. When I came to, he said "Speak, you whore. You did all these things. Stop denying." They took me to a cell again and then to some other place. They kept torturing me with pressure water. It was October and I was cold.¹⁹⁰

Accounts similar to Mother Seher's account of torture in police custody or in prison were given by every single participant I interviewed during my fieldwork. They were either repeatedly raped or threatened to be raped in police custody. As evidenced in the interview extract, "whore" is an insult commonly directed against elderly Kurdish mothers.

These mostly firsthand and in some cases secondhand experience of torture and sexual violence Kurdish mothers went through cannot be explained away as sexual violence used as a weapon of war against racialized women. The common thread that runs throughout the accounts of sexual violence narrated by Peace Mothers points to a form of violence that is specifically directed to Kurdish *mothers*.

Mother Güler: We have been through a lot. Where should I even start? I don't even know which story to tell. We saw sexual harassment, rapes. We saw women dragged naked by military vehicles. We saw women hung by their breasts to military helicopters. We live against this mindset. We live in this state that hates us. We saw naked Kurdish women tortured with pressure water, raped, insulted, dehumanized. We have been through this and are still going through it.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Mother Seher, oral interview with author, November 2019.

¹⁹¹ Mother Güler, oral interview with author, November 2019.

As I was going over the interview transcriptions to organize my thoughts on sexual state violence against Kurdish women, I identified a pattern that made me realize that the violence I was bearing witness to in the data was not against the female body per se. It was directed precisely against Kurdish motherhood. When I first heard accounts of torture inflicted on the breasts of Kurdish women, I automatically interpreted it as an attack on their womanhood. Later, however, it became clear to me that it was specifically an attack on their motherhood through desecration of Kurdish breast milk. Many mothers stated that in police custody they were commonly accused of feeding their children un-halal milk. “Helal sut emmek” (being fed halal breastmilk) is a very common idiom in Turkish that associates religious morality and good character with halal breastmilk. In the eye of the state, their children’s terrorist tendencies were directly linked to the un-halal breastmilk of Kurdish mothers. Therefore, I believe, when Mother Seher were electroshocked on her nipples, or when Kurdish women were hung by their breasts from military helicopters or, as I mentioned in previous chapters, when Kurdish mothers collected breasts from dumpsters, the violence inflicted on them was not merely an attack on their womanhood but rather an attack on their motherhood.

The connection between breast milk and racial reproduction has been studied in relation to slavery with a focus on wet-nurses. Andrea Freeman analyzes the history behind the lower rates of breastfeeding among Black women which persists to this day. White settlers picked the wet-nurses very carefully since they believed at the time that the temperament of the wet-nurses would be transferred to the baby. This caution, Freeman argues, “reflected both classism and racism, as the characteristics defined as undesirable in wet nurses generally consisted of habits attributed to the lower classes, or physical attributes such as dark skin and other non-white features.”¹⁹² Until

¹⁹² Andrea Freeman, “Unmothering Black Women: Formula Feeding as an Incident of Slavery,” *Hastings L.J.* 69, no. 6 (2018), 1555.

the end of the seventeenth century, white settlers primarily chose lower-class white women to be their wet-nurses. The racialization of breast milk during slavery intensified with white settlers denying enslaved women the right to breastfeed their infants because breastfeeding was believed to be a form of contraception and went against the colonial agenda to have more slaves through reproduction. Another layer of this complex racialization of breastmilk was the malaria epidemic during the time which made enslaved women ideal wet-nurses with the supposed immunity they had against malaria which they would transfer to the babies of white women. Forced wet nursing on plantations created multiple layers of displacement of maternal care of enslaved women from their own children to the children of slave owners. Freeman calls the relation between enslaved women and white children they nursed an ambivalent one. On one hand, the maternal care that enslaved women had to provide for white children was integral to the prosperity and well-being of white settlers. On the other hand, the fear that enslaved women's milk might be tainted with racial inferiority was rampant among the settlers.¹⁹³ Enslaved women's breast milk was both exploited as a commodity the same way their reproductive body as whole was commodified and also simultaneously vilified as a source of racial inferiority.

The correlation made between enslaved women's breast milk and racial inferiority helped me think through the racialization of Kurdish breastmilk. However, I could not find any literature that specifically focuses on race and breastmilk in relation to Kurdish women. Racialization of breastmilk in a Muslim context has not been studied extensively. My knowledge on the connection between breastmilk and race is limited to personal observation. I can say, however, that the idiom "helal sut emmek" (being fed halal milk) is originally a religious matter. According to Islam, breastfeeding creates a "milk kinship" between a woman and a non-biological infant similar to a

¹⁹³ Ibid, 1558.

blood-relationship. Islam forbids marital relationship between the child and the milk mother or the milk siblings. In other words, it would be *haram* (the opposite of *halal*) for them to marry one another.¹⁹⁴ “Helal Sut emmis biriyle evlenmek” is a very common saying in Turkey which originally meant marrying someone who is not haram, who wasn’t nursed by the same milk mother or who was not non-Muslim. Over time, halal milk took on a broader meaning where it is associated with Islamic morality and good deeds. When it comes to women, “helal sut emmis” is associated with sexual purity and a proper Muslim lifestyle. While Islamic law is more tolerant towards men, it is still expected of them to stay away from adultery, alcohol or gambling. As I tried to understand the utilization of the *halal* milk narrative to justify violence against Kurdish mothers, I realized that the definition of halal had gained a racial connotation. All the Peace Mothers I interviewed are practicing Muslims, but they were violently excluded from the halal category due to their race. Therefore, another layer that should be analyzed regarding the attack on Kurdish breastmilk and breasts is how Kurdish women’s Muslim identity is annulled by their racial identity. In the modern Turkish context, Muslim identity becomes something that can only be reproduced in conjunction with Turkishness. In many radical Islamic traditions, sexual violence during wartime is justified through the rhetoric that Allah allows Muslim men to rape non-Muslim women (in other words, they are halal) in order to humiliate them and claim religious superiority. I witnessed countless times during the thirty years I spent in Turkey that non-Muslim women in Turkey, especially Armenian women, became targets of Turkish nationalist rape culture. They are almost always referred to as “gavur” (infidel). What we observe in the cases I presented above is that Kurdish women are deemed rapeable through their exclusion from Muslimhood due to their

¹⁹⁴ Norsyamliina, C.A.R., Salasiah Hanin, H., Latifah, A.M. *et al.* A cross-sectional study on the practice of wet nursing among *Muslim* mothers. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 21, no. 68 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-021-03551-9>

Kurdish racial identity. This point is not to argue that state violence directed against Kurdish mothers is in any simple sense religious violence. It is to argue that sexual attacks on Kurdish mothers operate on multiple inter-connected levels. They are targeted by a sexual fascist state for being Kurdish, for being women, for being mothers who have the potential to proliferate Kurdishness physically and culturally, for being mothers who are improper or lapsed Muslims and whose un-halal milk feeds infidel, terrorist children.

Sexual state violence on Kurdish motherhood operates on the early republican discourse on race which puts social reproduction at the center of the Turkification process. In 2016, when two women in their 20s who had to flee Cizre during the military siege with a baby in their arms and no ID asked permission to pass from a young police officer at a checkpoint, he said: “Don’t expect mercy from me. You raise terrorists and expect me to show mercy toward you? Raise children that obey the state, then you can expect my mercy. Got it?”¹⁹⁵ Criminalization of Kurdish women for their reproductive capacity is not unprecedented. In 2013, after the Gezi Park protests, Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, got thousands of his supporters to boo a grieving mother whose 13-year-old boy, Berkin, was killed by the police during the protests. He accused her of being a terrorist for giving birth to and raising a terrorist. Berkin’s mother had made very straightforward accusations against the state and called Erdoğan a killer. In his Gaziantep rally in 2014, Erdoğan said:

A few days ago, there was a funeral in Istanbul. A child who had unfortunately been dragged into terrorist organizations, a kid whose face was covered with poşu (a scarf seen as the symbol of Kurdish resistance) and who had iron marbles and a slingshot in his pockets was shot by a pepper spray canister. How was the police supposed to tell that he was a child when his face was covered with a poşu and was throwing iron marbles at the police with his slingshot? They say he had gone to the store to buy bread when he was shot? Buying bread, my foot! Nonsense. And strangely enough his mother says: “The killer of my son is Erdoğan.” I know all about love for one’s children but I don’t understand why

¹⁹⁵ “Turkey: City of Cizre is a Big Cemetery,” *Green Left Weekly*, March 4, 2016. <https://www.newcoldwar.org/turkey-city-cizre-big-cemetery/>. Author’s translation.

you left red cloves and iron marbles onto your kid's grave. Why was she placing all those iron marbles on his grave? What message are you trying to give?¹⁹⁶

In his speech, Erdoğan reactivated the war on terror rhetoric to push against the “innocent child killed by the police” narrative used by the opposition. While doing so, he reproduced the well-established trope of “the terrorist Kurdish child who throws stones to the police” and consolidated the impunity constantly granted to the police officers responsible for killing Kurdish children. Erdoğan delegitimized Berkin's mother's motherhood by contrasting her with the mothers of Turkish martyrs (şehit anneleri, the “national mothers”) killed fighting against terrorism, and then urged his supporters in the rally to boo Berkin's mother.

The “terrorist mother” trope that Erdoğan passionately reactivated during the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations has been the primary rationale for the mass incarceration of Kurdish mothers since the state of emergency was declared in 2015. Every single Peace Mother I interviewed had been arrested a ridiculous number of times for supposed “affiliation with a terrorist organization.” Mother Güler states in the interview that she has been arrested 20 times in the past year and her house raided every other day “for asking for peace.” She also explains how Peace Mothers are constantly criminalized by Turkish media for their “terrorist” mothering practices.

This is a state which is afraid of sharing a mother's pain. A Turkish mother in Bursa whose son fell martyr in Cudi mountain fighting against PKK said rebelliously “What the hell was my son doing in Cudi in the first place?” Without making it public, we called her as Peace Mothers and told her that we wanted to see her to give our condolences. She agreed to see us. But before we could go to Bursa, there was a headline in *Hurriyet* that read “Watch out for these mothers, they are terrorist mothers.” The family of the martyr was also pressured out of seeing us. We couldn't see her. They are not happy with the situation either, but they cannot organize.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ “Unutulmasın diye... Berkin için nerede ne demişti? *Birgün*, June 16, 2015. <https://www.birgun.net/haber/unutulmasin-diye-berkin-icin-nerede-ne-demisti-82892>.

¹⁹⁷ Mother Güler, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Mother Güler's account demonstrates the tension repeatedly created by the Turkish state between "şehit anneleri" (mothers of the fallen Turkish soldiers) and peace mothers through mainstream Turkish media. Peace mothers are not only criminalized for raising terrorist children but they are also policed for their potential to "poison" the minds of the national mothers. Mother Güler's account also exposes the state mechanism that is in place to ensure Turkish mothers grieve in a certain way that involves showing national pride for losing a child for the sake of the Turkish nation. The "Vatan sağ olsun" (God Bless the Country) rhetoric has been at the core of this Turkish nationalist maternal grief. When "şehit anneleri" are asked for their comment during their children's funeral, it is common practice to say "Vatan sağ olsun." The origin of this rhetoric goes back to the early years of the Turkish republic where "the new woman of the republic" emerged. As I mentioned in the first section of this chapter, the new woman of the Republic had a duty to mother the nation into a homogenized culture of the new Turkishness. This national motherhood understanding disrupted the biological motherhood framework and prioritized the social reproduction aspect of it. In other words, Turkish women were urged to devote their reproductive capacity to the reproduction of Turkish culture and Turkish children that would "dedicate their existence to the Turkish existence" as the Student Oath instructed. The Student Oath was written on April 23rd, 1933 by Resit Galip, the Minister of National Education at the time, and with the circular number 1749/42 issued by the Board of Education and Edification on May 18, 1933. It established that students must repeat the oath every day before classes started. The oath reads:

I am a Turk, honest and hardworking. My principle is to protect the younger to respect the elder, to love my homeland and my nation more than myself. My ideal is to rise, to progress. My existence shall be dedicated to the Turkish existence. How happy is the one who says: "I am a Turk"!¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ "Turkey's Student Oath Becomes a Controversial Issue - Politics Today," *Politics Today*, May 29, 2020. <https://politicstoday.org/turkeys-student-oath-becomes-a-controversial-issue/>.

“Dedicating oneself to the Turkish existence” and “Mothering for the nation” rhetoric have since been integrated into the language of war on terror to glorify martyrdom in the name of the nation so much so that martyrdom is seen as the second highest position a person can reach after prophethood. In recent years, however, “şehit anneleri” (Turkish mothers of the martyrs) have begun to push back against the “Vatan sağ olsun” (God Bless the Country) rhetoric publicly, especially at their children’s funerals. “Şehit anneleri” criticized the government for “the senseless war” that has been going on for decades on numerous occasions through statements such as: “Damn this nation. It shouldn’t live long. My son should have lived long”; “I don’t want a country like this. I won’t give my blessing for my dead child. God, don’t bless the country”; “Shame on this country. Shame on this President, Shame on this Prime Minister. Why don’t they send their own children!”¹⁹⁹ “Şehit anneleri” who protested the God Bless the Country rhetoric were arrested and charged with treason. Their racial affiliation with the nation did not make them immune to state persecution when the legitimacy of their motherhood became suspect to the state and their maternal grief became a national threat, which ultimately brings them discursively closer to Kurdish mothers.

In Chapter 1, I examined in detail the multiple forms of necropolitical state violence exercised on Kurds by the Turkish state. The following section of this chapter builds upon my discussion in Chapter 1 by focusing on the state violence that directly targets the bodies and minds of Kurdish mothers.

Violent regulation of motherhood by the state as part of the Turkish nation building process designates the boundaries of legitimate motherhood and put mechanisms of state violence in place that police these boundaries to maintain the very (re)productive relationship between motherhood

¹⁹⁹ “Vatan sizin olsun, oğlumu geri verin bana!” August 18, 2015. <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/yusuf-nazim/vatan-sizin-olsun-oglumu-geri-verin-bana,12547/>.

and Turkish nationalism. These mechanisms were also designed to ensure that the dangerous “from Kurdish womb to armed insurgency” pipeline was cut off in any way possible. In addition to the sexual violence directed at Kurdish mothers and the discursive construction of them as terrorist makers, the Turkish state continuously resort to its Sovereign right to kill to prevent physical and social reproduction of Kurdishness. The state’s regimes of visibility both exclude the racialized Kurdish reproductive body from the national imaginary of motherhood, and violently include it as an object of regulation and exploitation. Khiara Bridges talks about a similar paradoxical position of racialized mothers in *Reproducing Race*. Bridges’ ethnographic work focuses on the ways in which pregnancy and childbirth of racialized mothers in a New York public hospital is policed and criminalized. The discursive construction of Alpha patient population as “high-risk” not only excludes them from the normative category of “mother,” it also pathologizes them as an “undesirable” population whose fertility should be strictly policed. Their inclusion into the universal health care system puts them into a double bind. They gain access to free, high-quality prenatal care but this access also entails their subjection to racialized reproductively orientated governmentality. They are stigmatized and homogenized as pathological due to an “assumed shared history, environment and set of behaviors,” which are reminiscent of the historical construction of non-white or non-Anglo racialized reproductive body as the reproducer of the “undesirable” race.²⁰⁰ Over-medicalization of poor women of color marks them as “possessors of ‘unruly bodies’” and they are “treated as biological dangers in the body politic.”²⁰¹ For Bridges, contemporary manifestation of biopower through state regulation of racialized reproductive body is reminiscent of the “racial folklore.”²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Khiara Bridges, *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011), 151.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 16.

²⁰² Ibid, 16.

In *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts traces the long history of “dehumanizing attempts to control Black women’s reproductive lives” through a genealogical analysis of the construction and maintenance of this “racial folklore.”²⁰³ Roberts offers the history that determines the experience of Alpha patient population in Bridges’ ethnographic work. “From slave masters’ economic stake in bonded women’s fertility to the racist strains of early birth control policy to sterilization abuse of Black women during the 1960s and 1970s to the [then] current campaign to inject Norplant and Depo-Provera in the arms of Black teenagers and welfare mothers—paints a powerful picture of the link between race and reproductive freedom in America.”²⁰⁴ Roberts presents a case which exemplifies how slave owners violently separated the fetus from the pregnant body. In this extreme case of “maternal-fetal conflict,” a slave owner dug a hole in the ground big enough for the belly of a pregnant slave woman and whipped her without hurting the child.²⁰⁵ This is a powerful example that shows how natal alienation began way before childbirth.

In the Kurdish case, state violence against the racialized reproductive body that leads to natal alienation takes a necropolitical form. According to Roberts, the natal alienation of enslaved women stemmed from dual oppression they suffer “both as both producer and reproducer.”²⁰⁶ This dual position of enslaved women made them a subject of a violent biopolitical governmentality. On the other hand, lacking the “producer” identity, Kurdish women’s position in the eye of the state is closer to the Alpha patient population as “possessors of ‘unruly bodies’” and reproducers of the “undesirable” race and state violence against them is necropolitical, rather than biopolitical.

²⁰³ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Random House/Pantheon, 1997), 14.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 86.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 85.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the Zilan massacre was one of the most striking cases of state violence against the Kurdish reproductive body. I analyzed the image of the dead body of a young Kurdish woman with her belly cut open and her unborn baby taken out and placed on top of her. Hers and countless other unborn Kurdish babies that were murdered by the state were remembered by Kurdish mothers during the interviews. The recollection of those past stories was a collective effort and an active form of remembering to make it clear that state violence against the Kurdish reproductive body is a continuous and systemic state action that should be historicized correctly.

Mother Akrime was the first mother who used the phrase “touched by the hand of the state” which became the phrase that underpins the main arguments of this chapter. Her account provides crucial insight into the temporality and the reach of the “hand of the state.”

Mother Akrime: This year, they raided my brother’s apartment on March 6th. Fifty masked soldiers knocked the door down. My brother’s wife was pregnant. They dragged her by the hair. She was five months pregnant. She got scared and hid behind the couch when they burst in. They dragged her out by the hair. I witnessed this with my own eyes. They told her to lie down on her belly. One of the soldiers jumped up and down on her back. That baby died a month later. It was touched by the hand of the state even before it was born.²⁰⁷

The hand of the state takes the shape of combat boots in the case above, boots that reach into the Kurdish reproductive body and killing the unborn Kurdish baby. During the interviews, numerous Kurdish mothers gave accounts of state violence against their pregnant children in police custody or during protests most of which led to the death of the babies. Like the forced sterilization of women of color in the U.S., killings of the unborn Kurdish babies expose a racializing state mechanism which activates its necropolitical power not only to kill its racialized subjects in the present but also to proactively destroy the possible future manifestations of the “unruly” race. I believe this is why peace mothers are in agreement that Turkish state violence against the Kurdish reproductive body is an ongoing genocide. At the center of this genocidal project carried out by

²⁰⁷ Mother Akrime, oral interview with author, November 2019.

the Turkish state are Kurdish women both as reproducers of the Kurdish race and as social reproducers of Kurdish language and culture.

The necropolitical reach of the hand of the state does not stop at the torture and killing of physical bodies. The Turkish state's direct attacks on Kurdish motherhood are extended into the realm of maternal racialized grief. In the following image appears Mother Halise from Mardin holding a package sent to her by the Office of Chief Public Prosecutor via PTT (Turkey's national postal service). In the package are her son's bones - weighing 3.450 kilograms.



Image 10: Mother Halise holding her son's bones²⁰⁸

Mother Halise's son Agit Ipek joined PKK in 2010 and was killed in a conflict in 2017. She was in Istanbul visiting her daughter when she got a call from the Diyarbakir PTT office letting her know that they had attempted to deliver a package, but she wasn't home. The package was returned to the Diyarbakir Courthouse. Mother Halise states that she did not know what was in the package until she went to Diyarbakir to claim it from the courthouse. She says: "While I was waiting for a file or some kind of paperwork, some officials approached me pointing at a package

²⁰⁸ "PKK'linin cenazesi kargoyla aileye gönderildi." Gazete Duvar, September 27, 2020. <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2020/04/10/pkklinin-cenazesi-kargoyla-aileye-gonderildi>.

and said, “Your bones are here.” I was petrified. They had sent my son’s remains with PTT. I signed a paper and got the package. I took a cab home.”²⁰⁹

Like Mother Emine who had to keep her daughter’s body in her freezer, or like Mother Saliha who picked up her daughter’s pieces in her skirt and carried her home as I mentioned in Chapter 1, Mother Halise was coerced into a violent intimacy with her son’s remains. The only way Mother Halise differs from the other two mothers is that she is the literal addressee of necropolitical state violence and her son’s murder is literalization of dehumanizing state violence. Another case where a Kurdish mother becomes the direct addressee of the necropolitical power of the state happened in a state institution itself. Mother Güler’s son joined PKK in 1993 and after eight months in the Kurdish army, he was martyred. In the following extract, she talks about her interaction with the police officer in Diyarbakir Police Department.

Mother Güler: We went to the police department. I told them my son had been killed and I was there to identify him. The officer opened a drawer and pulled out a bunch of photographs of dead guerillas. He tossed them in front of me. I looked at them. They were all naked from waist up full of bruises and wounds. I looked at them. Couldn’t find my son among them. Then they sent me to a police station.²¹⁰

Mother Güler was forced to look at the pictures of multiple anonymous dead Kurdish bodies in order to identify her son. She is not the only mother that went through this psychological state violence. I talked to several mothers who were asked to look at pictures of dead bodies on computers, case files or in mass graves to identify their own children. I previously discussed how the violent regimes of *invisibility* in enforced disappearances, mass graves and prohibition of Kurdish funerals produce non-corporeal subjects of necropathy. Here, on the other hand, we bear witness to a violent regime of *visibility*. Looking at those pictures is an act of mothering the dead, a form of radical maternal grief that is similar to that of Kurdish mothers who had to listen to

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Mother Güler, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Kurdish prisoners in the city walls of Sur groan in pain for weeks or who collected body pieces of their children from dumpsters.

The cases I analyzed above involving sexual, discursive, and necropolitical state violence against Kurdish mothers indicate that Kurdish mothers are not only indirectly victimized by the state through the killings of their children. They are also systematically and directly targeted by the state for being the primary site where Kurdishness is thought to be reproduced. After examining the multiple ways in which the Kurdish reproductive body is touched by the hand of the state, I would like to end this chapter with a quotation from a Peace Mother whose “smell” metaphor explains how the Kurdish reproductive body gets intimately and permanently connected to the touch of the state within a violent regime of *visibility* where the state utilizes multiple senses to detect and surveil Kurdishness.

Mother Sultan: Once you get yourself talked about by the state, your life is over. It gives you a smell. You have a smell now. You stink. No matter how clean you are, you stink to the state.²¹¹

The smell metaphor reiterates the complex interplay between the biological and cultural in the making of modern Turkey. While Turkishness was constructed as a reachable and desired destination that is above the limitations of biological race, Kurdishness is repeatedly reduced to the visceral. Kurdish breastmilk, vagina, smell, and body hair makes Kurdish women the target of state violence. The question that is at the center of the following chapter is how Kurdish women mother and grieve in the face of this reduction of Kurdish body to the visceral and sensory. The response I got from Peace Mothers pointed to a form of mothering that is not visceral or sensory, that turns this reduction on its head and mother children beyond and towards death. This took me back to a conversation in an interview made with a Kurdish mother, a former PKK guerilla. She

²¹¹ Mother Sultan, oral interview with author, November 2019.

said “[c]hild was something that happened elsewhere. It was something people wrote poems about. It was a metaphor.” This statement captures the core of Peace Mothers’ mothering practices. Mothering a child whose physical existence is constantly threatened and whose death is always assumed to happen means finding a way to mother beyond the body.

Chapter 3

Necromothering: Insurgency Through Radical Care

We went through a lot during the office but I remember this one encounter with a Kurdish mother that tells it all. We were in front of this 4-story house which was destroyed and half-burnt. The mother and I sat in the yard. I held her hand. I was trying to find the right thing to say. I was wondering. Was she resentful? Was she angry or hurt? As I was trying to decide how to approach her, she broke the silence and said in Kurdish “My daughter, lift your head. Keep it up. It is ok. God bless Kurdish people. God bless you!”²¹²

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Kurdish mothers respond to the necropolitical state violence analyzed in Chapter 1 and 2. State violence against Kurdish women explodes the boundaries between life and death and private and public through three interconnected forms of state violence (sexual, discursive and necropolitical) exercised on them specifically for being mothers. The examples I present in this chapter showcase how Kurdish mothers disrupt the dominant progress narrative around “good motherhood” that revolves around the protection of the child and takes its innocence as given. They also demonstrate that Kurdish mothers push back against the myth of “mothers as vessels of peace” by not only producing discursive insurgency through (re)production of intergenerational counter knowledge but also literally putting their children and their own bodies into harm’s way to respond to state violence in a non-affective, militant way. This chapter consists of two sections. In the first section of the chapter, I bear witness to three forms of mothering practiced by Kurdish mothers that leads to a re-imagination of motherhood into a revolutionary praxis that rescues the reproductive body from the constraints imposed by colonization, patriarchy, and even feminisms. In the second section, I examine the ways in which Kurdish mothers transform the “penal architecture” of the Turkish state into sites

²¹² Gültan Kışanak, ed. *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics: Female Politicians Writing from Prison* (London: Pluto Press, 2022), 49.

of gendered insurgency not only by carrying their “private” identity into prisons but also by turning prisons into homes.²¹³

Militant Mothers: Rescuing the Dead, Refusal of Care, and Mothering towards Death

Violent intimacies forged between the dead and the living and the temporal and spatial reorganization of the boundary between life and death in the Kurdish context radically transforms the way Kurdish women mother and relate to death. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, state violence against Kurds continues beyond death and so does the resistance to it. This chapter centers stories of Kurdish mothers whose mothering practices and systems of care in response to state violence are not only affective but also militant. The insurgent care and grief framework I call for challenges the narratives of care that recognize racialized women only as victims of war and fail to see them as political subjects actively involved in anti-colonial resistance movements. In other words, Kurdish women are not only excluded from historical subjectivity, their suffering falling through the cracks of national and international laws suspended by the state of emergency, they are also erased from the imagination of what resistance looks like, as well. The stories in this section disrupt the narrative trope of gendered erasure. The following cases reveal three interconnected practices of insurgent mothering and care that are essential to the imagination of the insurgent care framework I am calling for: rescuing the dead, refusal of care, and mothering towards death.

The first story is about Kurdish women who divorce their grief from the physical body of the lost subject. The dead bodies of their loved ones are deliberately unconsecrated by Kurdish women in order for the dead to escape further state violence. As mentioned in the introduction,

²¹³ Bargu, “Sovereignty as Erasure,” 45.

Sinan Antoon urges us to think about care beyond the living. He says that “material and discursive resources and energies are dedicated to rescue the living and to tend to their wounds,” which is never enough; care is always carried out unequally. Indeed, “humans live very unequal lives and the inequalities that structure their lives extend to their deaths and beyond as well.”²¹⁴

The mothers of Cemile, whose body was kept in a freezer for days, and Ceylan, whose body pieces had to be carried home in her mother’s skirt, know all too well that the death of a body does not necessarily stop its racialization and remove it from the state’s reach. Mother Taybet’s body was buried by the local government authorities 23 days after she was killed, and her 9 children and other family members were not allowed to attend the funeral. Calling it a funeral would actually be wrong. She was just hastily buried with no religious ceremony and family attendance. This is further testament to the violence exclusion of Kurdish mothers from the “sacred motherhood” category and Muslim identity.

The state violence that Kurds have been experiencing for decades has created conditions where traditional practices of care that occur after death such as funerals, memorial services, collective mourning, and religious rituals are made impossible. Kurdish funerals have always been a site of conflict due to the politicization of Kurdish death both by the Kurds and the Turkish state. The oppression of the Kurdish people and their resistance movement offer numerous examples as to how racialized body remains a site of conflict after his/her death. In other words, examination of the alternative framework of care Kurdish women create requires seeing Kurdish death not as a physical and temporal end of a life but as a politically charged site of oppression and resistance where racialization and state violence continues. This chapter tells the stories of Kurdish women who “rescue the dead” in a different way than Antoon’s formulation.

²¹⁴ Antoon, “Rescuing the Dead.”

Rescuing the Dead

The cases Antoon analyzed in his talk were cases of rescuing the dead by physically caring for the dead to make them griveable and to restore their dignity. Being stuck in the necrohabitats created by state violence during the state of emergency regime in Turkish Kurdistan in 2015, Kurdish mothers did the same. They had to. A short movie directed by Garip Celik based on Mother Emine's narration of the time when she had to put her daughter Cemile in the freezer documents the care ritual Mother Emine did on her daughter, how she washed her, wrapped her in a kefen (a white cloth wrapped around a dead body in the Islamic tradition), sang her a lament and put her in the freezer. These stories abound as much as the silence that surrounded them in the Turkish national imaginary. What I witnessed during my fieldwork, however, is a mothering practice that does not stop with physically caring for the dead, an act of mothering that does not prioritize restoring the dignity of the dead or making it grievable but rather rescues it by making the corpse irrelevant to dignity or grief. They rescue the dead by enabling the corpse to escape from the grips of post-death state violence. Grief is no longer attached to the physical body of the dead and mothering is more about reproducing non-corporeal, representative children that belong to Kurdish resistance. The act of remembering and grief does not require a symbolic reminder of the dead such as a resting place. This is a complex response to the ambivalent nature of state violence which on one hand attempts to erase Kurdish identity and resistance in the "invisible penal architecture" through forced disappearances and mass graves while on the other hand spectacularizing Kurdish death and torturing the corpses, creating violence regimes of visibility.²¹⁵ Peace Mothers respond to both by rendering the physical body irrelevant to their acts of mothering and maternal grief. Necropathy, then, emerges out of this radical response where they physically

²¹⁵ Bargu, "Another Necropolitics," 45.

care for the dead in necrohabitats while removing the dead body from the grief register they create at the same time.

The following extracts from interviews with two peace mothers showcase how necropathy dissolves the physical body into a non-corporeal subject of loss in Kurdish maternal grief register and saves it from the grip of necropolitical state violence.

Mother Bedia: My daughter joined the PKK and fell martyr 5 months later. [...] When we went there to claim her body, I chanted “Martyrs don’t die”! The policeman said they wouldn’t give us the body if I kept doing it. I said “Give her to me or not. It doesn’t matter. I saw my kid. I know she is a martyr. You killed her. That’s all I need to know. You can feed her to dogs if you want. It doesn’t matter whether I bury her, do this or that. You can let the dogs eat her!”²¹⁶

Mother Bedia’s approach to her daughter’s dead body is almost identical to that of many Peace Mothers I interviewed. Her account demonstrates that Kurdish women reject the individuality of death and grief and that Kurdish maternal memory operates in a collective and non-corporeal fashion. Death is not about an individual body. It happens to the Kurdish body as a collective. After three decades of witnessing extreme dehumanization of the Kurdish body by the state, Kurdish women created an alternative necropolitics in which their power over death resides in their agency to free their insurgency from the constraints of the physicality of the dead body. The dismissal of the biological connection between the dead and the living as the ultimate condition for the emergence of maternal grief and the insurgency that follows it prevents the state from reducing the Kurdish body to merely a tool of intimidation and discipline.

Mother Emine: I was married and living in Istanbul. They came to take my father and my uncle again. They took two other people from two villages. They took two people from three different villages and took them to the police station. They tortured them for a week in detention and murdered them. What can I say, my daughter? (She calls me daughter here). My father and my uncle were among them. We didn’t see them. They were executed at the station. They put their bodies in a van and set it on fire.

²¹⁶ Mother Bedia, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Interviewer: So your father doesn't have a grave?

He does not, Love. They say he does but he doesn't. My dad is buried in a hole with 10 people. I went there a year ago. I went and had those 11 people dug up. They have a grave now in our village. We buried them all together. They said they could run a DNA test (to identify which bones belonged to her father). I said I didn't want a DNA test. They gave us the bones. We brought them to the village and buried them together. They say, "Let's do a DNA test." I say, "They all are my father," because our blood became one with those who were killed with my father.²¹⁷

Mother Emine's is yet another case where DNA connection loses its significance as part of the Kurdish grief register. It demonstrates how individualized death and grief are rejected by Kurdish women and how necrography operates in a collective and non-corporeal fashion. The Peace Mothers turn necropolitics on its head and create their own necropower as racialized political subjects which have traditionally been excluded from the history of revolutionary politics, particularly in the Turkish context where militancy, and revolutionary practices have been read as masculine forms of political action. Another way that Peace Mothers not only neutralize Turkish state necropower but also create their own is through refusal of care. Kurdish mothers refuse to center the well-being and safety of their children in their mothering practices. Every single mother I interviewed had children who were killed, incarcerated or tortured by the state and some have children fighting in the Kurdish insurgency. None of them quit their radical mothering practices despite the fact that those practices lead to the death, incarceration, or torture of their children. The following section is an account of Kurdish mothers' refusal to care in conventional ways.

Refusal of Care

In her 2019 article titled "Mother, Politician, and Guerilla: The Emergence of a New Political Imagination in Kurdistan through Women's Bodies and Speech," Nazan Üstündağ

²¹⁷ Mother Emine, oral interview with author, November 2019.

engages with a question asked by Veena Das in her work on Lacan's analysis of Antigone: "How does one not simply articulate loss through a dramatic gesture of defiance but learn to inhabit the world, or inhabit it again, in a gesture of mourning?"²¹⁸ Üstündağ immediately identifies this distinction between "a dramatic gesture of defiance" and "a dramatic gesture of mourning" as a false opposition since mourning and defiance is intimately connected in Kurdish resistance. Üstündağ examines three figures in her article: The mother, the woman politician, the woman guerilla. I will build on her analysis on the Kurdish mother in which she argues that the Kurdish mother is "a limit figure between sacred and sacrilege" who "oscillates between the two positions of descent into everyday life to do repair work and dramatic transgression."²¹⁹ She believes that it is this dual position that makes Kurdish mothers uniquely suited to speak the truth. She asks: "How come the figure of the mother is so uniquely situated to speak in defense of those whose uniqueness is erased by law and violence?"²²⁰ I am also interested in examining the unique and paradoxical position of Kurdish mothers in Turkey where, on one hand, they mobilize their motherhood identity to call for peace between Turkey and PKK and, on the other hand, put their traditional mothering duties on hold and actively integrate their reproductive bodies and their children's bodies into conflict.

For Üstündağ, it is this oscillation between descending "into everyday life to do the repair work and dramatic transgression" that grants the Kurdish mother the power to speak the truth.²²¹ I diverge from her approach when it comes to how they cause this transgression. In this section, I present two objections to Üstündağ's analysis on the reasons why Kurdish mothers are in a unique

²¹⁸ Nazan Üstündağ, "Mother, Politician, and Guerilla: The Emergence of a New Political Imagination in Kurdistan through Women's Bodies and Speech," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 30, no. 2 (2019), 115.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

position to speak the truth, which will be supported with interview data. The first objection is to her argument that Kurdish mothers descend into everyday life to do the repair work in the face of constant conflict with the state and the second objection is to the argument that they use the “affects, roles, legitimacies, and values” granted to them by the state to cause dramatic transgression in public.

Although she aptly suggests that Kurdish Mothers disrupt the traditional understanding of motherhood, her reading Kurdish mothers’ unique position as an oscillation between the private and the political with pre-determined roles assigned to them actually reinforces the divide she is contesting. Üstündağ follows the Black feminist tradition that powerfully challenges the whitewashing of the private sphere by white feminisms as a site of patriarchal oppression. US Black feminism has long taken issue with white feminist approach to the private by claiming it as a site of healing and insurgency. As I mentioned earlier, bell hooks presents home as a refuge, a safe place where wounds of racial discrimination are healed and where the marginalized can affirm each other in “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance. Home, in her formulation, figures as a source of an alternative social reproduction, one that reproduces a collective identity, a history of the subjugated, a counterculture. While US Black feminism offers us a powerful rubric to understand how the reproductive body has the capacity to create insurgent bodies and counter knowledges through social reproduction, the analysis of Kurdish home and reproductive body requires a more nuanced take on the home. Üstündağ’s account on Kurdish home and Kurdish mothers as the site and actors, respectively, of repair work overlooks two facts. First, the Kurdish home has never been a “private” space; it has always been a site of destruction and surveillance. Second, Kurdish mothers do not do repair work for multiple reasons.

As I discussed at length in the previous chapter, the Kurdish home is a primary target of the necropolitical power of the state. Since its establishment, the Turkish state's necropolitical practices against the Kurdish population included destruction of Kurdish cities. In addition to its physical destruction by the necropolitical state power, Kurdish home is also constantly interrupted by the disciplinary/biopolitical practices of the state, as is Kurdish motherhood. As I will prove with ethnographic data in this chapter, the politics of Peace Mothers does not mobilize the conventional affects of motherhood that focus on "repair work." At the center of their movement is a radical reorganization of the private and refusal of conventional motherhood as an offensive response to state violence through militarization of reproductive body and weaponization of Kurdish children.

Leyla Güven, one of the figureheads of Kurdish resistance and Kurdish feminism explains why Kurdish mothers are at the center of Kurdish resistance and what the insurgent register of maternal affect they create looks like:

Leyla Güven: Kurds' peace mothers are highly politicized and woke. Kurds' stay-at-home are also politicized. Kurdish mothers who protest in front of prisons are politicized, as well. They had to become politicized. Their houses were raided every day. Soldiers stomped on their kids heads with their soldier boots. Their husbands were beaten up, tortured, and arrested in front of their children. They went to prisons every day, beaten up, humiliated, but they still saw their children. When a mother went to the infamous Amed prison, known for the torture happening there, to visit her son Kamber Ates, she couldn't talk to him because she did not speak Turkish and it was forbidden to speak Kurdish in state institutions. This story was made into a book later. She learns one sentence in Turkish "How are you Kamber Ates?" and she kept saying it over and over again during the 10-minute visit with her son and then left. People still talk about this. It was women who went through this cruelty. It was mothers.²²²

In a state prison where her son is physically kept apart from her, Kamber's mother is also denied an affective relationship with her son due to the ban on Kurdish language. Under the colonial regime that subjugates Kurdish culture, bans Kurdish language, and even funerals,

²²² Leyla Güven, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Kurdish mothers inevitably create an alternative affect register. Kurdish maternal affect is never private and does not revolve around repair work. The conditions under which the Kurdish home exists and operates make it impossible for the Kurdish mothers to do the repair work as the following interview extracts evidence.

Tuyader: When my husband was in prison, my children were little. The soldiers raided our house every day. My husband was already in prison and they were harassing us every day. My son was 12 then and they arrested him, my 12-year-old son! In front of my eyes, they put out cigarettes on his hands. They kept saying that we were sheltering guerillas.

Rojda: Our house was in the city at the time on Fatih Street. It was a one-story house. It was raided every single day. Our roof was full of police officers. They also barricaded the front door. I yelled at them “you raid our house every day. You scare our children. Why are you here every day?”. The police responded “We feel like it. Mind your own business.”²²³

These accounts showcase that the Kurdish home is under surveillance 24/7 and the members of the private is not immune to state violence. Every single interlocutor I interviewed mentioned that their houses are either raided every day or barricaded by the police. Kurdish mothers cannot “descend into everyday life to do the repair work” because the Kurdish everyday life is marked with daily conflict and state violence. Moreover, both sides of this supposed repair work, the child and the mother, are tortured and arrested within the private in everyday life. However, the conditions that make it impossible for Kurdish mothers to do repair work do not lead to a failure in motherhood but to a refusal of traditional motherhood roles for the sake of militant insurgency. In other words, Kurdish mothers do not use the “affects, roles, legitimacies, and values,” granted to them by the state to cause dramatic transgression in public. On the contrary, they acknowledge the fact that these “affects, roles, legitimacies, and values” have never been

²²³ Mother Tuyader, oral interview with author, November 2019. Mother Rojda, oral interview with author, November 2019.

granted to them in the first place and they claim an “illegitimate” motherhood role to resist the state in a non-affective manner.

Mother Didem: I was actively involved in Kurdish politics even before I joined Peace Mothers. I would go to the Newroz celebrations, protests etc. Sometimes my family would ask me why I was going and I would say “I feel guilty if I stay home. My conscience would eat me away if I stayed”. Luckily my kids took after me. They are involved in the movement. Their dad would blame me for getting them involved. I was arrested 21 times. They raided my house 20 times, kept me in police custody for three, four days every time I was arrested.²²⁴

Mother Didem is a Peace Mother I interviewed in Amed. She is one of the most active members of Peace Mothers with a long history of political activism and incarceration. What her statement demonstrates is that the urge she feels to participate in the Kurdish resistance outweighs her urge to care for and protect her children, which is traditionally the ultimate life purpose of a mother. Mother Didem does not do the repair work because, as a political activist arrested repeatedly, she is simply not there to do it. However, arrests are not the only reason she does not mother in the conventional sense. Her agency as a political subject has to be acknowledged here. The arrests are not the reason why she does not do the repair work. The fact that she does not do the repair work is the reason why she is arrested. The consciousness and conscience of Kurdish mothers as racialized subjects to commit to the Kurdish resistance comes from long-standing maternal grief, and this racialized maternal grief politicizes them into “illegitimate” mothers which in turn criminalizes them. During my field work, I listened to Peace Mothers’ self-reflexive accounts on their mothering practices. It is a constant internal conflict for them to reconcile their political identity with their motherhood.

My children were never happy. You will ask how I mean. They were never happy because I kept leaving them to go to protests. I was aware what I was doing. I would tell myself to stay home with my kids, but I never did. It was not what they signed up for. They didn’t choose that life. Do I have regrets. Definitely not. I was never there for them. I would leave them on their own and run to the streets. I was fighting for peace. I left them alone a lot...

²²⁴ Mother Didem, oral interview with author, November 2019.

They are proud of me, though. They support me. They say “Mom, you go, we got this.” I sometimes tell them “How unfair it was for me to treat you like that. I would leave you alone when you were little.” They would look after each other. The older would take care of the younger. They say “Mom, your world is different. Nothing is gonna happen to you. We are not worried.” I come home at night. They run to me, all of them. One says, “Kiss me,” the other says, “Kiss me first!” I feel guilty sometimes cause I left them alone a lot, but I had to. I am not afraid of the state. I have one life. If it has come this far, it can go wherever from now on. I do not care.²²⁵

Almost every mother I interviewed made self-reflexive accounts similar to the one presented above and yet none stated that they regret the way they cared for their children. None of them called themselves a failure as a mother. Moreover, while acknowledging the hardships they went through as kids, all the children I talked to were unanimously proud of their mothers. Kurdish children’s appreciation of their mothers despite what they have been put through by them is proof that while Kurdish mothers may neglect their daily motherhood duties for the sake of resistance, they never neglect the social reproduction aspect of their motherhood that instills Kurdish political consciousness into their children.

Leyla: After my dad was arrested for the last time, he did not come back. Then my mother’s struggle started to take care of the kids. I was the oldest daughter, and I had an older brother. My mother cried all the time, but she was also trying to raise us, be involved in the resistance, go visit my dad in prison... We were struggling financially. We all had to work in cotton fields. I was always with my mom helping her out, helping my siblings. I had to take on half of the mothering job which continued for a long time... After my father was taken, I could not go to school. My brother had to drop out, too, because my dad was arrested and he had to be the bread winner. He was 13 and I was 10. We had to take care of the family. I had two younger brothers. I was ten years old when I started working in the cotton field with my mom or she would go and I would look after my younger brothers... I was picking cotton at 10. I was working under very harsh conditions, under the sun all day in 110 degrees. I will never forget this one incident. I had a baby sister. My mother snuck out to breastfeed her for a minute. I was covering for her, you know, till she was done with breastfeeding. I wasn’t aware of it but apparently, I left some cotton on the branch. The overseer yelled at me. He was furious. He screamed “look what you did. You left half of the cotton on the branch” and he slapped me. I was petrified. I was ten. I got slapped by this man. I was ten.²²⁶

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Leyla Güven, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Leyla's story is shared by every Kurdish child in Turkey. Child labor is a common theme that repeatedly came up during the interviews. As a result of forced migration and economic subjugation of Kurdish people, Kurdish children join the workforce as unregistered workers at a very young age. Exclusion of Kurdish children from the national education system and their forced integration into unregistered workforce from a very early age inevitably restructures the private sphere and turns it into a site where repair work is constantly contested. The child is not part of the private as we know it. Any approach that treats the Kurdish child as the recipient of the repair work in the private space makes the mistake of attributing an unquestioned integrity to the private. Just like Kurdish mothers are denied and/or refuse to claim the "affects, roles, legitimacies, and values" granted to mothers, Kurdish children are also denied and/or refuse to claim the "affects, roles, legitimacies, and values" attributed to the category of the child. Like Gunes, a former PKK guerilla aptly put "[c]hild was something that happened elsewhere. It was something people wrote poems about. It was a metaphor."²²⁷ Along with state violence directly targeting Kurdish children, subversive mothering practices of Kurdish mothers in response to the state violence is complicit in the making of Kurdish child into a metaphor. However, as the rest of Leyla's story below demonstrates, the relationship between Kurdish children and their mothers is far from being antagonistic.

Leyla: My mom is a goddess in every sense of the word. When I got involved in the resistance, I didn't think she could take it. I talked to her. I said "You went through so much. How does it make you feel to see a piece of you, your daughter be a part of the resistance movement?" But looking at her I see she is more active, stronger. She is involved in the movement, as well. My dad and my mom are actively involved in Kurdish politics. I tell her sometimes, "You are old, you cannot survive prison." She says, "I cannot live without resistance anymore. If a piece of me is involved, I can't sit still and do nothing. I will fight right next to her. I have been through too much to stay behind". She is actively involved in the resistance movement.²²⁸

²²⁷ Bingöl, "*Bizim gizli bir hikâyemiz var*," 46.

²²⁸ Leyla Güven, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Sharing a collective racialized memory, Kurdish mothers and children are born with the knowledge that they are not under the protection of a contract with the state that endows them with certain “affects, roles, legitimacies, and values” in the private space. Kurdish mothers’ complicity in rendering the Kurdish child an impossible concept is testament to their radical approach to motherhood as something that goes beyond the temporally limited, biological connection between a mother and a child. It also emerges from the recognition of the fact that Kurdish child, as a “terrorist” entity and a threat, is always already “touched by the state” even before it is physically born and it is impossible to stop this touch so instead of investing into a doomed project of protecting the Kurdish child, Kurdish mothers turns the biopolitical power of the state on its head by doing two things: putting their children in harm’s way and turning them into actual threats that the state already assume them to be.

Mother Sultan: We made both children work. Our son worked at an auto-repair shop because we were forced to migrate and had lost everything we had. We put our daughter to work at a textile sweat shop. I was working there, too. My daughter had just graduated elementary school. We would go to work together. I didn’t know the city at all. After my oldest daughter got arrested, she was in police custody. How do I go see her? How do I go to Beşiktaş? I don’t know the streets, nothing. I am illiterate. I can barely speak Turkish. I had my younger daughter (11) come with me. She could speak Turkish and she was literate. She did not know the city, either. She would read the street signs and bus signs. That’s how we got to the police station where they kept my older daughter.²²⁹

Mother Sultan makes her 11-year-old daughter, Ceren, join her in her trips to the police station where her older daughter is kept, often causing her to skip school and utilizes her as her translator when she speaks with the police. A young girl has to navigate a city she doesn’t know and is repeatedly inserted into a dialogue with the Turkish police which she knows all too well is violent towards her people. When I interviewed Ceren, Mother Sultan’s younger daughter that accompanied her to the police station and the prison where her older sister is serving time and

²²⁹ Mother Sultan, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Serhat, Mother Sultan's son, I asked them about their childhood and both struggled to understand the question. It was as if they had no memory that would be characterized as childhood memories. The only experience they talked about was how they worked at an auto repair shop and a textile shop – a sweatshop. From day one, Ceren and I became close friends and she graciously agreed to be my translator both during fieldwork and when she translated the interview data from Kurdish into Turkish. In our off-the-record conversations, Ceren expressed a deep grief over losing her childhood home, the animals, the pomegranate tree they had in their garden and how her childhood was an experience shaped by forced migration, forced integration into workforce and state violence. Her childhood experience operated on a schedule determined by a grieving and highly politicized mother and the mothering practices she chose to perform.

Mother Sultan is not alone in this form of mothering. An anecdote from Gültan Kişanak's book "Kurt Siyasetinin Mor Rengi" (Color Purple of the Kurdish Politics) which is a collection of essays written by Kurdish women political prisoners from different prisons across Turkey is a striking example of how ongoing structural state violence rewires what is called motherhood "reflexes":

There was an enormous pressure on my father and my uncles. One of my uncles was wanted. The police demanded us to turn him over. My father died a week after he experienced intense torture in detention. I left my village bearing the pain of losing him. In 1998, when I returned to my village, they came to arrest me. I had a 20-day-old baby. I will never forget my mother's outcry that day. She had had enough. She looked like she had lost it. When the police put me in the patrol car, my mother put my baby in my arms and she also brought my grandmother and put her in the car, as well. Police officers were stunned. She would have sent the entire village with me if she could because she knew too well what "being taken" meant from what happened to my father.²³⁰

There is a lot to unpack in this story. First, it showcases how state violence and around the clock surveillance is a vicious loop that drags multiple generations through the racializing

²³⁰ Kişanak, *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics*, 172.

mechanisms of the Turkish state. Second, Kurdish women who find themselves in this loop of state violence the moment they are born also put themselves through another loop: the loop of insurgency. In other words, generations of racialized victims form generations of insurgents. Third, we see a familiar pattern of deliberately inserting Kurdish children into the Turkish penal structure instead of keeping them away from the harm's way. There are four generations in this anecdote; the Kurdish woman who is getting arrested, her baby, her mother and her grandmother. When a baby and a grandmother are placed into a patrol car intentionally by a Kurdish woman, the police is baffled. The state's disciplinary power is under attack. The fact that the woman "knew all too well what "being taken" meant" and still sent their loved ones to the police station when she didn't have to signifies a mothering practice that is unique to Kurdish mothers and stems from a unique racialized maternal grief and a specific historical context. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the phrase "touched by the state" (Devletin eli degdi) used by many of my interlocutors to explain state violence not only meant the literal, physical touch of the state in the form of torture and rape but also the trauma that reaches into the collective Kurdish memory. The mother in the above anecdote witnesses her daughter getting arrested and she recognizes the "touch" that impacts multiple generations and yet she still leaves her grandchild and her mother in the police car to be touched by the state. By doing so, she not only creates a microcosm of a hundred-year-old system of racialization of the Turkish state in a single patrol car but also carries out a discursive attack where she willingly endangers her family's life to take away the state's power to terrorize.

Mothering towards Death

A common thread in the narratives of Peace Mothers I interviewed is the pride they feel towards their guerilla children, dead or alive. I did not hear a single expression of resentment,

anger or disappointment from Peace Mothers I interviewed towards their guerilla children. On the contrary, three of the Peace Mothers I interviewed in the Istanbul diaspora complained about their children not being politicized enough. They asserted that the perks of modernity and urban life and the diaspora conditions of urban capitalism were leading to their assimilation.

Kurdish mothers not only disrupt the definition of traditional motherhood by prioritizing resistance but also by creating insurgent bodies out of their children through social reproduction in the limited time and space they have left with in the private. The first two cases I present in the following section demonstrate the interpenetrating relationship between the Kurdish guerilla identity and Kurdish motherhood. Rojda and Nalin are former guerillas who served in the PKK for over a decade and then become civilians and mothers living in the European diaspora. In the book *Bizim Gizli bir Hikayemiz Var: Dagdan Annelige Kadinlar (We Have a Secret Story: Women from Mountains to Motherhood)*, Berivan Bingol presents data from interviews with former female guerillas who are navigating motherhood in various diasporas. Nalin, another former guerilla, compares motherhood to being a guerilla:

Nalin

Being a guerilla, from a nationalist perspective, is more sacred than motherhood. It is for a bigger, collective cause. Motherhood, on the other hand, might be sacred for you as an individual but it is mundane for others, normalized. Motherhood is a big purpose on an individual level. Being a guerilla is about fighting for millions. More sacred. That's the difference between them. Being a mother is as valuable as being a guerilla because you raise your kid, shape them in a way that you create revolution in them. Both are difficult.²³¹

While Nalin makes a clear distinction and comparison between motherhood and guerilla warfare and puts being a guerilla on a higher pedestal in terms of its sanctity, many mothers represented in the book and Peace Mothers I interviewed blur this distinction and reveals the

²³¹ Bingöl, "*Bizim gizli bir hikâyemiz var,*" 34.

intimate connection between the two identities. In the book, Rojda is asked how she would prepare her children for the future:

Rojda

Interviewer: What would you want to put in your children's backpack to prepare them for the future?

Rojda: It depends on where they are going. What would I put in their backpacks? Sugar, water and bread. They would increase their stamina, keep their immune system working. That makes the most sense. I couldn't put anything else. What else would I? Clothes? No. The only thing that matters is that they have food, water and sugar for resistance. Soldier mentality... Did you expect me to say 'courage, love, hope? If I want them to survive, love and hope will not do that. I am a soldier.'²³²

Rojda's guerilla identity penetrates the ways she mothers her children. Her approach to motherhood is in direct opposition to the Western progress narrative that is at the center of mothering practices in the Global North. The Kurdish child is once again not an innocent entity to be defended against violence. Rojda's first-hand experience of violence and the prospect of violence for the child inform Rojda's mothering practices. Peace Mothers who are actively involved in Kurdish liberation movement and is subject to state violence on a daily basis takes a similar approach to motherhood. Children are put in close proximity with violence through their exposure to state violence everyday not only by the state itself but also by their mothers. The following interview extract is lengthy, but I chose not to interrupt its flow by trimming it because its flow reveals the typical cycle of life unique to Kurds and the structures and mechanisms that make the specter of death loom over the Kurdish body as a collective. It is also a powerful account of the multiple manifestations of Kurdish death, the cycle of violence leading to a cycle of insurgency and how death stops being scary when life is made unlivable through economic subjugation, never ending harassment and state surveillance.

²³² Bingöl, "*Bizim gizli bir hikâyemiz var,*" 12.

Mother Akrime: “It is like a wedding when a person dies with their people” a Kurdish saying. We raised our children under horrible conditions. I believed in the law and justice and sent my children to school thinking that they would become lawyers and defend our rights and bring us justice. I had eight children. Three of them died. One died of measles. We had no one. Their father was in prison (political prisoner). The other died at seven months old. The third died at the age of 27. He studied to be a science teacher. He was in Istanbul for four years and came back home in 2019. He struggled financially during his studies. We were very poor. He would dig pencils and erasers from dumpsters. He would sell gums, desserts, and simit (a form of bagel) on the streets to make allowance. My children never forget that we had nothing but water in the fridge for days. We lived in a single-room apartment. All six of us. The soldiers destroyed our home, exiled us, burned everything we had. Then they asked during a raid “why don’t you have anything but water in your fridge?” and I said, “Ask that to yourself!”

My son was so smart. He double majored in science and math education. He had two degrees. If we lived in a just country, if he was appointed as a teacher, he could teach in both fields. But we have been named terrorist. It doesn’t matter if we are educated or not. They don’t give us what we deserve. My son was unemployed for four years. He then studied law remotely. His diploma was shipped to us after he killed himself. He found a job in Konya and worked there for four months and fourteen days. Then he quit. God knows what they did to him there. He eats rat poison, writes a suicide note and hangs himself to make sure he wouldn’t survive.

They say, “You sent your child to the mountains” No one goes to the mountains for the kicks of it. You (the state) leave them no other option. You torture them, deny them their rights. They either kill themselves or go to the mountains or you either kill them or imprison them. The prisons are full of children. Children! Imagine having three college degrees and you still have 75 kurus (Turkish version of cents) in your pocket when they find your body!²³³

Mother Akrime’s statement starts with a Kurdish saying that equates collective dying with a wedding. I will analyze at length this reference to wedding in association with death later since it is central to the Peace Mothers’ approach to death and loss and it comes up a few times in other interviews. With respect to the particular interview extract presented above, however, the saying becomes the backdrop of Mother Akrime’s story as an encapsulation to an experience shared by thousands of Kurds. By telling the stories of her three dead children as casualties of the warlike conditions of Kurdish existence, she points the finger at the state as the perpetrator of the war

²³³ Mother Akrime, oral interview with author, November 2019.

crimes against Kurds. Her account works against the narrative that constructs Kurdish children as terrorists and Kurdish mothers as (re)producers of terrorists. She did try to navigate the system in the “legitimate” way: she sent her son to school, he did look for a job, he did try to be a law-abiding citizen and yet he was still pushed to death by the state. When there are only three forms of existence available to Kurdish children (dead, guerilla, or prisoner), there is no point in taking a defensive stance against the state. Therefore, Kurdish maternal politics become militant and offensive.

Mother Perihan: I was expecting my daughter to join the army. I knew it. She was such a patriotic child (Yurtsever) that she was going to go to the mountains sooner or later. As I mentioned before, resistance (Mucadele) is all we talk about at home. Resistance is our whole world. We know nothing else. We don't talk about anything else... I am extremely proud of my daughter who joined the army. I am so happy that a piece of me is fighting in those mountains. I cry every time I see those Yazidi women being sold in ISIS camps. My daughter is saving them. My daughter was very successful academically. I wish she could continue with her education, but I told you before you want a better world for your kids. I always say, first the world will get better, then the country and then people. No matter how much you appreciate this fight, it is still hard to send your child away but when I see Yazidi women being sold in street markets or ISIS militants kidnap women and girls or this or that, I tell my other daughter “I won't stop you, if any of you decide to go to the mountains. I am so grateful that my daughter is fighting against the brutality. I felt so proud when she left. I never cried. Not even once. There is a war. I picture those women in the street markets and I say every woman should be like my daughter. She should fight for her people. My daughter went to Sengal, too (Where Isis kidnaps and sell Yazidi women). She was in Sengal when I saw those women on TV. I cannot express how proud I was of her. I was filled with so much courage that my sadness just disappeared. My daughter is there fighting against those who put her race through hell.”²³⁴

Mother Perihan's account is a clear example of how the Kurdish home operates as a site of counter-knowledge production. Instead of keeping the conflict out of the private space, Kurdish mothers make conflict a constant component of their household. Even when there is no physical conflict at home, they make conflict constantly present at home by not talking about anything but resistance and watching the resistance on TV. She makes sure the enemy and its unspeakable

²³⁴ Mother Perihan, oral interview with author, November 2019.

actions are known to their children. When she says “I was expecting my daughter to join the army. I knew it. She was such a patriotic (*yurtsever*) child that she was going to go to the mountains sooner or later,” Mother Perihan implicitly points at how her mothering practices led to her daughter joining the army. Mother Perihan makes an explicit reference to the insurgent social reproduction she practices when she says: “When I see Yazidi women being sold in street markets or ISIS militants kidnap women and girls or this or that, I tell my other daughter: ‘I won’t stop you, if any of you decide to go to the mountains. I am so grateful that my daughter is fighting against the brutality.’ Mother Perihan’s involvement in Kurdish politics and her construction of the private space as a site of insurgency is the driving force that led her daughter to join Kurdish army. Another driving force is the complicity of Kurdish mothers in the making of the Kurdish child into a metaphor as discussed above.

Mother Asuman: You ask what I went through. Me and my children. I can tell you this. I never know what having a life feels like. Neither did my children. I have never forgotten the fact that I never gave them a life. My uncle fell martyr in 1996. That is when our world fell apart. We never saw his body. They tossed his body into bushes and burnt it. They did not give us the body. My mom was a young woman at the time, and she was involved in Kurdish politics as part of HEP, the Kurdish party. My mom on one hand, me and my 11-year-old daughter on the other. She never had a childhood because we were deeply involved in the movement and did not take care of her. She was 13 when she went to the mountains. She could never be a child and so she joined the army. She was caught in Sirnak. She was tortured so much that it still hurts to think about it.²³⁵

Mother Asuman’s statement is a testament to the paradoxical relationship between Kurdish women and motherhood. Their political subjectivity as Peace Mothers is informed by their maternal grief. The driving force behind their politics is their identity as racialized mothers and yet the maternal grief that drives their politics is also the very force that makes them put their motherhood roles on hold for the sake of their politics.

I went to Sirnak. My daughter was in police custody there. They had tortured her so much that she looked like a piece of worn out, dirty cloth. She was a kid (13 years old). Her tiny

²³⁵ Mother Asuman, oral interview with author, November 2019.

body was torn apart by grown ass men. I could not recognize her. They had torn her hair out. I screamed when I saw her. I screamed and said, “As a mother I will never forget what you did to our kids. We don’t accept this cruelty.” The chief of police cornered me and told me off. I said, “If you treat my kid like this, with this cruelty, I won’t ever accept you as my state (Devlet). You are not my state. I hadn’t seen what you do to my people firsthand until now, but rest assured that from now on I hate you, State, a thousand times more now.”²³⁶

The second part of Mother Asuman’s account signifies a curious pattern that characterizes Kurdish motherhood. The woman who admits that she did not take care of her daughter for the sake of resistance is the same woman who confronts the state “as a mother” who does not accept the cruelty her daughter was put through by the state. The “affects, roles, legitimacies, and values” associated with motherhood by the state such as caring for the child, nurturing and protecting them, placing them before all else etc. are excluded from the affective register of Kurdish motherhood. Grief and anger, then, become the primary, and maybe the only, affects allowed in this affective register unique to Kurdish motherhood. Since Kurdish motherhood refuses to be about caring for a biological child and since it is about imagining a world free of oppression where Kurdish child can exist not as a metaphor but as an actuality, Kurdish reproductive body and Kurdish child turn into sacrificial bodies expandable for the sake of resistance.

Mother Asuman: They forced my daughter to change her statement in police custody. They told her to be an informant. They cornered her. I got to her somehow and I whispered in her ears “do not tell on anybody. Keep your head up.” When I looked at her up close, I saw blood on her head. Her skull was cracked in multiple places. The blood had dried on her hair. I hadn’t seen that earlier. She teared up and started shivering. I shook her off and said “keep your head up, do not give up. Fight to the last drop of your blood”. She had just turned 13. Normally, girls at that age play around and have fun. My daughter was in jail. I will never forget how they tortured her, the cracks in her skull until I die. I came back from the police station that day and the police raided my house and arrested me for hating the state. I told them, “You hurt me to the bone. I can’t say the state is good” [...] We still remember like yesterday how they dragged our men and women naked in front of us. When I see one of us get humiliated, I remember my mother, my daughter. I will never forget.²³⁷

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

In the third part of her account, Mother Asuman sees her daughter in police custody. She is tortured, barely alive, and she still advises her not to tell on anyone and to keep her head up. The sight of her 13-year-old child tortured in police custody does not drive her to protect her in the conventional sense. She even encourages her to rather be a martyr for the cause than be an informant for the state, which makes the rest of her statement quite interesting:

Mother Asuman: When they arrested me, they said, “We are not asking you to be a MIT (National Intelligence Agency) agent. We just want you to not let your children join insurgency. Do not brainwash them. Do not raise them like this. Tell us what you need. A car, a house, money? We will give you whatever you want as long as you stop raising insurgents.” I said, “No matter what you give me, you can fill this house with gold, I will never accept your offer. Thousands of Kurdish children shed their blood on this land, for Kurdistan. They watered the mountains of Kurdistan with their blood. I will continue my fight to the last drop of my blood. I bequeath this resistance to my children. I made them promise that they will continue this fight and so will their grandchildren, for generations.”²³⁸

Mother Asuman’s hatred towards the Turkish state is fueled by her memory of thousands of Kurdish children shedding their blood for a free Kurdistan and then this hatred fuels her to encourage her daughter to die for the cause. She is also committed to making sure that the spirit of Kurdish resistance be passed onto the next generations in her family. The Kurdish death that has been rendered a constant figure in Kurdish home by the Turkish state for over a hundred years is claimed by Kurdish mothers as the source of their militant insurgency. Just as they neutralize Turkey’s necropolitical power over dead bodies by deliberately abandoning their children’s corpses to save them from being a disciplinary tool for the state, Kurdish mothers generate their own necropolitical power where they produce insurgent bodies out of their children through their militant social reproductive practices. In other words, they not only save their dead children from further necropolitical violence in a defensive manner, they also radicalize/weaponize their living children to attack the state. The following extracts from interviews with multiple Peace Mothers

²³⁸ Ibid.

suggest that militant mothering practices of Peace Mothers and politicization of the Kurdish home create a pipeline from Kurdish private space to the Kurdish army.

Mother Asuman: One day my son told me that he would join PKK in 3-4 years. I asked why and he said, “You sacrificed your life for PKK and your son will sacrifice his for PKK.” I said, “I love PKK and when a child tells their mom that they are ready to join PKK, that mother screams out of joy. But a mother would never force a kid to join.” My son grew up and said goodbye. I saw him off. I say “saw him off” because not every mother can do that. It is painful. Not everyone can take it, but I did. I made a song for him. He was 15. I told my son, “Don’t go now. Wait until you are 20. When you turn 20, I will dress you up in guerilla outfit and sing you songs and send you away just like Turks who send their sons to do their military service with drums and dances. If you wait for a while longer, you can fight better.” He responded, “Mom, if I wait longer, my mind will get older, but if I go now, I will be a great soldier by 20.” And he really did. He raised himself well as a guerilla. He is in Raqqa now.²³⁹

Mother Asuman’s commitment to Kurdish liberation movement and the PKK was the driving force for her son to join the army. For her, a mother would never force a kid to join the PKK but she would scream with joy when they say they are ready to do so. This statement suggests that the spirit of Kurdish resistance is not something a Kurdish child picks up at home as a passive observer, but they are actually prepared for the day they will join the army. Kurdish children are actively integrated into the Kurdish resistance from an early age, not as “innocent” victims of state violence or political pawns but as future insurgents expected to respond to that violence. Mother Asuman sees her son off to join the army the same way Turkish mothers send their sons to do their military service. In Turkey, military service is mandatory for every man above 18. It is seen as one of the male rites of passage along with circumcision. The fact that Kurdish mothers ritualize their son’s entrance into the Kurdish army the same way Turkish mothers do with their sons is a testament to the existence of a culture of social reproduction that predestines Kurdish children into political/militant subjectivity. We see a similar ritual with Kurdish girls joining the PKK:

Mother Bedia: One day, Leyla, my oldest daughter, approached me and said, “Mom, Evin (the younger daughter) decided to leave. She made up her mind. She is joining PKK.” I

²³⁹ Ibid.

said to Evin, “Evin, look, if you decide to go, I promise you I will send you off with a henna ceremony. I will henna your palms myself but please do not leave without telling me. If you truly want to go, you can. I will do your henna myself.”

Interviewer: Why do you do henna ceremony? Is it a tradition?

Mother Bedia: No, I wanted to do it. I was like I did not marry you off so you should leave this house to join the army like it is your wedding day.

Interviewer: Are you angry at your daughter for joining the army?

Mother Bedia: Hell, no. She chose her own path. I say at least she died fighting a legitimate war for the right cause.²⁴⁰

During my fieldwork, I came across multiple references to the henna ceremony in relation to female guerillas: the henna ceremony is a pre-wedding ritual common in many middle eastern cultures where the bride’s palms are hennaed, which is both a symbol of her virginity and is also believed to protect the marriage. Mother Bedia says it is not a tradition, but I believe it is about to become one, since several Peace Mothers mentioned holding the traditional henna ceremony – normally the symbol of the happiest day in a woman’s life – to mark the day their daughter joined the Kurdish army as the beginning of her new life. It becomes a female rite of passage for Kurdish women. Another common thread in the narratives of Peace Mothers is the pride they feel towards their guerilla children, whether dead or alive. I did not hear a single expression of resentment, anger, or disappointment towards their guerilla children from the Peace Mothers I interviewed. On the contrary, three of the Peace Mothers I interviewed in the Istanbul diaspora complained about their children not being politicized enough. They asserted that the perks of modernity and urban life and the diaspora conditions of urban capitalism led to their assimilation.

Mother Emine: Vallah, my dear, I wanted them to go to the mountains but their dad and his family stopped them. They are not as close to the movement as I am. I cannot lie, they are not. My husband also minds his own business. I went through a lot. I was humiliated, I

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

was beaten. Only those who tasted state violence know how I feel. My children don't know.²⁴¹

The Peace Mothers' celebratory attitude towards violence is more than merely a vicarious one that they develop through their children. As I argued earlier, their role in Kurdish resistance is much more than being peripheral subjects of affective resistance. They embrace violence not only as something to be exercised on the enemy but as something to be inflicted upon themselves to be prepared for the state violence they will be inevitably subject to. Self-harm as a form of violent insurgency is quite common among female guerillas, though as Menal's, a former PKK guerilla, statement below suggests, it is not limited to guerillas:

Menal Bagok: We would torture ourselves. We wouldn't eat, would put out cigarettes on our skin. We were trying to get ourselves used to pain and hunger. I never forget. I still tell my friends, 'The bullet wound healed, [but] this cigarette burn scar won't disappear' (she laughs).²⁴²

In the acts of self-harm Peace Mothers perform, the affective relationship between a mother and an incarcerated child turns into "dramatic transgression" that make the mothers a "force in Public" in Üstündağ's words and explodes the walls of Turkish penal architecture designed to render Kurdish suffering, death and resistance invisible.

Mother Sultan: My daughter was 14 years old when she left to join the army. She was gonna go to Diyarbakir through Mardin. She was caught in Ortacinar. She was in custody for 28 days. She was missing before that. In those 28 days, I neither ate nor showered. I slept on the floor. I knew how brutal it was out there. There was a military junta. I knew people were raped in police custody. They were killing girls and women. There was so much cruelty. Leyla Güven had just started her hunger strike in prison and then it spread to other prisons. My daughter was in one of those prisons. She was a hunger striker. We could not just sleep comfortably in our beds. I contacted other mothers. We, 6 mothers, initiated a sit-in in front of the Gebze prison. We said they could arrest us or kill us. We do not care. We do not want to see our children die before us. We couldn't take it anymore. We were gonna explode ourselves at some point (she is talking about self-immolation here). They arrested us that day and released us at night. We went again in the morning. The police arrested us again. They were yelling, "Round them up! Hurry. Bring the police car." We said, "You can arrest us as many times as you like. We will come back. Until this

²⁴¹ Mother Emine, oral interview with author, November 2019.

²⁴² Menal Bagok, oral interview with author, November 2019.

hunger strike is over, until the isolation enforced on Ocalan and other prisoners is lifted, we will stay here. Even if you kill us, my body will stay here. I was calling out to my friends saying ‘Look, everyone, if I die here-doesn’t matter whether the state kills me or I die of a heart attack, you will place my corpse at this prison door. My body will stay there till this hunger strike is over!’”²⁴³

Mother Sultan did not eat or shower for 28 days in solidarity with her daughter who is on hunger strike in prison. She makes her body mimic her daughter’s physical suffering and embodied resistance that is neatly hidden in the “penal architecture” of the Turkish state and brings her to the national public eye.²⁴⁴ She even talks about “exploding” herself, referring to a particularly Kurdish and female tradition of self-immolation. When she declares that her dead body would stay in front of the prison in public where her daughter is kept until the hunger strike is over, I cannot help but read it as a gesture to attack the state with the very necropolitical weapon it uses to terrorize the living: spectacularization of death. As I discussed in the previous chapter, it is a common practice of the Turkish state to spectacularize Kurdish death both to further dehumanize them in the national imaginary and to intimidate the living. The interview data I presented in that chapter pointed at a mothering practice performed by Kurdish mothers that neutralized the Turkish state’s power over the dead by relinquishing their right to their children’s bodies. In the hypothetical case I presented above, Mother Sultan takes it a step further and imagines to spectacularize her death as a symbol of her insurgency and as a way to resist the erasure of her daughter’s resistance by the Turkish penal structure. It is a clear reference to the image of Mother Taybet, whose rotting body on the street for seven days after being killed by the Turkish armed forces became a symbol of the state violence committed during the state of emergency regime in 2015. Mother Sultan’s commitment to turn her body into a spectacle is another example of Kurdish mothers turning necropolitics on its head and appropriating state’s necropolitical power to reinstate

²⁴³ Mother Sultan, oral interview with author, November 2019.

²⁴⁴ Bargu, “Sovereignty as Erasure,” 45.

the humanity of Mother Taybet and other dehumanized Kurdish corpses by taking control of Kurdish death.

When I interviewed Leyla Güven, the former MP for the Kurdish party who is currently serving time in prison for “membership to a terrorist organization,” she explained Kurdish women’s relationship with death, saying:

Leyla Güven: Women have always been more brave than men. When we believe in a cause, we act knowing that we should risk death for that cause. We definitely do not glorify death, tho. We do not live to die. We fight to live and ensure our people live. We say everybody has the right to live and live happily. However, sometimes in order to live, you have to walk towards death. The Beritan Gulnaz Karatas phenomenon is an example of this mentality. Beritan was a guerilla fighting in the mountains. One day she was surrounded by the enemy. There is enemy on one side and a cliff on the other. There is no other way to go. She asks herself death or capture? The enemy is approaching her, step by step. She says “No. I would rather die than be captured by them and go through whatever they would do to me” and she jumps of the cliff. Kurdish history abounds in examples like this. So why? Because sometimes you have to die to change the system.²⁴⁵

Leyla Güven is a very significant figure in Kurdish politics and Kurdish feminism. She follows a legacy of Kurdish women who engaged in practices of violent insurgency such as self-immolation, guerilla warfare, and female suicide bombers. She went on a hunger strike on November 8th, 2019 to protest solitary confinement of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan and torture and sexual violence in prisons. The hunger strike spread to other prisons in Turkey and Europe. Her politics explained below exemplifies an important trait that characterizes Kurdish resistance where Kurdish reproductive body stops being an affective subject in the periphery of resistance and becomes a militant political subject that creates violent insurgency through her body. Leyla Güven and Beritan’s acts of self-harm and embrace of death add another layer to the pattern where Kurdish mothers take control of Kurdish death; just as they save their children’s

²⁴⁵ Leyla Güven, oral interview with author, November 2019

dead bodies from becoming victims of Turkey's necropolitical power, they take away state's right to kill by torturing and killing themselves for the sake of resistance.

Leyla Güven: I was in prison when I started hunger strike. I was in prison when I got elected as MP. I know about the powerful resistance that emerged out of Diyarbakir prison. I know about the protests carried out by the Saras, Kemals and Hayris of Kurdish resistance (referring to the self-immolation protests of Diyarbakir prisoners). With the power I drew from them, I told myself "We are gonna die anyways, if not today, tomorrow. I should at least make my existence and death matter and mean something." How was that going to happen? Everything, the entire burden of resistance was on the shoulders of Kurdish youth. As a woman, as a mother, as a politician I want to take on some of that burden. I started my hunger strike without telling anyone. I got into an intense mental preparation. I was filled with this fascinating peace... After I ended the hunger strike, I felt terribly empty. I was going to die and I was ready to die. It was nothing. I was walking towards death step by step. I was wasting away bit by bit. My bones were sticking out. I couldn't sleep but I was proud and happy because I was dying for a good cause. It was worth it. I was elevated with joy. As mothers protested in front of prisons, I felt like I had a feast... What is death anyways? What is it? Sometimes, death is something that should be faced. With that mindset, I started the strike and I was fit and well till the very end, which means death is not that scary.²⁴⁶

While she was deep in her hunger strike, faced with imminent death, Leyla Güven called her daughter to say goodbye. They sat on her bed and talked about the resistance for hours until her daughter left – like she had come to visit her for the holidays. Kurdish mothers' dramatic performance of motherhood in public vis a vis state violence is in direct contrast with how they mother in private. During the interview, I asked her, as a prominent Kurdish feminist, how she would respond to the child-centric and peace-driven motherhood frameworks offered by Western feminisms. Her answer was as follows:

Leyla Güven: We see it in many Kurdish songs. They all say "Mom, I am joining insurgency. Forgive me. Don't cry when I die." We just saw it yesterday, in Rojava. A guerilla's will read "Dance when I die. Dance Halay (a type of line dancing associated with Kurdish resistance)." Her family was dancing at the funeral. Her/his mom was dancing halay with tears in her eyes in unimaginable pain. Let's think about Rojava for a second. Streets are occupied. The city is under siege. Can a mother really say: "Don't go," to her child? No way. I know there is an orientalist approach from the West that might question our mothering. They did not go through what we went through. They were never stateless. They never got their land seized. They (white feminists) didn't experience what we

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

experienced. Every night, every Kurd goes to bed knowing that their house might be raided at 5 am in the morning. The police knock on the door at 5 am, puts their guns to the children's heads, the parents get handcuffed from behind and dragged outside as the children watched. Every mother who goes through that will of course say: "That's enough." That's why they are proud of their children for joining insurgency. She will say "My child is there to protect my identity, my language and ensure my future."²⁴⁷

Leyla Güven aptly describes the unique context from which Kurdish feminism and Kurdish mothering practices emerge and exposes the orientalism engrained in Western feminisms that make Kurdish women's maternal politics illegible. In the context of Kurdish resistance, motherhood is never something that happens between two individuals. The future, too, is always collectively imagined and fought for. Kurdish Peace Mothers, in their collective imagining of a free Kurdistan, call for peace as their names indicate, not as vessels of peace but as militant political subjects.

Mother Fatma: We took pepper gas, police batons for peace; we were arrested and charged with so many things; our mothers served prison time, we risked death for the sake of peace. I will tell you one thing. We, as Peace Mothers, will ask for peace till our knees give out. We will not stop until our last breath. And we are going to fight with our people till the last drop of our blood.²⁴⁸

Under a violent, increasingly authoritarian colonial regime, peaceful protest is not an option or an aspiration. With violence being a quintessential part of the Kurdish private and Kurdish politics, Kurdish mothers' productive embrace of death and grief loosens the grip of biopolitical and necropolitical disciplinary mechanisms of the Turkish state on the Kurdish reproductive body.

Mother Bedia: I wrote three letters (to join the PKK). I had had enough. I wanted to go wherever the war was. I had my children write the letters. My daughter Sultan was in elementary school. I would tell her to write it. She had no idea what it was and she would write it. I had enough of this war.

Interviewer: So you wanted to join the army leaving your children behind?

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Mother Bedia, oral interview with author, November 2019.

Mother Bedia: Yes, I did. I was going to leave my kids. Then I learned I was pregnant again... They keep calling us “dirty Kurd,” terrorist. I was fed up with it. I made up my mind three times. I said I was going to the mountains. I was going to go. Wherever this war was, I had to be there, do something.²⁴⁹

Several mothers I interviewed talked regretfully about how they were too old to join the army and how they were kept from joining by the patriarchal structures of the Kurdish feudal regime. They also expressed a sense of empowerment they gained by being a Kurdish mother and elderly and a sense of entitlement to the political sphere gained through decades of suffering. Mother Bedia was ready to leave her children behind and join the army when she learnt that she was pregnant again. Peace Mothers manage to liberate themselves from “affects, roles, legitimacies, and values,” by the Turkish nation state and by the Kurdish feudal patriarchy by simply refusing to mother when motherhood is no longer a biological requirement. Mother Bedia was at that liberated space until she lost it due to pregnancy. In the following interview extract, Mother Asuman also voices her intention to arm herself and fight the state in the face of the constant invasion of her home. In addition, her statement exposes the overexposure of Kurdish mothers to the Turkish penal structure. Every single mother I interviewed has a history of incarceration. They have been arrested and served time repeatedly. Peace Mothers not only nips at the state’s power over the dead bodies by rendering death unthreatening and the physical body irrelevant to memory and grief, they also transform another powerful tool of discipline, captivity, into a site of insurgency.

Mothering in Prison: From imprisonment to Insurgency

Mother Asuman: What I am trying to say is, when they attack mothers or drag our children behind military vehicles, we will never forget. No matter how many times I get arrested and put on trial (There are currently 25 court cases against me), I keep saying “I am a mother and I don’t want to see kids being dragged behind armored cars”. [...] If need be, I will arm up and fight them. They raided my house again the other day. They knocked down

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

all the doors. They are all broken now. I keep guard at the door in case they come back. They shut me up when I spoke Kurdish with my daughter in my house. One of the officers literally put his hand on my mouth and shushed me. I hit his hand and said, “You cannot silence me.” I poked my tongue out, pointed at it and said, “You see this. This exists. I didn’t make it. God did.”²⁵⁰

In one of the house raids which have become an integral part of Kurdish everyday life and penetrated the social fabric, Mother Asuman is once again “touched by the hand of the state” in the literal sense of the word. Her mouth is closed by a soldier putting his hand on her face to stop her from speaking Kurdish with her daughter. It is the physical manifestation of the invisible hand that prevented Kamber Ates’s mother from speaking the only language she speaks with her son and made her repeat the same Turkish sentence over and over again to his son in prison. Kurdish mothers’ politics does not revolve around self-preservation and does not believe “surviving is resistance.” The power of the Turkish State’s tactics and institutions, designed to create fear and intimidation, is undermined by Kurdish mothers’ radical embrace of death and incarceration.

Mother Asuman: The prosecutor told me that I was gonna go to jail for praising Apo (Abdullah Ocalan). He called some officers and said, “Lay out a red carpet for this woman in front of the prison”. [...] I said I would be proud going to jail. Jail means honor, decency and dignity. They said they would kill me if they saw me in a protest after I was released. I responded, “I will be out there protesting the day I am released.” There was a press release in Kosuyolu the day after I was released. I attended. The police were taking pictures of me and I posed for them. I poked my tongue out and said, “Take one like this.” They arrested me again (she laughs).²⁵¹

Mother Asuman’s attitude towards imprisonment is not one of concern but one of joy and pride. She goes as far as to tease the police officers during a protest in the face of imminent arrest let alone try to avoid it. The red carpet joke made by the prosecutor is ironic given the celebratory attitude of Kurdish mothers when it comes to going to prison. This attitude not only stems from

²⁵⁰ Mother Asuman, oral interview with author, November 2019.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

their lack of fear of the state but also from the fact that they know prisons have historically been at the forefront of Kurdish resistance as sites where Kurdish political consciousness is reproduced.

Leyla Güven: What does the system threaten women with? Prison. They say you will end up in prison. So what? We did go to prison. We will again. You put us in a cell. There are usually like 30 women in each cell. We turn those cells into something fascinating. We have books, we read, we get training, we improve ourselves, we organize life, we organized festivals inside. In other words, you can do everything. It is like you are outside. We took away the threatening power of prisons.²⁵²

When she initiated the hunger strike which went national in 2019, Leyla Güven joined a tradition in Kurdish resistance where prisons become sites of violent insurgency through practices of self-harm and self-immolation. Her statement above also shows the immense potential of the prison as a place of organized resistance and counter-knowledge production. During my fieldwork in Amed (Diyarbakir), I interviewed Ayşe Gokkan, the head of Tevgera Jinên Azad (TJA) (Free Women's Movement). The following interview extract is her statement on behalf of TJA regarding the role of Kurdish women in the resistance, how they are much more than mothers and the importance of prisons.

Ayşe Gokkan: When Kurdish women embarked on this journey, you see I don't want to say "Kurdish mothers" -and mind you mother does not only refer to women who give birth because they are also fighters. A lot of women got together in front of prisons. During September 12, 1980 (The military coup), there was so much torture going on in the Diyarbakir prison. Those who responded first were women. This resistance did not occur from a "I am mother, I have children in those cells" perspective. It was a bigger fight. Mothers of the insurgents turned up at the door of Turkish general staff. They also resisted diplomatically. The organized resistance occurred in front of prisons, tho... Even though there were thick walls between them and the prisoners, those walls were removed through collective resistance. For instance, a lot of families, men, women got together in front of the prisons and they met each other that way for the first time. They, then, founded organizations together for those who were "disappeared" in police custody, for the incarcerated, for the victims of forced migration. Both before and after being incarcerated, women carried out a dedicated resistance movement. They never said "I am in jail, I paid the price and now I am done". Why am I saying this? Because they turned prisons into sites of education. They educated themselves and the public from prison. Families would go prisons to get trainings. Even local disputes were solved in prisons. When there was an

²⁵² Leyla Güven, oral interview with author, November 2019.

issue that needed to be addressed, people would take it to prisons and it was solved during visits. Prisons were sites of problem solving which was a first in history.²⁵³

Ayşe Gokkan is hesitant to label Kurdish women's movement as a "mothers' movement" due to the messiness of Kurdish women's political subjectivity. When she says Kurdish women's "resistance did not occur from a 'I am mother, I have children in those cells,' perspective. It was a bigger fight," she underlines a key point that informs Peace Mothers' politics: their politics might mobilize a maternal grief to generate insurgency and a powerful political discourse, but that grief is not attached to the individual loss of a specific child. Gokkan's statement demonstrates how prisons are turned into educational spaces not only for the prisoners but for the people outside. Prisoners gain a tremendous agency both by retaining their political subjectivity against all odds in the Turkish penal architecture and by becoming educators that spread Kurdish political consciousness and the history of Kurdish politics. The reach of their dissidence actually grows in prison. Women political prisoners, who are thought to be stripped of their agency, become authority figures that are closely connected with the outside. Along with their lack of fear of imprisonment, Kurdish women's transformation of prisons into educational spaces further diminishes the threatening power of prisons.

Figen Yuksekdag, the former co-chair of HDP who is currently serving time with charges of membership to a terrorist organization, remains a prominent Kurdish ideologue and political figure while in prison. She contributed to the "Color Purple of Kurdish Politics," edited by Gültan Kişanak, sharing her experience with prison:

Figen Yuksekdag: Of course, I was familiar with the prison since I had been arrested multiple times before. However, this time I was arrested to stifle my people's right to vote and be elected. That was what I did not and would not accept. Prisons are places designed to restrain the will, the spirit of people through corporeal confinement. However, sometimes prisons are incapable of doing so vis a vis the magnitude of the will and the spirit of people. How on earth do you think you can restrain the will and the spirit of six

²⁵³ Mother Gokkan, oral interview with author, November 2019.

million people? Because I felt the will and spirit of my people, I immediately crossed out “loneliness” option in prison.²⁵⁴

She continues her piece talking about the good parts of being in prison. Imprisoned Kurdish women even under isolation find ways to communicate and form solidarities:

Figen Yuksekdag: Your vocal cords get stronger. You increasingly get better at screaming. You also become a master listener to be able hear who say what through the vents. When you send a ball, a candy, a piece of cake, peppers etc. to each other through the vents, you feel playful thinking you break the barriers that keep you apart. You hear women sing songs of revolution at nights. Jokes aside, every woman in this prison including myself are experiencing something fascinating. Yes, we were always together in a way for the resistance but we are physically brought together here intimately. It is like we form a sea, an ocean of essence with each and every one of us running into it from our own courses. You see, sometimes you fit a forest, a sea, an ocean into a prison cell. Sometimes you break through the prison walls and become an ocean.²⁵⁵

Yuksekdag’s poetic narration of how imprisoned women navigate the prison to strengthen solidarity and find joy in captivity reveals a pattern of care that blurs the distinction between the public and private. Kurdish women build a “Kurdish home” in prison – a home that is persistently destroyed by the state – and perform there the caring and nurturing that could not happen in a Kurdish home on the outside.

Burcu Celik Ozkan: I have been staying here at Sincan Prison for seven months with my daughter Asmin. It has been a sad and hurtful experience. It is impossible to describe what it is like to be here with my daughter who has so much hope for the future. Like most Kurdish kids, Asmin is a child whose life and dreams are taken away from her. She is not alone... Hundreds of Kurdish children grow up the same way. Some are in prison, some are by the grave of their parents, some in front of debris of their destroyed houses. Witnessing Asmin’s experience with prison was very hard on me. She did not know prison but she immediately understood it was something limiting. She noticed the doors that open in the morning and shut in the evening, the iron bars etc. But she was happy because she did not know how bad it was for her. Maybe I was deceiving her... I don’t know. The day she came to the prison, she kept running in the yard back and forth trying to talk to the birds and asking about everything she sees. When the prison guard came to close the door to the yard, Asmin came running towards me. She said: “Mom, let’s go home”. I did not know what to say to her. Just as I was trying to find the words to tell her that we couldn’t

²⁵⁴ Kişanak, *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics*, 165.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 166.

go home, she grabbed my hand, took me back to our ward and said: “We are home!”. She had taken a huge burden off my shoulders. It was such a relief.²⁵⁶

It is very common for Kurdish female political prisoners to keep their children with them in prison. The state gives them two options: Take your child with you to the prison, or send them to state orphanages. They choose to raise their children in captivity rather than letting the state take care of them. It is another conflict they have to face as political subjects who are reproductive bodies. They do not choose to insert their children into the Turkish penal architecture lightly since they know all too well what the criminal justice system does to them. They also know that Kurdish women build their own systems of care and protection in prison, which makes being in prison with multiple Kurdish women safer than being under the care of the state out of their mothers’ watch. And since home is something that is constantly lost and remade for the Kurdish child, Asmin made prison home on her very first day in prison.

In another anecdote from Kişanak’s book, Sara Kaya shares her experience in Mardin Prison. It is another example of Kurdish women strategically building a system of care to resist the inhumane prison conditions.

Sara Kaya: On January 26th 2017, I was charged with terror charges and sent to Mardin Prison. I was frozen to the bone in police custody. I was looking forward to going to prison remembering the warm and friendly welcome I had received in the same prison a year before. Mardin Prison is a very old building. Living conditions there are horrible. I arrived at the prison at 11 am. Time flew as we chatted, drank tea and smoke together. It was quite late. My cellmates told me that my bed was ready. I immediately headed there. I was exhausted. There is a very large room which is freezing in Mardin Prison. They call it “the morgue.” The second you set foot in it, you freeze. They had set my bed there temporarily. I couldn’t complain. Normally, elderly Peace Mothers stay in that room. That was the arrangement. You know, cold is good for the mothers going through menopause. Mothers gave me a warm welcome and teased me saying “those who come to this room usually leave after a few days, we hope you stay”. My cellmates moved my bed into the other room six days later. My morgue days were over. Mothers teased me again as I was leaving “We won’t let you back in when the summer arrives. Wait and see.”²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 79.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 239.

As Sara's account of her first day in Mardin Prison demonstrates, gender becomes an organizing principle in prison. Kurdish women display a gendered resistance by literally turning the biological operation of Kurdish female body that is targeted specifically for its womanhood into a feminist tool and making the "morgue" a place of comfort. Kurdish women appropriate the strongest two weapons of the state, murder and captivity, into tools of resistance and solidarity. Therefore, the physical boundaries of human body and walls of state prisons lose their restricting power.

Gülten Kişanak: I went to Diyarbakir for college after high school. I was arrested in 1980 when I was a sophomore. I shared pain, resistance, and solidarity with Mother Duriye and Mother Emine (1980-1982). There were 65 people in our ward, most of which were between the ages 16 and 25. We did our best to save them from the beatings and torture. But there was only so much we could do. The guards were torturing and humiliating them even more just because they mattered to us. At some point they tried to cut our hair, saying, "This is a military prison. You have to follow military rules. Soldiers have their hair cut every week and so will you." They forcefully cut our hair and tortured us when we resisted. They left the Peace Mothers alone for a couple of weeks, but they got beaten trying to rescue us from the soldiers. Haircuts were just an excuse to beat us up. One day the ward sergeant ordered the soldiers to cut Mother Duriye and Emine's hair and all hell broke loose. We formed a circle around the mothers for days. We got beaten up, but we did not let the soldiers touch their hair. Then they said "Ok, we are not going to cut their hair but just like the soldiers taking their caps off when we say blessing for the food, they will have to take their hijab off." Mother Duriye and Mother Emine were wearing head scarves. They were wailing and beating their breasts. We resisted. We fought against that practice for days. Eventually, the torturers caved in.²⁵⁸

Like the time when the Kurdish mother placed three generations of Kurdish women into a patrol car, Kişanak's prison ward full of sixty-five female political prisoners becomes a microcosm of state violence against Kurdish women. Three generations of Kurdish women, from teenagers to elderly peace mothers, are prosecuted and brought together by the state for their political subjectivity in a way that exposes the cycle of violence against the Kurds that characterized the last hundred years of Turkish history. Kurdish women in Kişanak's ward transform this cycle of

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 184.

violence into a cycle of care and solidarity. Older women protect the teenage prisoners, and then in turn the teenagers all form a circle around the elderly Peace Mothers – both to physically protect them from the beatings and torture and also to protect their dignity and religious identity. When the prison launched a gendered attack on Kurdish women in the ward by forcefully shaving their heads and violating their religious rights, Kurdish women responded through a maternal mechanism of care which shattered the norms of mothering blurring who is mothering whom.

In this chapter, I examined the ways in which Kurdish reproductive body constructs her political subjectivity by strategically oscillating between claiming motherhood and refusing it to perform “dramatic transgression” into the public. I argued that Peace Mothers’ refusal of conventional motherhood through practices such as choosing resistance over caring for the child, self-harm, raising soldiers, and insurgents liberates Kurdish body from the necropolitical and biopolitical grip of the Turkish state. Death and captivity are transformed by them into sites of productive power where Kurdish political subjectivity does more than defending itself. It attacks. Mothering practices performed by the Peace Mothers I analyzed above challenge the conventional understanding of motherhood as biological and interpersonal. In a strategic move, Kurdish mothers separates “motherhood” the identity from “mothering” the action. While they mobilize their “motherhood” as a constant political identity to “be a force in public,” they refuse to treat “mothering” as a fixed set of pre-determined and repeated actions. The form, time, place, recipient, and provider of Kurdish mothering constantly changes. That is why the act of mothering does not automatically happen when there is a biological child in need or stop when there is no child to take of anymore. It cannot be neatly confined and punished in a prison cell, and it can easily be stopped to embrace death on a hunger strike. In this fluid form, Kurdish mothering as a messy act liberates

Kurdish reproductive body from the constraints of the myth of the “sacred Mother” by becoming “sacrilegious.”

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have traced the genealogy of necropolitical state violence exercised against Kurdish mothers by the Turkish nation state. Going back to the last decade of the Ottoman empire, modern Turkish statecraft has utilized multiple discourses and technologies to accomplish the objective of creating an ethnically homogenous nation-state that were informed by the Western colonial practices. As discussed in the Introduction, the making of modern Turkey following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was characterized by multiple contesting national identities. The ambition to build a unified nation out of the ruins of a multi-cultural, multi-religious empire led to the emergence of a unique understanding of race which defied the biological understanding of race and nationality. In a process which Janet Klein calls “internal colonization” where Ottoman empire was still an empire, but it was “thinking like a nation-state,” the rulers set to build and disseminate administrative power and governmentality to all parts of the empire, “especially its “non-state” spaces or “tribal zones.”²⁵⁹ The ambivalent relationship between the Turkish state and the Kurdish people result from the paradoxical position of the Kurds in the making of modern Turkey. On one hand, particularly because of the power they had cultivated in those non-state spaces or tribal zones with their own armies and leadership organization, the Kurds were utilized by the empire in the fight against the ethnic populations at the borders desiring to liberate themselves from the empire. On the other hand, their loyalties to the tribal chiefs, tribal culture and practices were in direct opposition to the agenda of building a homogenous and centralized state. Nomadic and tribal peoples were both seen as savages to be civilized and simultaneously a military resource that could be utilized if needed. This paradoxical position of the Kurds gave them bargaining power to be used against the Turkish state and consolidated the military power of the tribes and the loyalty to

²⁵⁹ Klein, *Margins of Empire*, 23.

tribal identity. We still observe today the loyalty to the Kurdish identity as a peripheral subjectivity that is imagined, operates outside of and contests the boundaries of the Turkish nation state.

Manufacturing a new national identity which centered Turkishness and muslimhood as the primary condition of belonging to the category of Turkish required a redefinition of race. A culture-based definition of race laid the foundation for the project of the transforming and Turkifying the periphery. Race came to be seen as culturally reproducible and Kurds were categorized as an ethnic group that could potentially be civilized into modern Turkish national subjects. The reframing of race as culturally reproducible integrated the reproductive body and motherhood intimately into the making of modern Turkey, which celebrated Turkish motherhood as the pillar of the new Republic while criminalizing Kurdish reproduction as the ultimate threat to the integrity of the Republic. The criminalization of Kurdish reproduction made Kurdish mothers a target for the necropolitical state violence.

I used necropolitics extensively as a rubric to examine state violence against Kurdish mothers. I chose not to focus on the conventional definition of necropolitics, which is the right of the sovereign to kill racialized subjects. Instead, I focused on the necropolitical power over the dead body. In Chapter 1: Necropathy: Power over Death and Necrohabitats, I examined three manifestations of the necropolitical power exercised by the Turkish state against the Kurds: the spectacularization of death, necrohabitats where the dead and the living spill into each other, and attempts to erase Kurdish death from history and memory through enforced disappearances. The history of modern Turkey is full of massacres against racialized bodies. However, the ethnographic data of the dissertation and the temporal focus of it (the state of emergency regime that started in 2015) steered me into the direction of looking at what happens to the Kurdish body after its death

and how necropolitical power of the state penetrates the boundary between life and death, creating necrohabitats where death spills into spaces of life and racialization continues beyond death.

Since the focus of my dissertation is Kurdish motherhood, I turned to the archive to understand the history behind the racialization of Kurdish reproductive body and how it became a target of necropolitical state violence. In Chapter 2: *Mothering for the State: Mothers as Nation Builders and Terrorist Makers*, I examined the ways in which social reproduction came to the center stage of the project of transforming/Turkifying the Kurds. I offered a historical account of how both the Turkish and Kurdish reproductive body were intimately regulated as the primary site of nation building in the making of Modern Turkey. This historical account exposed the legacies of European colonialism that informed the population politics of the Turkish state during the late Ottoman and early Republican period. Following the redefining of “race” for the purposes of Turkification of the nation, gender came into play as a significant component of the military and educational practices of this Turkification process. A newly emerging class of female Turkish intellectuals in the early years of the Republic was assigned with the title of “Mothers of the Turks” and they took on the “honorable” task of Turkifying the nation through education. “Mothers of the Turks” served as the vessels of the gender roles adopted by the westernized Turkish state. They were the embodiment of the “New Woman”, the modern Turkish woman, constructed by the male ideologues and leaders of the young Republic to represent the Republic’s break from its Ottoman past and to be the primary signifier of its Westernization. The project of assimilation of the Kurdish girls was carried out on multiple fronts. The young Republic founded boarding schools across the country where Kurdish girls were placed with Turkish boys in highly gendered and sexualized spaces to be rid of their Kurdishness through marriage into Turkishness. This technique of assimilation was directly imported from the North American colonial archive. Teachers taking on

the duty of mothering the Turkish nation decoupled motherhood from biological reproduction and reinforced an understanding of race that is culturally reproducible. This understanding put Kurdish reproductive body in an ambivalent relationship with the state. The Turkish nation state believed Kurdish girls to be assimilable, and the assimilation project relied heavily on the ambition of reforming Kurdish girls before it was too late, which protected them from genocide while exposing them to assimilation. On the other hand, Kurdish mothers were explicitly juxtaposed with the “Mothers of the Turks,” and they were the target of internal colonial practices aimed at erasing the Kurdish identity through the violent subjugation of Kurdish motherhood. We see the same juxtaposition operate in contemporary Turkey in the rhetoric that places the mothers of the guerilla in direct opposition with the mothers of the Turkish martyrs. I used archival documents and ethnographic data to trace the genealogy of the violence against Kurdish mothers specifically on the grounds of their “dangerous” mothering practices, which continues today through the “national mothers versus terrorist mothers” rhetoric.

The question of how Kurdish mothers respond to the necropolitical violence used against them, not as passive recipients of the violence but as militant subjects of the broader Kurdish resistance, is what informed the arguments presented in Chapter 3: Necromothering: Reversing Necropolitics, Mothering the Dead. Building on the historical account of how race and reproduction, or reproduction of race, factored into the making of modern Turkey, I shifted the focus from the necropolitical power of the state to that of Kurdish mothers. I examined three forms of Necromothering: *Rescuing the dead, refusal of care and mothering towards death*. Kurdish mothers I interviewed for this dissertation militantly respond to both manifestations of necropower, the right to kill and power over death. By caring for their dead children in the necrohabitats created by the necropolitical state violence, Kurdish mothers reclaim their mother identity which is

constantly contested, invalidated, and criminalized by the state through their exclusion from the national motherhood framework. This form of necromothering is a form of care similar to what Sinan Antoon calls “rescuing the dead,” which, as evidenced in the archive, happens a lot due to the abundance of necrohabitats in the Kurdish region. The ethnographic data revealed, however, a different form of “rescuing the dead,” which fundamentally disrupts the conventional imaginations of motherhood. By not caring for/about the dead body and through their willingness to abandon it to the hands of the state, Kurdish mothers rescue their dead children from necropolitical power that extends beyond death. The deliberate abandonment of the dead child and decoupling of grief from the physical signifier of death turns necropolitics on its head and transfers the power over death from the state to the Kurdish mothers. The second form of necromothering is refusal to care for living children, which stands in direct opposition with conventional norms of mothering. The Peace Mothers I interviewed unanimously expressed pride for putting the resistance before the well-being of their children. They mobilized their mother identity in their fight for Kurdish liberation while deliberately refusing to perform motherhood duties expected of them. This should not be read as “not mothering,” though. The motherhood framework that Peace Mothers offer disrupts the understanding of motherhood which renders motherhood an affective and interpersonal relation between the mother and her biological child. This individualistic approach to mothering fails to recognize mothering practices that are collective, militant, and that resist complacency in the neoliberal, progress and property-oriented forms of care that revolves around nation-state as the only imaginable site of existence and resistance. The militancy of Kurdish mothers is also manifested in a more literal sense through *mothering towards death*. Every single Peace Mother I interviewed without exception either had children in the Kurdish armed insurgency or they were in the process of preparing them to join the insurgency. I also heard from Peace

Mothers in the diaspora (Istanbul) who expressed disappointment in their children for being de-radicalized by the urban living and losing their connection to the Kurdish movement.

This dissertation makes a critical intervention into the feminist scholarship by offering a feminist resistance framework that does not take the nation-state as the *only* site where resistance can happen. It, rather, exposes modern nation state as an assemblage of technologies that make revolution into something that is possible to happen in the future while erasing the revolutions that are already happening. It brings the periphery, “the standpoint of dispossessed historical experience,” to the forefront and reveals the anti-national, non-statist mothering practices of Kurdish mothers which offers a feminist resistance framework and a maternal grief register that operate at the limits of the modern nation state and the modern capitalist temporality.²⁶⁰

Like all research, my research was limited in some ways, and understanding these can suggest avenues for further work. One of the challenges I experienced was the political atmosphere I worked in. I could not conduct follow-up interviews with my interlocutors because most of them got arrested and are still in prison. Several online sources I pulled data, from such as human rights reports and online newspapers have been shut down since, which is further testament to the ongoing subjugation of Kurdish resistance in contemporary Turkey.

Since my field study was limited to Istanbul and Diyarbakir, I did not get the chance to interview Kurdish people in other regions which have historical significance as places where the majority of internally displaced Kurds migrate to work on farms and sweatshops such as Adana, Mersin and Izmir. Examination of forced migration of the Kurds to predominantly Turkish cities, which peaked during the 90s, could provide valuable information on the complexities of diaspora

²⁶⁰ Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 16.

subjectivities and how the response to racialization operates under the conditions of abject poverty, labor exploitation and racial segregation in urban spaces.

Another related limitation and potential for further research comes from the fact that I centered Kurdish mothers in my dissertation. Incorporating oral histories with young adults who experienced childhood during the 90s and Kurdish children who are currently living under a protracted state of emergency regime could make a valuable contribution to Kurdish Studies. I had the opportunity to interview four children of Peace Mothers who provided insight into what it was like to grow up as Kurdish children in Diyarbakir and Istanbul. There were three main manifestations of Kurdish childhood in the ethnographic data: The child laborer, the child guerilla and the dead child. I would like to explore further on this topic in my future work to better comprehend the impact of the militant mothering practices of Kurdish women I studied in this dissertation on Kurdish children. I am particularly interested in elaborating on the notion of “child as a metaphor” that came up in the interviews.

Despite these limitations, I feel incredibly lucky to be a part of an emerging literature on Kurdish feminisms. I built invaluable intellectual connections with other Kurdish feminists across the world who grappled with the same lack of theoretical framework in Global North academia that is applicable to our work. I met these Global South scholars through the Kurdish Women Studies Network. We attended conferences together, organized panels and translated the book “Kurt Siyasetinin Mor Rengi” (The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics) which is a collective feminist translation project that works against the attempts to erase Kurdish feminist knowledges through mass incarceration of Kurdish women politicians, journalists, human rights lawyers and activists. I hope the stories that the Peace Mothers have told through this dissertation contribute to this collective work against the epistemic violence against Kurdish women.

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