

RESEARCH ARTICLES

In War and Peace: Shifting Narratives of Violence in Kurdish Istanbul

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ABSTRACT In this article, I draw on two years of ethnographic research to explore the multiple and contradictory ways Kurdish working-class men in Istanbul imagine, narrate, and conceptualize violence. How Kurdish workers remember and publicly speak of violence, self-defense, and retribution has notably changed in the context of the resurgence of the war between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). I came to understand this storytelling of violence, omnipresent in all the social infrastructures of male Kurdish life in Istanbul, as a form of communicative labor through which a distinct historical consciousness and shared understandings of violence are created, networks for survival and dignity engendered, and moral selves crafted. These narratives refuse interpretation of the ongoing Kurdish struggle as mere terrorism or victimhood and instead recuperate Kurdish agency and counterviolence. In these narratives, "defense of the community" not only asserts peoples' right to exist but also charges just violence with moral significance, turning those who protect their community against state violence into aspirational figures. [*violence, narrative, morality, war and peace, memory, Kurds, Turkey*]

RESUMEN En este artículo, me baso en dos años de investigación etnográfica para explorar las formas múltiples y contradictorias en que hombres kurdos de la clase trabajadora en Estambul imaginan, narran y conceptualizan la violencia. Cómo los trabajadores kurdos recuerdan y hablan públicamente de violencia, autodefensa, y retribución ha cambiado notablemente en el contexto de la resurgencia de la guerra entre el estado turco y el Partido de los trabajadores de Kurdistán (PKK). Llegué a entender esta narración de la violencia, omnipresente en todas las infraestructuras sociales de la vida kurda masculina en Estambul, como una forma de trabajo comunicativo a través de la cual una consciencia histórica distinta y entendimientos compartidos de violencia son creados, redes para la sobrevivencia y la dignidad engendradas e individualidades morales elaboradas. Estas narrativas rechazan la interpretación de la lucha kurda en desarrollo como mero terrorismo o victimismo y en cambio recuperan la agencia kurda y la contraviolencia. En estas narrativas, la "defensa de la comunidad" no sólo afirma el derecho de los pueblos a existir sino también carga la violencia simplemente con un significado moral, convirtiendo aquellos quienes protegen la comunidad en contra de la violencia del estado en figuras aspiracionales. [*violencia, narrativa, moralidad, guerra y paz, memoria, Kurdos, Turquía*]

KURTE Di vê gotarê de, li ser bingeha lêkolîneke etnografîk a du salan ez hewl didim lêbikolîm ka ka mîrên kurd ên ji çîna karker li Stembolê bi çî awayên cihêreng û nakok li tundiyê dihizirin, wê vedibêjin û pênasê dikin. Di çarçoveya jinûvedestpêkirina şerê di navbera dewleta tirk û Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) de, awayê ku karkerên kurd tundiyê, xwe-parastin û tolhildanê bi bîr tînin û di qada giştî de behsê dikin bi awayekî berçav guheriyê. Di

çarçoveya vê lêkolînê de ez lê serwext bûm ku ev çirokbêjîya tundiyê, ku hemû dem û deverên civakî yên jiyana mêrên kurd li Stembolê vedigire û lê amade ye, formeke keda ragihandinî ye ku bi rêya wê hişmendiyêke dîrokî ya xweser û fehmên hevpar ên tundiyê tên afirandin, torên ji bo domandina jiyane û parastina rûmetê pêk tînin û kesayetiyên exlaqî tên çêkirin. Ev vegotin an qisetên jiyane wan derbirînan red dikin ku têkoşîna kurdan tenê wek teror an jî mexdûrî şîrove dikin, û li şûnê, li bikeriya kurdan û tundiya beramber xwedî derdikevin. Di van vegotinan de, “parastina gel” ne tenê doza mafê hebûnê ya gelan dike, lê herwiha qîmeteke exlaqî jî bar dike tundiya heq, û wisa jî wan kesên ku gelê xwe li hember tundiya dewletê diparêzin dike kesên pêşeng û ilhambexş. [*tundî, vegotin, exlaq, şer û aşti, bîr, kurd, Tirkiye*]

SHIFTING NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE

I first heard the name “Sarı Komiser” in late 2013, when I started ethnographic research among Kurdish migrant workers in Istanbul (*sarı* means blond in Turkish and refers to his fair complexion and Western look; *komiser* means police chief).¹ I found him intriguing and started to ask my interlocutors if they had heard of Sarı Komiser. Many responded with detailed accounts of beatings he inflicted, torture techniques he used, and insults he made. During the first half of the 1990s, I was repeatedly told, a large group of male workers from different ethnic groups would assemble at an informal workers’ market (*amele pazarı*) next to the police station where Sarı Komiser worked. Every morning the police chief would come by to inspect the market and the men standing around waiting for jobs. He would insult and mock the Kurdish workers, check the cleanliness of their fingernails, and randomly hit their hands with a ruler. He would also force some of the Kurdish workers to clean up the police station. For most of my interlocutors, Sarı Komiser was a symbol of state violence, humiliation, police brutality, and torture against the Kurds. During this period, while Sarı Komiser’s name often came up in individual interviews, I never heard people talk about him in everyday conversations.

However, stories about Sarı Komiser—and other such narratives of violence—circulated in very different ways after the failure of the peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or PKK) in July 2015. Political violence and war became a significant part of the everyday lives of Kurds in Turkey again. I started hearing stories of Sarı Komiser in spontaneous storytelling, with people listening actively, adding details, and sharing their own stories in a form of recounting quite different from that produced and performed on demand in response to an anthropologist’s questions.

This article centers around the generative force of what I call *narratives of violence* among Kurdish working-class men. I place the ethnographic moment around which it centers in a broader political moment of Turkey’s historical transition from a failed peace process to the resurgence of conflict. As such, I take a narrative strategy that echoes the experience and narration of violence through which my interlocutors

constructed their sense of moral selves and imagined their communities. I draw on ethnographic material to show how eruptions of political violence and potential threats in my interlocutors’ lives refract through past experiences of violence to strengthen their determination to live a dignified life and to help consolidate resilient political subjectivities. I make these moves as an anthropologist from Diyarbakır, the de facto capital of the Kurds in Turkey, as an intellectual whose class position was privileged in comparison to that of my interlocutors and as an ethnographer who has lived and worked for two and a half years with the men whose stories I tell here.

Violence creates as much as it destroys. It forms modern states and societies; it is simultaneously destructive and generative of social relations, states and law, formal and informal authorities, multiple and layered sovereignties (Benjamin [1921] 1996; Clastres 2010; Daniel 1996; Das 2007; Fanon 1963; Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). The difficulty in writing about violence is that it “participates in its own self-definition” (Coronil and Skurski 2006, 6). State violence is accompanied by the epistemic production of its legitimacy through the interplay of illusion and truth, of fiction and reality. Constitutive violence of the state is inscribed into the very fabric of everyday life not only through structural and repressive means but also through the epistemic and violent production of the other (enemies, criminals, terrorists) (Aretxaga 2005; Tausig 1986). There is a strong tradition of critical work in anthropology and sociology on the state monopoly of violence (Weber [1919] 1994) and how the use of violence by nation-states and transnational institutions is legitimated (Aretxaga 2005; Bourdieu 1999; Das and Poole 2004; Fassin 2015; Nagengast 1994). But the politically and ethically fraught question of counterviolence in people’s self-defense and retributive action has been mostly left to moralists, politicians, and state discourses.²

This was the challenge posed by my interlocutors’ conversations in the wake of the resurgence of conflict in 2015. The Kurdish experience and narration of violence have led me to examine previously ignored or unknown ways in which narratives of violence are told, retold, and circulated as an integral part of moral and political self-formation and community making. How does violence become justified in

people's lives? Is it ever justified? How are the contradictions regarding the use of violence resolved? If legal violence can be illegitimate, *when* can illegal violence be positioned as just? As anthropologists and social scientists, how can we talk about all this in ethnographic work and theoretical inquiry?

Kurdish working-class men in Istanbul imagine, narrate, and conceptualize violence in multiple and often contradictory ways. How Kurdish workers remember and publicly speak about violence, self-defense, and retribution has notably changed in the context of the resurgence of the war between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Arbitrary and harmful actions from the state and police and nationalist attacks, as well as communal responses to these actions, take on a recognizable storytelling form that I call narratives of violence. During my ethnographic research, I came to understand this storytelling of violence, omnipresent in all the social infrastructures of male Kurdish life in Istanbul, as a form of communicative labor through which a distinct historical consciousness and shared understandings of violence are created, networks for survival and dignity engendered, and moral selves crafted. Kurdish workers remember and speak of community defense and retributive violence as kinds of "just violence" necessary to ensure survival and dignity, turning their actors into aspirational figures for community members. Stories of counterviolence are central to narratives about community morality, justice, and resistance. In times of recurring violence, the work of remembering and recounting earlier moments of exceptional violence has the effect of both keeping those moments alive for younger generations and outlining an ethical, political, and affective response to state violence that sees counterviolence as constituting both self and community.

I show that narratives of violence distinguish "just" and "unjust" forms of authority and power as well as help produce meaning and mediate how people construct moral selfhood, aspire and relate to others, and imagine communities in times of recurring violence. These narratives refuse interpretation of the ongoing Kurdish struggle as mere terrorism or victimhood and instead recuperate Kurdish agency and counterviolence. In the passage from a fragile peace process to the upswing of conflict, altered meanings and forms of narrative point to the changing politico-moral imaginations of a Kurdish presence in Istanbul and tell us about the ways people feel sovereign violence and react against it. These narratives not only present "theories of past events"³ (Ochs and Capps 1996) in the violent history of Kurds but also congeal moral selves and communities—though these moral selves and communities are not free from uncertainties and contradictions. In contrast to the expectations of Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1963), the counterviolence of the colonized does not necessarily lead to the creation of liberated selves.⁴ Rather, as Fanon himself shows in his transition from the idealized language of a political manifesto to his complex political and psycho-affective analysis, the liberatory potential of

counterviolence is in tension with its quality of being an assertion of power and de facto sovereignty—that is, the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity. In Kurdish Istanbul, counterviolence (and its narration) leads to the emergence of multiple and contradictory politico-moral subject positions and a more complex construction of selfhood. The radical rupture in the historical context lets us see how people craft their moral selves and political belongings moving between these multiple, discontinuous, and contradictory positions.

I conducted the bulk of my ethnographic research in Demir Mahalle, an old working-class neighborhood in Istanbul, between October 2013 and February 2016. The research was grounded in participant observation with Kurdish workers who had fled political violence in the Kurdish region during the conflict-ridden 1990s and those seeking temporary work in Istanbul in the 2010s. This was a masculine world. I worked with daily wage laborers in the construction sector, in neighborhood vegetable and fruit markets, and with subcontracting companies specializing in building platforms for daily events and organizations, university graduations, and concerts. Following anthropologists and historians of labor, I extended my research beyond the workplace: I attended weddings, funerals, prayers, rituals, and political protests of Kurdish migrant workers. I had access to my interlocutors mainly through male workplaces, coffeehouses, and Islamic communities and Sufi orders (*tarikats*).⁵ Geographically, Demir Mahalle is located in a valley extending inland from Istanbul's hilltop business districts and skyscrapers. It hosts poor working people of diverse ethnic origins, displaced Kurdish communities of different political orientations, and small factories, textile workshops, and bazaars. It is in this neighborhood where the next scene takes place.

KURDISH ISTANBUL

It is a Monday evening, early September 2015. We are drinking tea and talking about current events in a Kurdish coffeehouse in Istanbul where migrant workers meet to eat and drink, exchange information, wait for jobs, relax, and play cards. The basement air is thick with smoke. As news about the resurgence of war is broadcast on TV, migrant workers begin to talk politics. Kurdish coffeehouses in Istanbul are distinctly male working-class spaces known for serving bitter "smuggled tea." They are a "hub of communicative channels" (Elyachar 2010) where Kurdish workers exchange news about jobs, resources, opportunities, and politics.⁶ Kurdish television is broadcast at all hours, and social media constantly supplies updated news and images from accounts of friends and relatives in the Kurdish-majority southeast and east (the "Kurdish region" in what follows). Workers circulate regularly between their hometowns and western cities of Turkey; information flows quickly and reliably in this crucial infrastructure of Kurdish metropolitan life.

After two years of peace negotiations, my interlocutors are anxious about the resurgence of a war that has lasted for

three decades and resulted in the deaths of more than forty thousand people.⁷ “Edî bes e!” (“It’s enough already!” in Kurdish), one of the elder workers in the coffeehouse shouts furiously; the others nod in agreement. Young workers at another table swear in Kurdish and Turkish at those responsible for the resurgence of the conflict. They are anxious about their kin, friends, and beloved ones in their hometowns, about their own lives and jobs in the western cities, and about their hopes for the future.

Currently, Kurdish migrant workers constitute one of the groups most vulnerable to the collective violence of nationalist mobs in Turkey. After the last resurgence of war in July 2015, there were numerous cases of nationalist attacks against Kurdish workers in western Turkey. One Kurdish worker in Muğla was beaten and forced to kiss the statue of Mustafa Kemal (founding figure of the Turkish Republic); Kurdish businesses and homes were burnt or attacked in central Anatolia. There were outbreaks of violence and acts of intimidation in western cities like Istanbul, Izmir, and Bursa. Nationalist groups in various cities attacked buses traveling to the Kurdish region. Such groups have repeatedly been supported or mobilized in the past by the Turkish nation-state to attack religious and ethnic minorities or the political opposition: Armenians, Greeks, Alevis, communists, and Kurds (Bora 2008). All this was foremost in my elder interlocutors’ memories.

Violence and dispossession are intrinsic to the processes through which rural Kurds were unmade as peasants, uprooted from their villages to Istanbul in the 1990s, and became urban workers. The Kurds of Turkey have been steadily impoverished since the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Insufficient industry and infrastructure, as well as the preservation of the old land regime (that relied on the enduring supremacy of the Kurdish landed elite with strong ties to the Turkish bureaucracy), led to the de-development of the Kurdish region. Marginalized in the growing regional political economy, the Kurds were simultaneously blocked from the creation of an indigenous and independent political economy (Yadırgı 2017). Landless villagers migrated—either permanently or in circular migration—to the industrial centers of western Turkey. Waves of outmigration drastically increased in the 1990s, when the Turkish state used brute force in a self-declared “counterinsurgency,” stripping people of their land and livelihood in the Kurdish region and radically changing the ethnic composition of the working classes in Turkey.

Istanbul has always been a hub of migration and has long hosted a population of Kurdish people seeking better economic opportunities. But the nature and intensity of Kurdish migration changed in the 1990s. The Turkish state evacuated approximately four thousand Kurdish villages and hamlets at the peak of the counterinsurgency, displacing and dispossessing millions of rural Kurds (Jongerden 2007). Official numbers of the displaced went as low as 370,000 (TBMM 1998, 12–13), but these numbers are highly contested. Human rights organizations and independent organizations’

estimations vary between one million and four million people (HÜNEE 2006; GÖÇ-DER 2001). The stated aim of the counterinsurgency was to “drain the swamp” (*bataklığı kurutmak*) and reduce Kurdish support and “human resources” for the PKK. Those displaced by war and political violence in the 1990s constitute a significant part of the Kurdish population in the metropolitan areas of western Turkey today. The three million Kurds constituted approximately 17 percent of Istanbul’s population by 2018, making Istanbul “the world’s biggest Kurdish city,” as the saying goes among the Kurds of Istanbul.

Kurds of Turkey experienced different modalities of political violence during the 1990s: burnt villages and homes, lost lives, lost friends and relatives, humiliation, lawlessness, and injustice. State officials saw most of the people in Kurdish villages who did not accept “the village guard system”⁸ and refused to fight against the PKK as potential terrorists and treated them as such. Most of my interlocutors vividly remembered killings by Turkish army troops dressed in PKK uniforms as a strategy of dirty war. They recounted the humiliation of seeing respected elders of their villages stripped of their clothes in front of everyone, male and female. Many told me frequently that they still see, hear, and smell the slaughter of their livestock herds, the public display of murdered guerillas’ bodies, and the evacuation of their villages. This violence extended beyond the Kurdish region. Local hatred, nationalist attacks, and police violence in Istanbul (and other western cities) against the Kurds extended the geography of war far beyond the original counterinsurgency in the Kurdish villages and towns, reaching urban neighborhoods of Istanbul like the one in which I worked.

Through the 1990s, landlords in Istanbul refused to rent their apartments to Kurds due to their nationalist feelings and/or fear of terrorism. The Kurdish language was stigmatized as a sign of terrorism. Migrants only felt comfortable speaking Kurdish quietly and among themselves in private spaces. Many of my interlocutors (specifically the elderly) recounted the humiliation of being refused access to coffeehouses and restaurants owned by their Turkish neighbors. Different modalities of violence came into play as the war unfolded in rural and urban areas. We see the tension and interplay between the projects of liberal state-making (the extraction of labor and profit through racialized and insecure urban working class) and ethno-nationalist state-making (that relies on a desire to destroy, annihilate, and assimilate “the others”) in multiple modalities and forms of violence.

Beginning in January 2013, a peace process between the PKK and the Turkish state put a temporary break to the war after three decades of fighting. During the peace process, Kurdish migrant workers began to see the sociopolitical situation of Kurds in the city as increasingly secure. My interlocutors explained the relative ease of living in Istanbul over the course of the last decade and the very existence of the peace process as positive outcomes of the struggle waged by Kurds *and/or* (depending on the political perspective

of the narrator) the existence of a Turkish government willing to cooperate under the banner of Muslim brotherhood and Islamic solidarity. Politically, Kurds in Turkey are split between those who support the government and those who are opposed to it, and much of the support derives from strong association with Sunni Islam and Naqshbandi Sufi orders, although these social and political identities are in flux. In addition to these political divisions, there are linguistic differences among Kurmanji and Zazaki (also known as Dimili and Kirmancki) speakers, as well as the religious Sunni/Alevi divide.

In those few years between January 2013 and July 2015, regardless of their sociopolitical identities and religious attitudes, my interlocutors told me that the peace process might turn into a real historical break for the Kurds. Finally, they would be able to feel comfortable in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and coffeehouses and move around the city without fear. That feeling, alas, did not last long. Now, it seems, the peace process has not marked a new era, but rather was a quickly fading moment that ended with intensified urban warfare in Kurdish cities, a deep feeling of despair for Kurds of Turkey, and a new configuration of power in the Middle East.

DEFENSE OF THE COMMUNITY

It is September 7, 2015. Back in the coffeehouse, we hear shouts of an approaching crowd. Everyone runs out to the main street, and I follow. Hundreds of young men move toward the neighborhood park, shouting, “Martyrs never die, this country is indivisible!” They wave Turkish flags and shout “Allahu ekber” (God is the greatest) over and over again. A police “scorpion” (heavily armed police vehicle) and two police cars accompany the crowd to the park where they begin to sing the national anthem: “Fear not! For the crimson flag that proudly ripples in this glorious twilight shall not fade until the last family in my country stands!” Hundreds of Kurdish men appear on the sidewalk to watch as protestors shout nationalist and Islamist slogans with the flag flying. The scene taking place is unusual. The demonstrators call for revenge against the PKK. We watch from across the square with rapt attention. Kurdish workers’ arms and legs are trembling with anger and fear as they swear at the protestors in Kurdish and make nonstop jokes to calm each other down. The demonstrators—only a few of whom are locals—stay in the neighborhood for half an hour and then move on. Everyone knows the purpose of this roving demonstration: to protest a PKK attack a day earlier in Hakkari (Dağlica) during which sixteen Turkish soldiers were killed, the deadliest assault on Turkish troops since renewed fighting erupted in July 2015. It takes the protestors eight hours to complete their tour of all of the neighborhoods of this section of Istanbul. The protests were, it turned out, a choreographed targeting of the pro-Kurdish left-wing Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and the Kurds.

As the crowd disperses, I talk to some of the younger Kurdish workers. They are furious (but *not* surprised) with

law enforcement for allowing this intimidation to proceed without legal permission but with full police protection. Older workers try to calm down the young ones. “The cops would have attacked fully armed if it were Kurds marching,” says Ahmet, a young migrant worker whose early childhood memories include many fragments of war in the Kurdish region. The others silently assent. In fact, journalists later report that law enforcement officials did nothing to stop nationalist violence against Kurds that followed those demonstrations later that week.⁹ “Nothing so inspires group violence against outsiders or perceived transgressors as the sense that the group is carrying out a legal, lawmaking, or law-preserving mission” (Weisberg 1992, 185).

Rage, fear, and hatred linger on the faces of my interlocutors. Azad shouts in Turkish to a waiter in a Kurdish restaurant on the main: “Give me that knife so I can kill four or five of these assholes, I don’t care what happens to me later!” Others laugh. Shouted slogans calling for revenge wash over us, more faintly now, from the next neighborhood: “We don’t want a [military] operation, we want a massacre!” And again, “Allahu ekber, Allahu ekber!” That particular crowd did not take revenge, but other groups did: They attacked Kurds, HDP buildings, and Kurdish businesses in different parts of Istanbul and other cities in western Turkey. Indeed, the political rise of Sunni Turkish nationalism in Turkey—a reconciliation of secular Turkish nationalism with political Islam in a political oxymoron with brutal results for ethnic and religious others, women, LGBTQ communities, and political dissent and opposition—found an immediate call and response that day in the familiar acts of these state-supported groups.

Collective violence against the Kurds and the HDP was everywhere in Turkey on those days in early September 2015. The mood in Demir Mahalle was tense as well. Yet there Kurds were *not* subject to physical attacks, notwithstanding the diverse ethnic, religious, and political composition of the neighborhood. When I asked my interlocutors about this lack of violence, they had an immediate answer. Here, the Kurdish community was powerful, they said. That power had been accumulated through the “self-defense/defense of the community or people” (*kendimizi savunmak-korumak/cemaati savunmak/halkı savunmak* in Turkish) over many years. I heard this phrase “defense of the community” over and over in the days and weeks to come in social gatherings and coffeehouses and on the job. Almost everyone agreed. The crowd had not launched into violence in their neighborhood, my interlocutors told me, because Kurds were in a position to defend themselves in this neighborhood, and those outsiders knew it. “Defense of the community” was central to my interlocutors’ narratives of how to generate a dignified life and balance of forces between Kurds and nationalist Turks—no matter how precarious that balance might be.

After the crowd disperses, we go back to the coffeehouse. This time the workers stay in front of the building.

“It won’t be safe [in the basement coffeehouse] if they attack,” one says. “This is just like the 1990s,” says Ahmet, voicing a common sentiment of late. The absence of any actual legal protection and the presence of imminent violence revitalize the memories of the 1990s for Kurds and attest to their urgent need to defend themselves and their community in these out-of-joint times.¹⁰

They warn me to be careful—I’ve been in the neighborhood for two years now, mostly hanging out with them. They are concerned for me. As an urban Kurd known to be doing research on Kurdish migrant workers, my security is on their minds. My elder friends ask the younger ones to accompany me around the neighborhood. Fear bridges the gap between generations; younger workers listen respectfully to the older workers tell stories of similar events in the past. Community ties solidify as threats get closer. When we finally resume drinking tea and smoking, the elders talk about preventive measures against potential violent attacks. Ramazan and his friend Osman—who were compelled to come with their families to Istanbul during the forced migration—advise the young men to never walk alone, to never have arguments with young Turkish men, and to always carry a knife or gun to protect themselves. The constancy of violence in Kurdish lives, as in Deborah Thomas’s (2016, 185) research in the garrisons of Jamaica, produces “a sense of simultaneity regarding their experiences of events in the past and the present, as well as their expectations of the future.” Under this renewed threat of violence, the history of the 1990s is told and retold through exemplary stories such as those about Sarı Komiser. This retelling provides an interpretive framework through which new meanings and feelings can be acquired, “just” and “unjust” violence can be distinguished, and a theory of political agency, action, and moral selfhood can be constructed. Kurdish workers quietly share guns and knives among themselves in the coming days. First priority goes to family homes where migrant workers live with their kids and families, rather than the single men’s/bachelor rooms (*bekar odaları* in Turkish) in which most of the temporary and seasonal workers live.

It is the beginning of the fall and the weather is still warm. I leave the coffeehouse after this tumultuous evening with the young workers. We go to the park. The atmosphere is completely different now. Kids are playing soccer, women walk with their babies, unemployed youth speculate about their job opportunities, and groups of young men and women eye one another. I see some Syrian, African, and Turkmen migrant workers and refugees still discussing the details of the demonstration in the park. Young Kurdish workers start to talk about the girls working in the supermarket on the other side of the street. Life goes on *as if* nothing had happened. Yet there is stillness in the movement. I am confused by the immense speed with which the people and their surroundings return to the ordinary. Passages between violent events and the ordinary and from the everyday to the eventful accelerated during the summer and fall of 2015.

THE WORK OF REMEMBERING: ON POLITICS OF HISTORY AND MEMORY

During the night of the demonstration and the days that followed, elder Kurdish migrants in Demir Mahalle began telling stories about Sarı Komiser in social gatherings, workplaces, and everyday conversations. With the intensification of political violence and the urgency of Kurdish self-defense, those stories that I used to listen to during my interviews acquired a new social life. This era not only witnessed a proliferation of different forms of Sarı Komiser’s story but also a radical change in how people narrated these diverse and often conflicting stories in times of war and peace. It was then that I started thinking differently about these stories and their meanings. Mustafa, a Kurdish porter in his late forties, recounted his memory of Sarı Komiser in the coffeehouse a day after the demonstration. The political atmosphere was still very tense, and there were nationalist attacks in Istanbul and other cities in western Turkey. The coffeehouse is usually incredibly noisy with the sound of conversation, laughter, little fights over card games, tea glasses, silverware, and chairs. Today, everything was quiet, and everyone listened, even the young migrant workers who usually scoffed at or ignored the tales of their elders. Mustafa’s voice was full of lingering humiliation and indignation: “Every morning Sarı Komiser would ask us to stretch our arms and check whether our nails and hands were clean or not. He would order the cops to chase us like herds. We would run away like animals. I felt so humiliated. I can never forget.” Moral indignation against humiliation was key to Mustafa’s storytelling: Sarı Komiser was not only a figure of cruelty, but he would dehumanize and symbolically play with the Kurdish workers whose very existence in the city depended on the availability of certain forms of labor in the market. The police chief had complete power over the workers through his ability for humiliation, which was reinforced through the constant threat of physical violence.

The sensory richness of the stories about Sarı Komiser reveal the wider atmosphere and diverse actors of the 1990s, who had differing degrees of responsibility: high-ranking commanders and soldiers involved in village evacuations and the burning of villages in the Kurdish region, infamous JITEM¹¹ members and paramilitary organizations responsible for torture and extrajudicial killings of the dirty war, and war criminals and the politicians of the era who were never punished for their crimes and human rights abuses. Details of Sarı Komiser’s humiliating acts merged with the details of recurrent violent acts from distinct historical eras. Those details became part of an epic history in which past and present, here and there, merged. These stories told of ongoing cycles of violence, displacement, and community self-defense in shifting locations, from Kurdish villages to urban Istanbul, between the 1990s and the 2010s.

Through these narratives, younger Kurdish workers learned about this violent history, the subsequent displacement and settlement of migrants in Istanbul, and the importance of self-defense and care for each other in times of

recurring violence. These narratives translate the historical experience of forced migration and political violence into telling, endow the past and present events with meaning as an integrated whole, and charge them with moral significance. They establish structures of relationships between the self and the other, state and community, and they develop communal ties. In those narratives, exemplary figures emerge as constitutive symbols in the reproduction of Kurdish communities as a collective political force and key part of the working class in Turkey. How people narrated these stories about state violence and retributive violence was central to the ways they define “right” and “wrong” action and craft politico-moral selves. Specifically, the ways they defined the actors and actions of retributive violence offered a cartography of aspirations, moral values, and self-making.

Narrative and (re)signification are the main ways through which the role of violence in state-making and history is revised. In these narratives, the justness of violence is a generative force; political struggles waged by the rising urban Kurdish population enable Kurds to protect their neighborhoods, lives, jobs, and businesses against violent nationalist attacks. They speak of their violence in response to attacks as crucial to their existence in a “cosmopolitan” city (that is currently proud of its multicultural past with the rise of political Islam and imperialist Ottoman nostalgia), as an older Kurdish migrant reminded others in the coffeehouse on that Monday evening: “During the 1990s, we could not enter the coffeehouses. They were not selling tea to our elderly folks or us because we were Kurds. Now some impertinent youth among us say that ‘nobody can touch me, etc.’ If we had not fought here, if the guerrillas had not struggled, there would be no place for Kurds to sit in this city.” Similarly, the memories of an often-quoted immense fight between Kurds and migrants from the Black Sea region over transportation business in early 1990s abounded. In this story, Kurds had to fight for their rights over minibus ownership against other groups as the state was legalizing this profitable business and giving “M plates” to minibus owners (mostly Kurdish) who had been in this business illegally until that time. These fights lasted for days and took place in nearby neighborhoods, and many Kurdish men were detained and tortured by Sarı Komiser at the time.¹² In these narratives, Kurds were not simply depicted as innocent victims of state violence or nationalist attacks. This was a radical position in a political moment when building a new regime of truth and memory was central to the remaking of the Turkish nation-state.

The past is always a site of struggle. Yet at this historical moment, and during the violent events and narrative recounting of them that I witnessed during my fieldwork, “talk on history” had never been so pervasive or consequential in Turkey as it was in 2010s. The AKP government produced and sustained an image of a government different from previous governments. It defined itself at the time against the oppressive Turkish state tradition (epitomized as the deep state), creating “the myth of the government

against the state” (Günay 2013, 180). Key in this moment was the public recognition, for the first time, of past massacres and disasters—even if in limited, hesitant, and highly convoluted forms (Ayata and Hakyemez 2013). At the same time, the AKP’s selective critique of state violence and past massacres fortified the promise of peace among Kurds and provided further legitimacy (and electoral support) to the government (notwithstanding the ongoing state violence): Islamists claimed to be the victims of the same secular state tradition that oppressed the Kurds.

Scholarly literature shows that making sense of political violence is fraught with struggle over facts and interpretations, exclusions and inclusions in history (Aretxaga 1997; Bernal 2017; Trouillot 1995). Although renewed official history in Turkey provided further legitimation for the new government and its authoritarian practices by producing a sense of genuine reconciliation with the past, it also opened a public space for countermemories and alternative (often transgressive) interpretations of the past to emerge. Neglected and officially denied histories of the Armenian Genocide, as well as past massacres against the Greeks, Alevis, Kurds, and leftists and communists, became part of everyday conversations, public discussions, social discourses, and academic and artistic production. In Kurdish Istanbul, collective memories of violence entailed *unruly* imaginations of “just violence” that lay at the intersection of ethics and politics.

Mustafa lights another cigarette and continues telling his story of Sarı Komiser. Total silence among his audience of young workers intensifies the power of his words:

They took care of him later on. What goes around comes around, you know, one of our kids cut his ear. They caught him right on the shore [of Bosphorous]. They cut off the entire half of his ear like that. He took a break with that wound for two years, after that he retired. What they said to him was, “you won’t continue [torturing and humiliating our folks],” they stipulated that condition. I heard it that way. It must have been a good threat that the man didn’t continue.

Exploring the ways black urbanites in Chicago transform experiences of injury into communal narratives, Laurence Ralph (2013, 104) shows how stories of Jon Burge—a police commander infamous for his torture techniques—allow “the qualia of pain [to be] converted into narratives that shape community, and become the seedbed for historical consciousness.” For Ralph, these narratives turn the experiences of injury into forms of communal remembering, and through them, black urban residents come to terms with their shared pain. Similarly, in the garrisons of Jamaica, Deborah Thomas (2016) listens to what people tell us about what sovereignty *feels like* in moments of exceptional violence to understand what it means to be human in the wake of the plantation. She shows that “recurring moments of exceptional violence, themselves emerging from ongoing, everyday patterns of structural and symbolic violence, lead

to an experience of time neither as linear nor cyclical, but as simultaneous, where the future, past, and present are mutually constitutive and have the potential to be coincidentally influential” (183). While the narratives of violence that Ralph and Thomas describe take form in relation to the experience of injury, narratives of violence in Kurdish Istanbul entail stories not only of injury but also of doing violence.

Whereas narratives of the brutality perpetrated by Sari Komiser (his torture and humiliation techniques) become a marker of the unjust violence and the state’s responsibility for people’s suffering and pain, the act of punishing Sari Komiser turns here into a communal narrative of just violence and of Kurdish agency in Istanbul. First and foremost, narratives of violence let Kurdish migrants talk about their experiences as victims of state violence, partly mimicking the ways the Kurdish issue was being discussed by the AKP government and the Turkish state’s intellectuals in the beginning of the peace process coinciding with my research. However, the cutting of the police chief’s ear also entailed a *refusal* of the representation of Kurds as merely innocent and passive victims of the conflict—a common trope in social sciences and humanities in Turkey as well as mainstream media discourses during the peace process.

The cut ear marks a collective *refusal* to hear and internalize ongoing narrative violence exercised by the state toward the Kurd as victim or the Kurd as terrorist. Violence is inseparable from how we imagine knowledge of that violence to be produced and circulated and how we are interpellated in the process (Briggs 2007, 339; Gana and Härting 2008). How people think about violence and narrate it, and the multiple ways they are interpellated, however, are questions not only of *perception* but also of historical consciousness and collective constitution in relation to sovereign power. Among my interlocutors in Kurdish Istanbul, that distinct historical consciousness was being actively shaped through embodied memories and actual experiences of violence, all in the context of the restructuring of the Turkish state through the resurgence of the war in Turkey and northern Syria (Rojava—western Kurdistan), and the revitalization of the Turkish ethno-nationalist project (this time dangerously merging with political Islam).

AGENCY, MORALITY, AND SELF-MAKING

Who punished Sari Komiser, and how? “For an experienced event,” writes Walter Benjamin (1968, 202), “is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it.” The range of explanations for Sari Komiser’s punishment gives us a good mapping of the male Kurdish working class in Istanbul through its aspirational figures. There was no stable explanation or even narrative of his punishment. He was punished either at a bar with friends or maybe while walking along the Bosphorous. The agent of his punishment changed, too. I am not interested here in which version is more correct,

for “errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings” (Portelli 1991, 2) and offer us valuable understanding of people’s imaginations of self, others, communities, and the state. Oral history or everyday tales should not necessarily be seen as accurate or “truthful” retellings of events that actually occurred in the past, but rather as versions of the past that take different forms and meanings according to the teller, audience, and context (Portelli 1991).

“The very act of violence invests the body with agency,” writes Allen Feldman (1991, 7). He argues that in Northern Ireland there is no stable relationship of agency to nomothetic social frames, such as class, ethnicity, or political ideology, because both body and social space are under ongoing reconstruction by violence. Political agency is manifold and “formed by a mosaic of subject positions that can be both discontinuous and contradictory” (5). There is a ceaseless movement between body as object and body as subject, as well as embodied acts of violence, political discourses, and the movement of history. Through the practice of violence, the body accumulates political biographies and a multiplicity of subject positions as it moves from different spaces, times, and technologies of commensuration. In this political culture and dense discursive field, the self, Feldman argues, is the referential object of life histories, interpellated by discourse, and cannot be prior to it: “The self that narrates speaks from a position of having been narrated and edited by others—by political institutions, by concepts of historical causality, and possibly by violence” (13). Unlike in Feldman’s analysis, I think that there is room for people’s creativity in storytelling, political action, and self-making. Depending on the historical context, Kurdish migrant workers move (but not without friction) among a multiplicity of narratives, subject positions, and political biographies to craft moral selves. That movement is key to the proliferation of various narratives of violence (such as those on Sari Komiser’s punishment) and people’s imagination of political agency in Istanbul.

Some say that it was a victim of Sari Komiser’s torture during the 1990s who cut off his ear; others argue that it was a member of “the party” (that is, the PKK), and yet others think that it was a Kurdish *kabadayi*¹³ (local strongmen) or member of the mafia who cut off Sari Komiser’s ear. In any event, the specific person’s identity was always unknown and always “one of us” or “one of our kids.” To the degree that the storytellers convinced listeners that the actors of punishment were “one of us/our kids”—which means an actual member of a neighborhood community, a larger imagined community of Kurdish people, local strongmen, or mafia—these actors were turning into figures of excitement, desire, and aspiration, especially among the youth. In all versions, Sari Komiser retired and “never messed with the Kurds again” after being forced to promise that “he would never do it again.” Shifting narratives of violence in Kurdish Istanbul teach us of the multiple unstable and conflicting imaginations of “just violence,” political action, and moral values, as well as the porous politico-moral boundaries between these

contradictory imaginations. Central to this narrative is the mutilation of Komiser's body.

The cutting of an ear has a different grammar from that of a beating or shooting. It is a gesture situated within much longer histories of bodies being acted on, violated, and humiliated because mutilation of the body is a common practice among the Turkish soldiers in the war between the Turkish army and the PKK. There have been numerous cases where soldiers have used Kurdish guerillas' ears as emblems/badges of honor to prove their bravery and prowess during wartime. Yet war creates excess. One of the war crimes perpetrated by Turkish soldiers is condensed into the body of the police chief, in revenge for his humiliation and the torture of Kurdish workers. This mimetic act not only undermines the state's monopoly of violence but also symbolically registers the Kurdish struggle for recognition. For younger generations who never met Sarı Komiser or experienced his brutality, the story of cutting off his ear works as an empowering narrative demonstrating the importance of solidarity, "just violence" (sometimes linguistically framed as a question of well-deserved violence), and care for each other. The narrative invites the youth to enjoy the masculine pride of defending the community and struggling against oppression and humiliation.

Mustafa shared that pride when he spoke of Sarı Komiser. "I heard it was one of our kids who was tortured and ridiculed by him," said Mustafa. He, like others listening to his story, identified with the perpetrators of this mimetic act. When Mustafa narrated the tale of Sarı Komiser—carving out authority and attentive silence in an otherwise noisy coffeehouse or a workplace—he asserted his (and all male Kurds') masculine heroic self. The punishment of Sarı Komiser is not simply bloody; it mimics the control of humiliation and cruelty—the different modalities of violence that are intrinsic to Turkish state-making and exist in relation to each other. Ethics is not only a question of justifying violence but also an important part of its execution. In this particular history of violence and state-making, Kurdish manhood and morality are juxtaposed to the brutal (ab)use of power by the Turkish state: its use of torture, cruelty, and humiliation.¹⁴

I conducted an interview in 2014 (during the peace process) with K., a Kurdish construction worker, and he told the story in a different way. After a long workday at a construction site, we went to a nearby restaurant to talk about his life and labor as a migrant worker in Istanbul. For him, the retributive violence against Sarı Komiser represented a break in the lives of Kurds in mid-90s:

I shined shoes by the police station when I first came here in the 1990s. The cops would come by to get their shoes shined and break my box right after getting the work done. Most of the time, I was spending my earnings on these broken boxes. One of these cops was Sarı Komiser, he was the police chief. . . . He used to beat us because we are Kurdish. The cops used to put us in jail when they got bored. One day I heard that a member of the party [PKK] punished Sarı Komiser. You know, our situation used to be terrible. When we talked in Kurdish among ourselves,

they [the Turks] would give us nasty looks and often silenced us. Whenever there was a problem in the neighborhood, they used to blame us because they saw us as terrorists. They used to come together and attack us. It was frustrating, but we had nothing to do. I think the struggle of the guerrillas and the start of legal politics improved the conditions of Kurds. Through their struggle we learned to support and back each other. Our community grew and got stronger. Nobody can fool us anymore.

In this narrative, Kurds acquire agentive power and make their own history through the anticolonial struggle of the Kurdish movement, including both armed and political-legal wings. This was a common narrative among the Kurds of Demir Mahalle during the peace process, and it became even more common during the intensification of the war between the Kurdish movement and the Islamic State in Rojava (western Kurdistan/northern Syria) in 2014 and 2015. During that time, K.'s youngest brother (who had similar ideas regarding Kurdish history, politics, and violent anticolonial struggle) joined the Kurdish forces in Rojava to fight against the Islamic State. This version became increasingly dangerous with the resurgence of war in July 2015, and the public circulation of this version of the tale decreased significantly with the intensification of fear, even though many people would still whisper it in each other's ears.

The local election office of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) was a relatively safe space for the circulation of this form of the story. Those who volunteer for the HDP during the elections were harassed and attacked in the neighborhood by right-wing groups and the police, and there were several fights between them and HDP supporters before the general elections of November 2015 (and later during the 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum and the 2018 general elections, as I later heard from my interlocutors and read in newspapers). In this political atmosphere, elder party members/volunteers were recounting stories from the 1990s and telling how they had to pay the price (*bedel ödemek* in Turkish)¹⁵ in order to become part of the political and economic scene in Istanbul. This work of remembering and recounting stories in times of recurring violence is the medium through which people craft a sense of belonging and engage in political action. "Stories," wrote Renato Rosaldo (1989, 129) "often shape, rather than simply reflect, human conduct." The ways people narrated these stories and defined the state and actors of retribution were key to the formation of historical consciousness and self-making in Kurdish Istanbul.

The third version of the narrative, which became much more popular after the resurgence of war, represents Kurdish *kabadayı* and/or mafia bosses as anonymous saviors. In the world of working-class masculinity, the *kabadayı* and mafia bosses occupy the *manliest* category. Everyday conversations in Kurdish Istanbul are filled with references to the Kurdish *kabadayı*, crime bosses known as *babas* (*baba* means father in Turkish), and mafia dons as providers of justice. "Their world evokes associations with courage, lawlessness, honour, and defending the weak" (Yeşilgöz and Bovenkerk

2004, 204). The names and stories of legendary Kurdish *kabadayı* and crime bosses like Behçet Cantürk and İdris Özbir (Kürt İdris) (who have been enemies of the right-wing mafia dons and paramilitary organizations) are crucial parts of everyday conversations. Their capacity for counter-violence against state officials and paramilitaries in the name of the community is imagined as a kind of retributive justice. Fearlessness, honest acts of courage, nonpointless violence, and a code of honor are the crucial tenets of the *kabadayı* tradition in the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, and these are significant reasons for the nostalgia among people for a time in which men fought with their fists and not their guns (211–15). Knives, however, were considered to be part of their bodies and were crucial for “teaching a lesson” through an element of intimidation and a threat of further violence. “Knives were—and still are—only used to warn someone, or to cut a piece of their ear” (212).

A week after the nationalist demonstration in Demir Mahalle, we were selling vegetables in a vegetable market in a different neighborhood. Kurdish workers were exchanging news from different locales in order to better apprehend the rise of political violence. The reference point was again the 1990s. After swearing at those who participated in the demonstration, Ramazan told a different version of Sari Komiser’s punishment for his young apprentices and me.

Sari Komiser once arrested fifteen of our teenage guys. Then two men, a rich contractor from Bitlis and a mafioso from Ağrı that everybody respects here, came to the police station. He [the mafioso] swore at Sari Komiser in front of all of us, he swore at his mom and his whole family. A lot of our people were there at the police station, too. I think that the cops were also afraid. They let the kids free. Later, I was told that he [the mafioso] was the one who taught Sari Komiser a lesson.

In Istanbul, Kurdish migrant workers (along with Syrian and African refugees) work the most difficult and labor-intensive jobs without any insurance or health benefits. After years in these jobs, their bodies are worn out and many of them are no longer able to work and end up in poverty. Mafia relations and associated underground/illegal economic networks are imagined as routes to escape poverty and hard labor. They are the working-class shortcuts to a life of worldly pleasures and extravagance and the masculine fantasy of justified violence against injustice and impunity. The fascination and secret admiration of the public with the figure of the “great” criminal, notes Walter Benjamin ([1921] 1996, 239), “can result not from his deed but only from the violence to which it bears witness.” Heroic and masculine forms of violence, talking back to the state through the language of violence, create emergent forms of authority and de facto sovereignties constantly acting through exclusions and drawing the line between friend and enemy (Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Schmitt 1985).¹⁶

This masculine imagination of justness does not necessarily imply justice for women and homosexual men. I vividly remember the shock of seeing one of my interlocutors with his shirt full of blood after “punishing” a flirtatious

gay man. He was confident that he “taught that faggot his lesson.” My interlocutor is a young laborer who is proud of the political force the Kurdish community acquired through defense of the community. In response to my criticisms, he said, “I don’t want that faggot to become a bad example for the young members of my community; we have to protect them.” During my fieldwork, I encountered cases in which some Kurdish migrant workers attacked homosexuals and drug users when they felt that the morals of the Kurdish community were threatened by their existence or actions. Most of the murders of women committed in the name of honor were also seen as acts maintaining group integrity and morals “against an immoral urban culture,” which is also an echo of the prevalent Islamist discourses in the neighborhood that circulate through the powerful religious orders and also an important way for pious Kurds to think of ethnic differences and group boundaries.¹⁷ Moral resentment against other groups or individuals may give rise to violence against them under the name of defending the community, even in the absence of a threat.¹⁸ As in state-making, populist forms of sovereignty rely on the marginalization of others and involve violence, exclusion, and impunity.

CONCLUSIONS

During the peace process, I encountered the story of Sari Komiser from multiple workers only as a response to my anthropological research questions. But with the reintensification of state violence against the Kurds in the summer of 2015, that story (and many others) became part of everyday conversations and acquired a new social life. Looking back on this, I am reminded of Toni Morrison’s (1995, 323) Nobel Prize lecture in 1993, in which she notes: “Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.” Time and change in historical context, my interlocutors taught me, shape what *can* be narrated, as well as the production, circulation, public lives, and effects of those narratives. Depending on the time and context of telling, a violent act of retaliation against police violence or hostile crowds can be narrated as a political tale, a practical lesson to defend one’s self and community (as in the case of an approaching crowd), a sign of the masculine power of a community, or as a metaphor for the decades-long struggle of the Kurdish movement (at a workplace, local election office, or coffeehouse performance for fellow workers). The forms, intensities, and meanings of these narratives of violence shift in times of war and peace, which change people’s conceptions of self and other as well as political and ethical imaginations of community, care, and the state.

As the state gets more violent and nationalist Turks become less willing to live together on equal terms with Kurds, community defense acquires tremendous significance for Kurdish migrant workers. The justness of violence used in self-defense and retribution becomes a key element of care for one’s self and community. Notions of violence and justice are most clearly tied to the very definition of moral selfhood, community, and sovereignty. Narratives of

violence delineate the experience of pain under the constancy of state violence, its ebbs and flows, as well as the ways people resist and react to pain inflicted by the state and others. As such, narratives of violence help produce meaning and agency, form historical consciousness, construct theories of action, and form politico-moral selves. In these narratives, “defense of the community” not only asserts peoples’ right to exist but also charges just violence with moral significance, turning those who protect their community against state violence into aspirational figures.

In recent anthropological work on ethics and morality, there is a strong tendency to neglect the political: “In an attempt to constitute their objects, the analyses of local moralities and of ethical subjectivities seem to have specified the moral and the ethical to the point that they often became somewhat separated from the political, as if norms and values could be isolated from power relations, or sensibilities and emotions from collective histories” (Fassin 2012, 9). By contrast, I show that the complex and relational construction of moral selfhood, values, desires, and aspirations in Kurdish Istanbul is located within a particular political economy and history of sovereign violence. The neat separations and rigid oppositions between the moral and the political, or storytelling and action, do not hold among the Kurdish workers of Istanbul. The justness of violence, as imagined by people in multiple ways, points to the intermingling of the moral and the political in contingent and unexpected ways.

Last but not least, the anthropology of violence has been full of stories of victimhood, suffering, and injury. The story of Sarı Komiser’s ear and other narratives of counterviolence among Kurdish working-class men in Istanbul, however, refuse the representations of the Kurd as victim or the Kurd as terrorist, as I have shown. Attention to narratives of violence can help us gain a more nuanced understanding of the layered formation of self, morality, and community in the intersection of past and present acts of violence. As such, they show us not only the limitations of the anthropological literature but also the potentiality and limits of a politics enabled by stories of counterviolence in the face of an increasing threat of violence and war. By listening to how people imagine and narrate counterviolence, we can discern an emergent political agency, with its contingencies and contradictions, and its contested moral mechanisms of futurity.

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NOTES

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1. By migrant workers, I mean Kurdish male citizens of Turkey who migrate to Istanbul in search of labor or to escape violence and poverty. I deliberately say “male” because my fieldwork was almost exclusively among men. All the names of my interlocutors and the neighborhood are changed.
2. The global crisis of the nation-state as the main vehicle of sovereign power was accompanied by recent anthropological explorations of de facto sovereignty. The key proposition of the reinvention of sovereignty in anthropological discourse has been “to abandon sovereignty as an ontological ground of power and order, expressed in law or in enduring ideas of legitimate rule, in favor of a view of sovereignty as a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006, 297). Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat argue that this approach does not preclude state practices or legal practices but may help to “reorient such studies away from the law as text, or the courtroom spectacle, toward exploring more quotidian notions of justice, of ‘legal consciousness,’ and of punishment as they occur in everyday life” (297).
3. In “Narrating the Self,” Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996, 22) argue that narrative and the self are inseparable. For them, narratives situate narrators, protagonists, and listener/readers “at the nexus of morally organized, past, present, and possible experiences.” In that regard, “in forging story elements into a plot, narrators build a theory of events” (27).

4. The question of legitimate violence and legitimate anticolonial struggle has a long history in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In this political manifesto, Fanon and Sartre set the question of anticolonial violence as the means of liberation through which decolonization of the mind and the psyche (and thus the colonized subject) takes place. However, as Fanon proceeds with his political and psycho-affective analysis, he shows how inequalities, violence, and injustices persist for a majority of people in postcolonial contexts and that there is no neat transition between colonial and postcolonial situations—where the question becomes the persistence of colonial forms under the government of a national(ist) elite. In his foreword to the book, Homi K. Bhabha (2004, xxxvi) offers an alternative reading of Fanonian violence: “For Arendt, Fanon’s violence leads to the death of politics; for Sartre, it draws the fiery, first breath of human freedom. I propose a different reading. Fanonian violence, in my view, is part of a struggle for psycho-affective survival and a search for human agency in the midst of the agony of oppression.” A search for human agency can take multiple forms. I will focus on the question of agency and its complex relation to anticolonial violence in the last two sections of this article.
5. With a few exceptions of female workers in the neighborhood markets, all the manual workers in my field sites were men. Islamic orders have separate meeting places for men and women, and I only had access to the former. Coffeehouses in the working-class neighborhoods are also exclusively male places as opposed to the new and modern cafes in the middle-class parts of the city.
6. See Julia Elyachar (2010) for a related discussion on how social infrastructure like coffeehouses become the hubs of communicative channels in Egyptian economy and play a key role in the creation of semiotic meaning and economic value. By phatic labor, she refers to chatting, gossip, and talk for the sake of establishing ties with others that create communicative channels that establish semiotic communities.
7. Nobody knows the exact number of the dead, and the state officials have often provided inconsistent figures. See Noah Arjamond, “Nobody Knows How Many Have Died in the Turkey-PKK Conflict.” <https://bullshit.ist/nobody-knows-how-many-have-died-in-the-turkey-pkk-conflict-c09c49b131ee>.
8. The Turkish state initiated the village guard system in 1985 to recruit a progovernment Kurdish militia in its fight against the PKK. The law establishing this militia authorized the provinces’ governors to recruit “temporary” (paid) and “voluntary” (unpaid) village guards in provinces determined by the Council of Ministers (Belge 2016). The state recruited village guards locally from the rural Kurdish population and provided them salaries, weapons, and uniforms in order to assist security forces in their duties, to gather local information about guerilla activities, and to mark the local population as loyal or dissident.
9. For a detailed account on political violence against Kurds and the pro-Kurdish HDP in 2015, see Scholars for Truth, Justice and Peace (2015) “Report on Recent Incidents of Violence against HDP and Kurdish Citizens in Turkey.” <https://barisistiyoruz.wordpress.com/2015/09/26/report/> (Last accessed on November 23, 2015).
10. Self-defense (originally a question of protecting oneself from physical, symbolic, structural, and everyday violence) is imagined and described as an antidote to the nation-state in Rojava Revolution. In a recent article, Nazan Üstündağ (2016, 208) discusses the ways self-defense in Rojava (Western Kurdistan/Northern Syria) becomes the medium for unmaking the nation-state and creating revolutionary subjects for the Kurdish movement. Üstündağ defines a particular form of politics in Rojava, “a movement that is situated in the dialectic between state-ness and society” through which “society defends itself not only from the state that is under erasure but also from the one that is always in danger of emerging.” While Üstündağ deals with the question of self-defense as a question of liberation in Rojava Revolution and scrutinizes its relation to the making of a new form of self-government that has the potential of “overcoming social separations and bringing all that is reified by the state and capitalism to the people to use freely” (207), in this article I focus on the formation of moral subjects through the practices and discourses of self-defense and counterviolence at the heart of a Turkish metropole—where the question is not creating a model of self-governance but rather claiming a dignified presence in the midst of oppression, humiliation, and state violence, expanding their life chances and possibilities for self-determination (not being governed too much).
11. For many, JITEM (Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism) was the embodiment of what was called the “deep state” in Turkey. However, it should be noted this focus on a “deep state” is misleading in the sense that it portrays JITEM as a deviation from the structure of the nation-state. The organization, however, was in fact a central mechanism of the Turkish state in its war with the PKK. JITEM was one of the crucial forces behind the dirty war, numerous killings of the Kurdish intellectuals and politicians like Musa Anter and Vedat Aydın, as well as the militarization of everyday life in the Kurdish region for decades.
12. Kurdish migrant workers repeatedly told me that although conflicts between communities mostly stem from economic issues or more “banal” everyday problems, during the 1990s these conflicts were transferred to an ethnically politicized realm by law enforcement and public authorities. This was suggested, for example, in the narrative of S., an older worker from Bitlis: “Some of our young men began venturing into the minibus (transportation) business. We were doing it illegally, as the state hadn’t issued us the M license plates. At that time—it was maybe 1993 or 1994—the migrants from the Black Sea arrived and were trying to forcibly take the routes from us. . . . We were the ones to bear the brunt of illegal work, [and then] the state makes a tender offer for a route and these guys try to take it away from us for free. Anyway, when we realized that they had their eyes on our means of subsistence, they started attacking us. And what do you do when someone attacks you, when they try to snatch your bread [means of subsistence]? So we started fighting against these guys. One day I smashed the windows of twenty-four minibuses in the Sanayi District! May God grant that no one end up on the second floor of the Demir Mahalle police station. It used to be a torture house [back in the 1990s]. One day they tied my arms

around my wrists. Then they stripped me naked. I said to myself ‘these bastards are going to fuck me.’ I’m like this [holding his hands up]. They lifted me up a bit, then made something touch my feet. [Laughing] Every time they touch me, my entire body jerks. I’m being destroyed. Then they drop me down, kick me all over. Also, since the issue is political, you know Kurds and Turks were fighting, I was in jail for thirty-five days like that.”

13. *Kabadayı* stands for “informal leaders of urban neighbourhoods who sell forced protection, settle disputes and who protect the poor against oppressive administrations” (Yeşilgöz and Bovenkerk 2004, 203).
14. See Peteet (1994) for a discussion on male gender and rituals of resistance in the Palestinian intifada.
15. *Bedel ödemek* is a common saying in the political discourse of the Kurdish movement and generally used to denote making a sacrifice for one’s political ideals.
16. See Gilsenan (1996) for narratives on the force and violence of ruthless men and the personalized elements of people’s experience of power at the Lebanese frontiers.
17. During my fieldwork, I attended the meetings and prayers of a prominent Islamic order in Istanbul on a regular basis. In most of these gatherings, the religious teachers emphasized the moral superiority of the universalism of Islamic solidarity over sectarianism and ethnic nationalism. However, in the order, pious Kurds regarded themselves to be more religious than the Turks although they considered themselves to be a part of the universal Islamic Ummah. Pious Kurds articulated ethnic boundaries in terms of their devoutness and the moral conformity of Kurdish communal life to Islamic teachings, not in terms of linguistic difference. Secular and Westernized modes of urban life, heavily criticized by the religious teachers, have been associated with the Turkish culture in the pious Kurdish imaginary. Among the Islamist and pious Kurds, the Kurdish political movement is frequently criticized for its alliances to seculars, leftists, feminists, and LGBTQ communities. This mode of critique, I argue, is widespread also among the Kurds who are not part of the Islamic orders and communities and thus is influential in shaping how Kurds build moral selves and imagine their communities in Istanbul.
18. Didier Fassin (2013, 260) distinguishes resentment and *ressentiment*: “The resentful man is not directly or indirectly exposed to oppression and domination, but he expresses discontent about a state of affairs that does not satisfy him. *Ressentiment* results from a historical alienation: something did happen, which had tragic consequences in the past and often causes continuing hardship in the present.” For him, resentment as an ideological alienation and *ressentiment* as a historical alienation characterize two ideal-types of moral sentiments and modes of political subjectivation. Whereas Fassin refers to asymmetrical confrontations of the man of *ressentiment* and the resentful man as moments of truth for the society, here I am interested in the porous and fluid boundaries between the two. Following the lines Fassin draws between resentment and *ressentiment*, I ask: How can one become a subject of resentment and *ressentiment* at the same time? How can one’s historical alienation as a result of an experience of injury become the moral ground of an ideological alienation?

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