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Reading and feeling gender in perpetrator graffiti and photography in Turkey | Beja Protner [±]

Abstract

During the urban clashes between Kurdish militants and Turkish state forces in 2015-2016, young politicized social media users in Istanbul witnessed and experienced political violence through their engagement with violent words and images on social media, without being anywhere near the armed clashes. These were photographs of militarized nationalist performances of masculinized domination and sexist graffiti, produced by the Turkish Special Forces and circulated in the cyberspace. Based on an ethnographic study among young educated pro-Kurdish viewers and an ethnographically situated textual analysis of the graffiti, this article illustrates the ways images are perceived in the particular cultural and sociopolitical context. It argues that the gendered meanings that relate to the core of the gendered and ethnicized structural violence in Turkey, enhance the affective cybertouch of political violence.

Keywords: Digital Militarism; Affect; Subjectivity; Political Violence; Kurdish Issue.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJI

Xwendin û hiskirina cinsiyetê di grafitî û wêneyên bikeran de li Tirkîyeyê

Ev meqale berê xwe dide hêlên cinsî yê rasthatinên hissî û watedar ên ligel grafitiyên bikeran û wêneyên qadên şerê bajarî li bajarên kurdî li başûr-rojhilatê Tirkîyeyê. Di dema pêvçûnên nav bajarî de navbera mîltanên kurd û hêzên dewleta tirk de, salên 2015-2016, bikerên ciwan û politîzêbûyî yê medyaya civakî li Stenbolê bûn şahid û tecrubekerên şideta politik wexta ketine ber pêla wêneyên xeşim ên grafitiyên cinsiyetger û performansên neteweger û militarîst ên serdestiya nêrîne, ku ew wêne û grafitî ji destê Hêzên Taybet ên Tirk derketibûn û li seranserê qada sîber hatibûn belavkirin. Ev meqale xwe li ser bîngeha etnografiya bînerên ciwan û perwerî yê piştgirên kurdan û li ser bîngeha tehlîla metnî ya grafitiyên ji nezera etnografîk ve hatiye avakirin, û îdia dike ku ew sûret bi dilxwêlîn û hêrseke mezin tesîr li bîneran dike ji ber wateyên xwe ên siyasî û cinsiyetperest, ku ev yek ji berê me dide kakila şideta binyadî li Tirkîyeyê. Tesîrên şer ne tiştên ne-subjektîf, pêş-gotarî, gerdûnî û tesadufî ne, belku ew di sîbjektîfîyên politik-cinsî yê mirovan re derbas dibin û li ser wan têne mohrkirin ji ber çarçoveya xwe ya babsalarî û nefreta li hember jinan. Amajeyên aloz û pir cinsî rê didin rêzeke bîranîn û bibîrxistinê ku tecrubeya hissî bilind dîkin.

ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Xwêndinewe û hest kirdin be cender le grafitî û fotografi tawankariy le Turkiya da

Em meqaleye terkîz dekat le ser rehende cenderiyekanî peywendîdarbûnî hestewerî û watar dar legell grafitî tawankariy (Perpetrator grafiti) û fotografi da le zone bajerriyekanî şerr le şare kurdîyekanî başûrî rojhellaî Turkiya da. Le katî berdewamiy pêkdadane bajerriyekanî nêwan çekdare kurdekan û hêze dewlletiyekanî Turkiya da le nêwan sallanî 2015 bo 2016 da

[±] Beja Protner, Majcigerjeva 35, 2000 Maribor, Slovenia. E-mail : beja.protner@gmail.com.

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bekarhêneranî gencî be siyasibûwî soşyal mîdiya bûne şahid û ezmûnkerî siyasetêkî tundûtîj ke le rêgay bekarhênanî wênegelî tundûtîjî xonişandane netewegera serbazîyekanî heymeney mêrsalarî û grafitîyî sêksîst, le layen hêze taybetekanî Turkiyawe berhem dehatin û le sayber speys da pexş dekiran. Le ser binemay êtnografîyî temaşakarani genci, pêgeyîştûwî kurdgerawe û şikariyî têkstgerayî be êtnografîyî şwênga kiraw, em meqaleye pêdagirîyî lewe dekat ke ew wênane be şeweyekî pîrr bêz û tûrreyî karigerîyî le ser temaşakeraniyan dadenên, eweşş be hoy wata siyasîye be cenderkirawekaniyanewe ke degatewe kirrokî tundûtîjî bûnyadî le Turkiya da. Encamekanî şerr ziyatir lewey ke kesî, prê-dîskursîv, gerdûnî û herremekîyî bin, be kesêtiye siyasîye be cenderkirawekaniyê xellê da deguzerên û be hoy çwarçêwe bawksalar û dije jinekeyanewe pêyanewe deçespên. Amaje aloz û be qûllî becenderkrawekan beşêkî birewerîyî û peywendîyekan hoşyar dekatewe û debête hoyî ziyadbûnî ezmûnî hestewerî.

Introduction

In early February 2016, a photograph was widely circulated on social media in Turkey.¹ On a white wall of a residential building somewhere in Cizre, a Kurdish town of Turkey's Şırnak province, near the Syrian and the Iraqi borders, graffiti is sprayed in large black letters: *AŞK BODRUMDA YAŞANIYOR GÜZELİM :) PÖH ☺* (love is lived in (the) basement, my beauty :) PÖH ☺).² The phrase is taken from a Turkish pop song by Bülent Serttaş, *Bodrum Akşamları* (2013), but this particular “entextualization” and “co(n)textualization” (Silverstein & Urban, 1996) involves a word play. While “Bodrum” in the song refers to the summer resort district of Muğla province on the Aegean coast in South-western Turkey, the word (written as *Bodrumda* instead of *Bodrum'da*) also means “basement”. In this piece of graffiti, ended by a smiley symbol, *bodrum* refers to basements in Cizre, dubbed “basements of horror” by Kurdish politicians. About two weeks before the graffiti appeared, during intense clashes between Kurdish militants and Turkish security forces, people took shelter in basements. Turkish security forces embarked on an alleged military operation against the militants hiding in the basements and indiscriminately massacred and burned 177 people, predominantly non-combatants (see HDP, 2016).

The wall inscribed with the graffiti is riddled with holes from an explosion. In front of it stands a large, heavily armed man in dark combatant clothes who poses for the camera. His head and face are covered with a black balaclava with a slit for the eyes. His arms are raised; he is holding a Turkish flag in his left and showing a symbol with the right hand, fingertips joined together, except the index finger and little finger, which are stretched upwards, forming the shape of a canine head. The symbol belongs to the militant neo-fascist organisation Idealist Hearths (*Ulkeî Ocakları*, shortly *Ulkeücüler*), the unofficial paramilitary wing of the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), who also call themselves *Bozkuurtlar* (Grey Wolves) and have been involved in various

¹ I deliberately refrain from including visual material into this article. The reasons for this have to do with the issues of complicity in viewing and circulating violent images, which I discuss below. If the readers wish to view the first described image, they may follow this link: <http://gazetekarınca.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/58390-750x500.jpg>. More examples may be found online by using the key words “PÖH duvar yazıları”.

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author's own.

acts of political violence against ethnic and religious minorities, and left-wing opposition throughout Turkey's history. "PÖH", Special Police Forces reads the signature on the wall. Turkish Special Forces (*Özel Harekat Timleri*, ÖH), Special Police Forces (*Polis Özel Harekat Timi*, PÖH) and Gendarmerie Special Forces (*Jandarma Özel Harekat*, JÖH) have played a major role in the urban warfare in Kurdish cities and have reportedly conducted violations of human rights and war crimes with impunity (see OHCHR, 2017). The basement massacres in Cizre are the most notorious of such incidents, which have been praised by the authorities as successful anti-terror operations.

Güzelim (my beauty) is a word with which, conventionally, a man would address a woman in a romantic relationship. I am looking at the photograph, going back to the words "love" and "basement". I feel a lump in my throat and I become aware of my breathing; I notice that my heartbeat has raised and I try to calm down by breathing slowly. No one knows exactly what happened in those basements, what was done to these people before they were killed, how exactly they were killed and their bodies burned. The gendered bodily experience of horror leads me to think about sexual violence. Then comes disgust; anger and hate; helplessness. I am following these events on social media and can do nothing; "I am nothing". And finally some unexplainable state of melancholic numbness caused by the witnessing of horrific violence (cf. Sontag, 2003).

This article is concerned with the gendered aspects of the "cybertouch" (Kuntsman, 2010) of what I call *perpetrator graffiti* in the urban war zones in Turkey's Kurdistan. It brings to attention an aspect of war which is often neglected in Kurdish studies and studies of political violence in general: a conflict's parallel developments and gendered political violence in "another war zone" (Kuntsman, 2010; Kuntsman & Stein, 2015), namely cyberspace. With the term "perpetrator graffiti" I refer to (1) the graffiti (*duvar yazıları* – writings on the walls) sprayed by the perpetrators of political violence (in our case members of the Turkish ÖH)³ onto the contested spaces of conflict as an act of territorial appropriation and symbolic violence against the victimised population (in our case the resistant Kurdish spaces) that have the power to affect people with violence, albeit in various ways; and (2) sharing of photographs of the graffiti together with a nationalist, militarist, masculinist performance with flags and other ideological symbols on the virtual "walls" of social media. The notion also stands as (3) a metaphor for the affective inscription of political violence onto people's gendered subjectivities (see Das & Kleinman, 2000; Ahmed, 2004; Cvetkovich, 2012).

³ The scholars studying perpetrators within memory and trauma studies have shown that perpetrators emerge as such under complexly intertwined personal, cultural, social, economic, and political circumstances and that the categories of victims and perpetrators are in fact ambiguous and the borders between them are often blurred (Baines, 2009). While I acknowledge this complexity, this discussion exceeds the limits of this article.

During the urban clashes between the Kurdish Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (*Tevgera Civanên Welatparêz, Yên Şoresger/Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareket*, YDG-H) and the Turkish state forces in 2015-2016, social media users who followed the events of the war from other parts of Turkey, daily encountered violent words and images of the brutal war, such as the one described above. As they routinely scrolled down the newsfeeds with the touch of their skin on the screens of their phones, the visual violence touched them again and again (see Kuntsman, 2012: 3). In recent years, we have been witnessing the increased digitalisation of the war between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) and the Turkish state. This has important consequences and implications, including greater visibility and normalisation⁴ of the violence and its deeply gendered nature. It has brought the political violence and its experience to an unprecedented level, as it immediately and directly affects large numbers of people far beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the material war zones (Kuntsman, 2011).

"Today", Patricia Spyer and Mary Margaret Steedly (2013) wrote, "photographed, digitally produced, globally disseminated images impinge on us from all directions" (p. 17; see also Mitchell, 2005). As Dora Apel (2012) argued, "public understanding of war through media images is not separate from or secondary to actual war experience but is *primary* war experience and therefore central to our social understanding" (p. 151, original emphasis). As the internet and particularly social media have become such an integral part of our lives (see Miller & Slater, 2000; Kuntsman, 2010; 2012), this aspect of war experience should not be neglected. With the help of digital technologies, "[p]ast and current conflicts, wars and genocide touch us deeply, despite being distant temporally or geographically. What is more", Adi Kuntsman (2010) argued, "they touch us precisely when they emerge in the seemingly disembodied realm of cyberspace" (p. 9). Thus, Kuntsman (2010) put forward the concept of the *cybertouch* of war, violence and death which stands for the "ways in which past and current events can touch us through the monitors of our computers and mobile phones, whether by creating an immediate emotional response (sadness, rage, pain, compassion, indifference, etc.) or by leading to long-lasting changes in the ways we remember and experience war and conflicts" (p. 9-10; see also Kuntsman, 2011).

Images of violence are experienced bodily and emotionally in a way ontologically distinct from language (Spyer & Steedly, 2013: 12). As Christopher Pinney (2006) argued, images are more than just visual language; yet they are also not entirely opposite or inaccessible to signification. The visual, he argued, is a continuum between discursive and affective (p. 135). While no media is exclusively visual or textual but rather a combination of both (Mitchell, 2005;

⁴ It is important to note that this normalisation of violence or "turning into ordinary", as several of my interlocutors put it, does not necessarily result in people becoming numb to the violence (see Sontag, 2003). Rather, as my research showed, continuous encounters with violence lead to continuous irritation or even agony.

Spyer & Steedly, 2013), the images of the graffiti amidst the ruins covered with Turkish flags and masked perpetrators showing fascist symbols, most explicitly intertwine and merge visual and textual, semiotic and affective. Their semiotic aspects, I argue, in fact enhance their power to affect particular publics which are called up and engendered by the image.

First, without knowing the right linguistic and cultural code (Hall, 1980) to comprehend the messages of the graffiti, the effects of the images would only be partial. And second, signs may “shift” their meaning depending on audience, contexts, etc. (Silverstein, 1976). As images move between media, frames, contexts, and conditions of possibility, they “encounter, engage, or engender various audiences, or publics” (Spyer & Steedly, 2013: 8). Hence, they “move” (affect) different people differently. While the words and images from the war zones may trigger horror and anger in some people, they may be amusing and empowering for others.⁵ They invoke different histories of previous contexts of understanding and feeling, and intertextual references and associations (see Silverstein, 1976; Sontag, 2003; Ahmed, 2004). Hence, as Spyer and Steedly (2013) wrote, the affective aspect of images is “*other* than conscious knowing yet neither beyond or primordially before it” (p. 27, original emphasis). Anthropologists of emotions in the last two to three decades have discussed that meanings and bodily feelings are inseparably intertwined in people’s emotional experiences (Leavitt, 1996; Beatty, 2005). Thus, objects have the power to affect us in bodily and uncontrollable ways not *despite* our subjectivity and consciousness, as some of the so-called affect theorists have suggested (see Massumi, 2002; for the critique see Leys, 2011; Parla, 2017). Rather, they affect us in a particular way *because* of the way we subjectively perceive them according to who we are, what we have experienced, and how we read and understand the world and a particular situation, although the affective experience itself is uncontrollable, non-conscious, and difficult to understand and put in language. My research shows that the gendered aspect of the ÖH images’ semiotic content significantly determines the ways these images affect (pro-) Kurdish viewers because the meanings these images carry and the associations they forge stretch to the very foundations of structural violence in Turkey.

In this article, I will illustrate the ways in which the war between the PKK and the Turkish state and its everyday experience beyond the material war zones are gendered, based on two complementary methods. Firstly, I collected photographs from the urban war zones taken by ÖH that circulated on social media during and after the clashes, particularly those published on pro-Kurdish Facebook and Twitter accounts and on accounts apparently managed by members of the ÖH. I analysed the content of the graffiti and the photographs. Secondly, in 2016-2017, the period immediately after the clashes ceased and left behind mass destruction and devastation, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork

⁵ I did not work with people who are in favour of the war. Yet their engagement with the news and images online through comments, “likes”, and “shares” points to their positive experience.

among young educated people in Istanbul who were emotionally and/or politically involved in Kurdish politics. This includes (pro-) Kurdish individuals aged between 24 and 31, who had been closely following the events related to the conflict on social media. Some were actively involved in the activities of the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), while others supported Kurdish, minority, and human rights in ways other than party politics. My participant observation took place within the politicised circles of young adults, in the cafés and bars in central Istanbul where they often spent time engaged in political discussions and reflections on recent events. In 2017, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 14 persons, 6 women and 8 men. While meeting my interlocutors in cafés, their homes, or other places where they felt safe and comfortable, we spent several hours discussing their usage of social media, the ÖH graffiti and photographs from the urban war zones, how they affected them and the general atmosphere in Turkey. We talked about examples of specific images, which they raised and described according to their memory (i.e. we did not view any images together). Many talked about the same images, which were the most infamous and insulting. While the temporal distance from the experience made talking easier, these were still painful and emotional conversations that required sensitivity. Yet, my interlocutors thought that my research was important and were willing to contribute to it, which resulted in productive ethnographic collaboration.

The profile of my interlocutors was specific, as they were all university students or graduates, actively or ideologically involved in the Kurdish movement in Istanbul, who exhibited high political literacy and engagement.⁶ I focused on this group because they were the ones most engaged with Kurdish politics online and were thus most exposed to the “cybertouch of violence” (Kuntsman, 2010). Social media was their primary source of news, communication, and for some political engagement related to the conflict.⁷ They had similar backgrounds or/and life styles, and shared political views, strongly marked by the official narrative of the HDP. This resulted in overlapping readings of the images and common feelings, albeit not always experienced in the same way. For some, the sadness, disgust, grief, and rage in the face of the images mixed with feelings of helplessness and led to despair. Others were able to channel these feelings through “precarious hope” (Parla, 2017) and turn them into a source of collective political energy.

The emotions of others always remain out of reach for a researcher, since we can never completely understand how others feel, nor can we adequately

⁶ It is important to acknowledge the relative privilege of these people within the Kurdish movement, given their level of education and liberal lifestyle in central and secular parts of Istanbul as non-married young people. While many of my interlocutors critically reflected on their own privilege, most of them nevertheless encountered problems such as economic and political insecurity, and everyday nationalist discrimination.

⁷ While other (young) people also use social media and follow political news, the ways my focus group consciously uses social media (especially Twitter) in a particularly politicised way may be quite specific and typical.

mediate the experience to our readers (Beatty, 2010). Yet, serious attention to feelings and emotions is crucial if we want to move closer to a nuanced understanding of the effects of war and political violence. The feelings that circulated during my interviews and the emotions and intellectual insights that my interlocutors were willing to share with me marked my entire research, including the analysis of the images. Thus, this work is a result of intense emotional and intellectual exchange with my field-mates during what Ruth Behar (1996) called “vulnerable” ethnography.

By engaging in a contextualised reading of the graffiti and images from a critical gendered perspective inspired by my interlocutors, this article has a double aim: first, to analyse in-depth and expose the gendered militarism of the ÖH and the Turkish state in general; and second, to bring this gendered bodily experience, as it is experienced by those who are repeatedly affected by such violent images and texts, closer to the reader. I will argue that subjective meaning, bodily feeling, and context are inseparably intertwined in the affective experience of war in cyberspace. The gendered meaning of the perpetrator graffiti and militarised performances of masculinised domination hurt oppositional readers due to their gendered political subjectivities and consciousness, especially as they encounter political violence in the context of continuous war and the “routine violence” (Pandey, 2006) of gendered political arrangements of inequality and sexual oppression in Turkey (see Kandiyoti, 1988; Parla, 2001; Sirman, 2005; Üstündağ, 2015).

Perpetrator graffiti and photography of the urban war zones in Turkey’s Kurdistan

After two and a half years of ceasefire, the conflict between the Kurdish armed movement and the Turkish state escalated again in July 2015. In addition to the war between the PKK and the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri*, TSK) in the mountains of Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia that has been going on for more than 30 years, the main battlegrounds of intense clashes between Summer 2015 and Spring 2016 became certain districts and neighbourhoods of Kurdish cities and towns such as Silvan and Sur (of Diyarbakır province), Varto (Muş), Şırnak, Cizre, and Silopi (Şırnak), Nusaybin (Mardin), and Yüksekova (Hakkari). After the termination of the ceasefire, militarised Kurdish youth formed local militias (YDG-H), dug trenches to prevent state forces from entering the areas under their control, and declared autonomy. State forces, including both PÖH and JÖH, attacked the neighbourhoods with full military force. In the areas of the clashes, the government declared a state of emergency and around-the-clock curfews that lasted for days and sometimes weeks. The curfews were only temporarily lifted in order for civilians to abandon their homes, which were then subjected to full-scale destruction. During the curfews, numerous cases of systematic human rights violations were reported; hundreds of civilians were killed and hundreds

of thousands were forcefully displaced (OHCHR, 2017). The intensity of violence against the local population and against the built environment has reached a scale that could only be compared to that at the peak of the war during the 1990s.

Yet, as a result of the warfare's increased urbanisation, visualisation, and digitalisation, the experience of war has changed significantly in the last two decades (see Apel, 2012). Perhaps due to the novelty of the urban type of warfare or the prominent role of the ÖH, who consist of ideologically relatively homogeneous (read ultranationalist) professionals, symbolic violence has become unprecedentedly intense and systematic as well as intimate and personal. Soon after the urban clashes began, some groups and individuals, presumably members of the ÖH or other armed groups in service of the state, sprayed large graffiti with ultranationalist, jihadist, misogynist, threatening, and scornful content and some small murals (mostly Turkish flags) on the ruins of destroyed public and residential buildings of the neighbourhoods they fought in. These were well-thought-out, co(n)textualised and entextualised messages that were directly communicative (i.e. a text meaningfully moved from one context to another; see Silverstein & Urban, 1996). The practice soon became systematic among the ÖH and perhaps even turned into a kind of internal, competitive show-off.

The graffiti was accompanied by militarised nationalist spectacles of posing armed teams and individuals with gigantic flags, military vehicles, and ultranationalist and jihadist symbolism, which were all documented in photographs and videos with the help of digital technologies. These photos and videos were published on various “sharing” websites such as blogs, social media, YouTube, etc., apparently by ÖH members themselves. The triumphalist visual production may be classified as *perpetrator photography* (and video). Perpetrator photography is a part of the machinery of violence and destruction (see Hirsch, 2002; Butler, 2009: 63-100; Apel, 2012). The photographs are not only taken as a trophy and circulated for the amusement of the perpetrators, but are a particular technique of systematic political violence that transcends the spatial and temporal limits of the war zones. They perpetuate the event by “[reproducing] a set of social relations that made the taking of the photograph possible” (Apel, 2012: 6). Moreover, as Judith Butler (2009) argued, the photographic frame also defines the limits of legitimate violence and “grievable” human life. In addition to the borders of the photographic frames and of the screens from which we view them, the photographs are also “enframed” by ideological points of view and “frames of reference” (Spyer & Steedly, 2013). The images are accompanied by provocative comments, insults, and glorification of the institutionalised culture of violence, and “shared” by hundreds of ultranationalist supporters of the war. On the other hand, there are public celebrations of violence in the cyberspace on the pro-PKK side as well, albeit notably less and with much less explicit imagery. These include celebrative tallying of deaths of police and military

personnel, and images and videos of explosions of state facilities and vehicles, recorded from a distance. Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein (2015) defined this spill of a conflict into cyberspace as *digital militarism*.

Militarism, “a set of ideas and structures that glorify practices and norms associated with militaries” (Altınay, 2004: 2), has been central to Turkish nation-building and the state’s approach to ethnic, religious, and political heterogeneity of the population. It has also prevailed in inter-ethnic relations in Turkey, especially those framed by the militarised discourses of the state on the one hand and the PKK on the other. The three-decades-long war has resulted in the militarisation of all aspects of Turkish, Kurdish, and other lives (see Altınay, 2004; Arjomand, 2017). Militarisation is a subtle process in which beliefs and structures most closely connected to the military come to be taken for granted in everyday life (Enloe, 2000). In cyberspace, militarist politics interplay with social media and other digital communication tools. Ordinary networking and the pleasure of digital acts, in all their banality and everydayness, mixes with wartime violence and the brutalities of exceptionalism (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015: 2-12). Cyberspace is not separated from everyday social life but is “continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” (Miller & Slater 2000: 5). “[F]eelings and affective states can *reverberate* in and out of cyberspace” and “move through bodies, psyches, texts and machines, [...] intensified (or muffled) and transformed through digital circulation and repetition” (Kuntsman, 2012: 1-2, original emphasis). As the Turkish-Kurdish conflict⁸ spills into cyberspace, people engage in passionate wars of words and images, and fight for discursive and visual domination.

It is not only admirers who engage with the images of ÖH militarised spectacles in cyberspace, but also the oppositional public concerned with the war, mostly young Kurds and other critical left-wing members or supporters of the Kurdish movement, who closely follow the events in the war zones through online news and social media. Many of them “follow” not only the pro-Kurdish news agencies and engaged individuals, but also Twitter accounts apparently owned by individuals or groups from the ÖH and TSK ranks, such as *Terör Gerçekleri* (Terror Truths), *Özel Kuvvetler* (Special Forces), *Türk Özel Kuvvetleri* (Turkish Special Forces), and *Terör Analizleri* (Terror Analyses). This way, my field-mates claimed, they access the news from different perspectives, including that of “the enemy”, in order to better understand the situation. Many others, however, refuse to “follow” these accounts or have stopped at some point, because of the level of sadistic brutality and racism in these publications. Yet, they still

⁸ I use the notion of “Turkish-Kurdish conflict” in order to encompass the war between the PKK and the Turkish state, as well as the conflict beyond the war zones and weapons, which includes daily direct and indirect conflictive encounters and (violent) confrontations in Turkey, in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods of Turkish cities, in schools and dormitories, on streets and buses, and in cyberspace. The use of “Turkish-Kurdish” is also a rejection of the popular expression of the “Kurdish conflict”, which implies one-sided responsibility. It emphasises that the conflict is both “Turkish” and “Kurdish”, and that in various ways it affects both Turkish and Kurdish lives.

frequently encounter violent ÖH images and words, particularly the graffiti, because they are circulated by their Facebook “friends” and people they “follow” on Twitter. As my interlocutors explained, when used by the opposition, the perpetrator graffiti are re-enframed with different aims: to expose the excess of violence and the sadist, misogynist nature of the ÖH and the Turkish state, and to trigger political rage that leads to mobilisation against the violence. Some of my interlocutors “shared” violent images with these intentions, while others were strictly against the circulation of dead bodies or of any kind of war images.

The participation in digital militarism through viewing and “sharing” these violent images raises questions of complicity. Both graffiti (see Brighenti, 2010) and photography (see Berger, 2013; Sontag, 2003) call for witnessing, which is never innocent. The witnessing of suffering implicates us in the violent event and calls for moral positioning. This includes the researcher. My research is perhaps a reaction to such vulnerable witnessing, but it only opens more questions than it resolves (see Behar, 1996). Does the research perpetuate the violence? Does it exacerbate the pain for the benefits of the researcher, who is already in a position of privilege? The circulation of perpetrator graffiti raises similar questions, as it explicitly spreads the violence it contains and perpetrates. As Marianne Hirsch (2002) warned, even when used in a different context, perpetrator photography reproduces the triumphalist perpetrator gaze or what she calls the “Nazi gaze”. In Butler’s (2009) terms, the gaze is embedded in the frame. Those of my interlocutors who “shared” the perpetrator graffiti were aware of the problem of the reproduction of violence. Yet for some, ambiguously hopeful “sharing” of these images was the only way to express their outrage and call upon an oppositional public living under the conditions of severe political oppression and insecurity, to galvanise a counter-reaction. Photography has the potential to be counter-hegemonic (Apel, 2012; Azoulay, 2008). However, as Susan Sontag (2003) argued, the bitterness of witnessing the pain of others and the “frustration of not being able to do anything about what the images show” (p. 91) may make us reject violent images and look away or leave us numb (see also Berger, 2013). My research shows that while the affective visual/digital terror moves some people, it paralyses others and leads them into “political depression” (Cvetkovich, 2012). The following analysis will only be able to touch upon small fragments of these complex “affective fabrics” (Kuntsman, 2012) that run between cyberspace and everyday life.

Reading gender in militarised spectacles of domination

More than three quarters of a century ago, Virginia Woolf (1938) argued in her book-long answer to the question “How to prevent war?”, that war is a masculine(ist) endeavour. In hegemonic (nationalist) imagination, men are designated to make states and protect nations, both through militarist means (Yuval-Davis, 1993; Nagel, 1998). As Cynthia Enloe (2000) showed, state-building most commonly takes place through the connection between

militarism, nationalism, and masculinity. In Turkey's nation-building project, the ideal man has been constructed as a soldier, a hero who protects the "sacred" territory by all means possible (see Altınay, 2004; Arjomand, 2017). The Turkish woman, on the other hand, has been constructed as dependent and obedient but patriotic and supportive, "modern" (in outlook) but a modest (sexually repressed) wife and mother, and guardian of both family and national honour (see Kandiyoti, 1988; Kadioğlu, 1994; Parla, 2001). As Nukhet Sirman (2005) put it, "Women were made part of the nation through the control of their bodies, and through cultural elaborations of femininity came the definition and control of the cultural boundaries of the nation" (p. 150). This foundational nationalist imagination has its consequences for the gendered citizenship regime: only men who serve their "duty" in the military have the status of full citizens, while women, even if they do take active part in nationalist movements, are primarily seen as bodies that carry the nation's honour, children (future soldiers), and culture/traditions, and have to be protected by male "citizen-soldiers" (Altınay, 2004; Sirman, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 1993; Nagel, 1998; Enloe, 2000). Active engagement with violence, either in the form of protection or aggression has been constructed as a central feature of masculinity and war is often perceived as an "invitation into manliness" (Nagel, 1998: 257).⁹ By celebrating military violence and performing militarised hypermasculinity, the ÖH nationalist spectacles appear as the ultimate embrace of this invitation.

DELİKANLILIK ZIRHLIDA DEYİL [sic] YÜREKTE OLUR..! (crazy-bloodedness isn't in the armoured [vehicle] it is in the heart..!), reads a piece of graffiti from Nusaybin. "*Delikanlılık*" (literally crazyness, wildness, or hot-bloodedness) is an emic gendered concept in Turkey which describes the uncontrollable masculinity of young men in the period between puberty and marriage, and represents the climax of sexual potency. As such, it is the ultimate embodiment of the masculine ideal, which has positive connotations. "A *delikanlı* is someone who is tough, true to his word, has his friends' back, and is honest, straightforward, and charismatic" (Nuhrat, 2017: 26). In addition, "a certain amount of deviant behaviour [is] accepted as an inevitable concomitant of this stage" (Kandiyoti, 1994: 208). The concept not only serves as rationalisation and legitimisation of violence, since *delikanlı* men allegedly cannot control their passions, but a *delikanlı's* aggressiveness is also praised as the correct behaviour of a "real man" protecting the "home", meaning women, society as a whole, and the homeland.

Yet, the ÖH militarised nationalist spectacles in full military attire with large weapons and balaclava may be redefining the limits of legitimate masculine violence. ÖH members openly write graffiti as state officers and "law

⁹ Even when women do participate as combatants, their strategic inclusion, position, representation, femininity, sexuality, and "natural" (dis)ability of being a (good) soldier are continuously discussed and negotiated, in contrast to men, whose same position is naturalised and a part of the normative construction of masculinity (Enloe, 2000). To what extent these mechanisms are subverted in egalitarian or all-women guerrilla movements is a question that deserves a separate debate, which exceeds the scope of this article.

enforcers” on duty. Theirs is no longer an “outlaw masculinity” (Monto et al., 2012) performed through the bold and rebellious act of illicit graffiti-writing, but it is presently “above-the-law” and directly related to the militarised power of weapons in association with hegemonic masculinity. My interlocutors interpret this message of violent domination from the graffiti. As one of them remarked:

It is a technique of provocation. “I am killing you, you cannot do anything”, and there is such show of power: “[...] I am writing this graffiti, I trample your houses, I rape your women, I kill your children in the middle of the street; I am stronger than you”. They are showing “I can do anything I want”. It is about this. (Evîn, 28)¹⁰

Under the general state of emergency and lawlessness in the Kurdish region, perpetrator graffiti sent the message that its authors are the ones who “make the law” in these spaces and thus signal impunity for these armed men. In a patriarchal society concerned with female respectability, this is a masculinised type of power related to institutionalised mechanisms of control over women’s bodies.

On a wall in one of the destructed cities, there is a black mural of Mahsum Korkmaz, known as Egîd, the first commander of the PKK’s guerrilla forces. During the clashes, the wall was riddled with bullets and the figure of Egîd was “dressed” in a women’s bra, skirt, and high heels, sprayed over in red. Beside the mural is written: **FİSTANLI HEWAL** [sic] (*Heval* [comerade, a term with which guerrillas and other members of the Kurdish movement refer to each other] in women’s dress). A large masked ÖH member in black uniform stands beside the inscription, holding his imposing rifle with both hands. The reference to *fistan* (women’s dress) evokes reports in Turkish media about young Kurdish men camouflaging themselves in women’s clothes during a protest in the autumn of 2014, which were followed by widespread nationalist mockery on social media (see En Son Haber, 2014). In addition, *fistan* is closely associated with traditional Kurdish women’s attire (called *keras fistan*) and thus already ethnicised as Kurdish.

Many of my interlocutors talked about the multi-layered connections between gender and ethnicity in the graffiti, and between nationalist-racist chauvinism and misogynist sexism in ÖH colonialist attitudes towards Kurds more broadly, as something obvious and omnipresent. As one of them explained:

It is not only about the lands. You need to conquer that place and you need to assault this people. And the Special Forces of the state, they think that they can assault someone with their women and try to put

¹⁰ The interviews took place in either Turkish or English or a combination of both. Names of the interviewees were changed in order to protect their identities.

them in a woman's position. Because they feel that if you put them in a woman's position that they are assaulted and humiliated. (Rojda, 31)

Feminisation of "the enemy" has implications that go well beyond supposedly comic and humiliating "queering". The feminisation of Kurdishness and masculinisation of Turkishness in the perpetrator graffiti and images has parallels with differentiations of citizenship in Turkey along ethnic (see Parla & Özgül, 2016) as well as gender lines (see Kandiyoti, 1988; Sirman, 2005; Altnay, 2004), which trace their origins to the very core of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. Throughout the Turkish nation-building process, difference has been constructed as a threat to the nation-state which seeks its legitimation through enforced homogenisation, meaning Turkification (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008). Therefore, Kurds and other minorities have always been treated with suspicion based on their refusal or inability to assimilate into the ethnicist hetero-patriarchal matrix. Resistance to assimilation has been perceived as a sign of disloyalty to the nation-state, which leads to exclusion and oppression (Yeğen, 2009). In Butler's (1993) terms, within the exclusionary matrix, some bodies, heterosexual male Turkish bodies, are rendered valuable (notably as "protectors"); they matter as significant, legitimate, and grievable, while others are constructed as *abject*, impure and dangerous, pushed to the "unlivable" zones of social life where they can be violated with impunity and killed without being grieved. My research shows that the viewers who themselves already inhabit "unlivable zones" (Butler, 1993) experience the images as additionally hurtful and dehumanising. As one of my interlocutors observed:

They are hitting you from all sides. From the gender perspective, from your femininity, from your childhood... In fact, they put you in this kind of position, that you may not be a human anymore. They go and kill a number of people and they can write this on the walls as graffiti. And this graffiti is so disgusting, they can ridicule this, for example. When you look at it, this is in the level of sadism. They treat people like bugs that should be destroyed. (Evîn, 28)

On a widely circulated photograph another example of feminising graffiti is sprayed in red on a grey wall of a residential home in one of the neighbourhoods under curfew and reads: **BAHAR'DA TANGA GİYDİRECEM** [*sic*] **SİZE** (I will make you wear a G-string in spring). Months later, this photograph reappeared on social media paired with another photograph: a skinny young man lies on the ground barefoot, dressed in a short pink dress. Three men in military uniforms stand over him, one of them pointing his rifle towards the man on the ground. They are smiling into the camera and their eyes are concealed with white marks on the photograph. Soon after the photograph was published on JÖH's Twitter account with the superscript "The Turkish army is

true to its word” (*Türk ordusu sözünü tutar*), the post received almost 500 “likes” and was “shared” 113 times.

Forms of sexual violence and harassment have reportedly been a common part of the war in Kurdistan (Üstündağ, 2015). Some events have also been photographed or filmed and circulated on social media as a systematic form of political violence. The complicated node in which different photographs and graffiti cross-reference sexual(ised) violence and torture triggers a flow of memories and associations, and the images themselves become torturous for the viewers. Most painful and significant for my interlocutors was the image of a young female guerrilla fighter, Ekin Wan, depicting her naked, blood-stained body lying on a street of Varto (Muş), surrounded by the military boots of members of the Turkish security forces who had killed her, stripped her naked, and took the photograph in the summer of 2015.

I also cannot forget what they did to Ekin Wan. It started with this. I think that this war started after they stripped and exposed Ekin Wan’s body and left it like this on the street. [...] They expose your body. We also remember older photographs [like this] but this reminded us again: “Look we [the Turkish state] are like this”. (Sara, 29)

As Nazan Üstündağ (2015) argued, the publically displayed stripped body of the woman guerrilla indicates not only a new and more devastating stage in the state’s war against the Kurdish movement, but also in its war against women. At the same time, the photographic documentation and online circulation of the image brings the event to another level. The photograph flooded social media in Turkey in August 2015. It became an iconic image of the desecration of the “enemy’s” body and the performance of a masculinist Turkish domination through sexualised torture and humiliation of Ekin Wan’s feminine body after she had already been killed.

Photographs such as the two examples are primarily aimed to shame the tortured, coerced into a cross-dressing act or stripped naked and exposed to the public, based on the presumption that feminisation of a man or nudity of a woman represents “the destruction of one’s being” (Butler, 2009: 90). This way, the photographs reinscribe norms of gender and sexuality (see Butler, 2009: 89-90). Moreover, as Butler (2009) argued in her discussion of the torture photographs from the US Abu Ghraib military prison in Iraq, witnessing torture through photographs evokes questions of humanity, because the tortured is positioned outside of the norms by which the human is constituted. Thus, photographs of torture and mutilated dead bodies, as well as the graffiti that refer to these acts, reinforce the routine violence of everyday reality in Turkey by consolidating categories that separate “natural” from “marked” citizens (Pandey, 2006), grievable from ungrievable lives (Butler, 2009), and worthy from unworthy, dishonoured, rapeable, and killable bodies (Butler, 1993).

The border between these violent categories is translated into the border between Turkishness and Otherness, and it is drawn on women's and men's bodies by marking them according to the nationalist hetero-patriarchal ideas of normative femininity and masculinity. The "enemy of the state" becomes marked by inappropriate sexuality and the latter comes to be associated with the former (see Mosse, 1985; Yuval-Davis, 1993; Nagel, 1998; Enloe, 2000). The exposure of Ekin Wan's body may be read as a communicative spectacle of punishment for both Turkish and Kurdish publics, not only for her perceived treason against the Turkish state, but also for her ambiguous and subversive femininity as a guerrilla woman (Üstündağ, 2015). For my interlocutors, this violent spectacle was enraging because of the way in which the violence it depicts is read in a broader cultural and political context:

You know when a guerrilla is a woman, it makes these Special Forces more and more crazy [mad]. Because they hate guerrillas and when they see it is also a woman, they become more violent. [...] I think this was one of the most important pictures that made us all angry and very emotional. Because it was not enough for them to kill her, but also take off her clothes and spread the picture. [...] It was spread actually by the Special Forces to make you see that "if you are a guerrilla and if you are a woman, if you are against the state, that's what we will do to you", and that's why many of the pictures were spread. (Rojda, 31)

The photograph of the killed female fighter Ekin Wan, it is an attack on the female body. It is at the same time a body of an enemy and a woman's body. Because there is a concept of *namus* (honour), it is used a lot in Turkey. (Firat, 30)

They mean this, "We fucked them", they think like that. But it is not shameful for us, it is honour. They make this in relation to the woman. They stripped her because she was a woman. They are trying to hit [us] from that point, "among you there is also *namus*..." They are trying to use this. They are trying to use women. That's why it is not shameful for us, it is something honourable. (Cemal, 26)

Assuming a shared conception of feminine respectability in Turkish and Kurdish communities, the exposure of Ekin's body may be an attempt to dishonour Kurdish men (particularly the guerrilla's kin) and the "Kurdish nation" as a whole, given the way patriarchal nationalism constructs the role of women as mothers and daughters of the nation.¹¹ The gendered concept of

¹¹ The Kurdish region is typically imagined in Turkey as "tribal" and "backward", where "honour" crimes against women are common and patriarchal oppression especially intense, which works as an ideological bordering tool (see Schäfers, 2018).

namus (honour), encompassing family honour, men's honour and ultimately the honour of the "nation", is dependent on a woman's chastity, modesty, and respectability, and is an institutionalised mechanism of control and oppression across communities in Turkey (see Parla, 2001). The Kurdish movement condemns and actively transgresses the oppressive norms of gender and sexuality, as evident in Cemal's subversion of the notions of honour and shame above. This has contributed to conceptual changes in pro-HDP circles and to significant improvement of women's position in the region. Still, the concept of *namus* continues to structure social and political relations, while the new politicised gender roles carved out by the Kurdish movement have their own constraining effects (Weiss, 2010; Schäfers, 2018).

For all of the women I talked to, Ekin Wan's photograph was a cold reminder of the way war inscribes itself on women's bodies and of the vulnerability of their own bodies. Yet for those who were able to turn their sorrow and feminist rage into political movement (see Ahmed, 2004: 175-177), it was even more a reminder of the ongoing struggle they are a part of. As one of them explained:

The sexist stuff of the graffiti [...]. It can be fought against from here [Istanbul]. With the sadness and rage from there [Kurdistan], when I am explaining something to the women here, I can say that it counts as the same struggle. Of course it is not immediately related to what is happening there, but in general building up a struggle against sexism with the women here can heal that sorrow and that rage. (Armi, 24)

Violent penetration

As I have already implied, the militarised performances of masculinised domination not only reinforce the normative categories of gender and ethnicity, but also threaten with sexual violence. A piece of graffiti from Silvan that "went viral" on social media reads: **DEVLET HER YERDE # KIZLAR GELDİK İNİNİZE GİRDİK** (The State is everywhere # girls we came [and] entered your dens), with a drawing of a crescent and a star. The message might address women guerrillas, as "*in*" (den) may refer to the places where they hide in the mountains. Yet, during the urban clashes, the border between civilians and combatants became blurred in the perceptions of the Turkish forces. Everyone's home or basement was treated as a mountain den. Some of the most memorable perpetrator photographs for my interlocutors were those taken inside people's homes. Bedrooms were raided, walls sprayed with graffiti, linen scattered around, and, in one infamous image, condoms scattered on the floor. Hence, rape as the ultimate invasion is symbolically performed by the authors and bodily felt by oppositional readers. As one of my interlocutors said in anger:

To go as far as into people's bedrooms... It is in fact a photograph in the name of suppression and annihilation of people's entire privacy, of all the flow of their lives. Because it is a conservative country. [...] The

bedroom is always secret, a hidden place. They can't even enter their own parents' bedrooms, those policemen, soldiers. But there [in Kurdistan], they enter the bedrooms of other people, they take photos of other people's bedrooms. [...] It is a rape of people's lives, of the right to live, of human rights, [...] a rape of private life. (Murat, 24)

Home is a feminised space in Turkey, where spatial gender segregation prevails and most women are housewives, and legally and conceptually associated with the family (see Sirman, 2005; Parla, 2001). Within the culture of *mabremiyet*, the Islamic notion of domestic privacy and intimacy, the family home is considered a sacred and secret space (*mabrem*, meaning forbidden) to be hidden from the gaze of strangers. The (male) gaze is considered aggressive and becomes penetrative (i.e. sexually active), when it transgresses the *mabrem* borders, and is thus directly associated with rape (Sehlikoglu, 2015). It is perhaps not a coincidence that the Turkish word for rape, *tecavüz*, can also mean break-in or "invasion" into a home: *haneye tecavüz*. The home, or metaphorically, "den" in the graffiti above is a trope for a Kurdish woman or her vagina: penetrated, violated, ruined, and allegedly "dishonoured" by the "Turkish man" (*delikanlı*) and his (phallic) rifle. The significance of the images can be overwhelming, as one of my interlocutors described:

I feel like I am losing my mind and my mind will run away from my head. [laughs] It is like if I lose my mind I will not understand what is going on. Because it is like... It is disgust, I think. The graffiti, I was not depressed with them. [...] It was just like disgust and I just wanted to kill them. Disgust and [wondering] how this is possible. It's too much, it's perverse. (İdil, 30)

Disgust (*iğrenme*) was a gendered response to the images: while all the women I talked to expressed feelings of disgust, hardly any of the men did. According to Sianne Ngai (2005), disgust is "the ugliest of all ugly feelings" (p. 335). It is unambiguous and intolerable towards the object, blocks the path of sympathy, and strengthens and polices boundaries (ibid.). In addition, it is a very bodily feeling, agonistic and contaminating, impossible to ignore. The women with whom I discussed the photographs described their bodily experience of disgust as sickening, felt inside, (for some) upsetting the stomach (*mide bulandırma*).

Yet the spectacle goes even further. One mural pictures a pornographic scenario. The exposure of red bricks on a damaged wall is transformed into a head and large, round breasts are drawn under it. Beside the feminine figure, there is a drawing of a nude man. According to his moustache style, he may be an *Ülkücü* man, as they typically shape their moustache in the way that their lines continue down beside the edges of the lips. He holds the hole turned into a head with his both hands and penetrates it with his drawn penis. As Nagel

(1998) argued, “the use of the masculine imagery of rape, penetration and sexual conquest to depict military weaponry and offensives” is a common aspect of sexualisation of a militarised conflict (p. 258). The Turkish perpetrator graffiti most vividly expresses the gendered imaginary of militarised territorial domination as rape. Several of my interlocutors talked about the parallels between the rape of a woman and invasion of a territory in the graffiti, and explained them as a sign of the institutionalised, masculinised, political culture of rape in Turkey.

It always seems to me like... When we look at it historically, for example Hitler occupied Moscow seeing it as a woman. [...] One of the most distinct features of fascism is to touch women, to be sexist. It is like the place they are occupying is a woman and it is like a culture that occupies [invades] women. In the graffiti that they write, for example, “we came to take you” and so on, “girls”, again this macho-masculine culture. (Armi, 24)

When you see those writings on the wall, you see that they are rapists anyway. They are raping the land, they are raping the [country], they are raping the history. [...] When they are in a war, when they want to conquer some place, in their idea, conquering is like raping also. You can see this from history also, also in Bosnia, also in Turkey, also in Germany during Nazi time. You see that conquering land is never enough. [...] So, yes, because the men think that it [their penis] is like a gun in their hands. And you see how pitiful their life is. (Rojda, 31)

Comparisons to (other) genocidal wars are not coincidental. Militarised rape and other forms of sexual and gendered violence have been widely used as (1) “recreation” of military men operating under legal impunity; (2) institutionalised “national security rape” as an instrument for bolstering a nervous [masculinised misogynous] state;” and (3) “systematic mass rape” as an instrument of open warfare”, aimed at the annihilation of an entire ethnic or religious group (Enloe, 2000: 111; see p. 132-151). As my interlocutors’ historical references reveal, the readings of the images as militarised rape trigger what Michael Rothberg (2011) called “multidirectional memory” of political violence, a non-competitive, non-hierarchical recognition of interrelations between distinct traumatic memories across communal, geographical, and historical boundaries. One of my interlocutors also pointed to historical parallels between the experiences of genocidal gendered violence among different minoritised populations in Anatolia:

Rape culture is something that has been present among Turks. To annihilate women, restrict their existence, and rape them. [...] There is also the Armenian [issue]. They take Armenian girls, make them their

wives, but they kill the men. And make them forget that they are Armenians. They do this also to Alevis, they also did it in Dersim. These things bring up these memories. “I will annihilate you with rape. You will already kill yourself, I don’t have to kill you”. (Sara, 29)

Since the concept of *namus* prevails in social relations in Turkey, rape is often seen as worse than killing and may have terrible consequences for the survivor and her kin. The images evoked this horrifying awareness in my interlocutors.

When I saw that [image] I just kept thinking about the women there and what happened to them. [...] It is crazy that people are getting murdered, but rape is something different. Because you have to live with it, too. (İdil, 30)

In the context of the ongoing war in Turkey’s Kurdistan, what Enloe (2000) termed “national security rape” has been present in symbolic threats as well as material practices against civilians and (dead) guerrillas. This type of militarised rape is used systematically against internal political opposition recognised as a security threat. It commonly takes place in prisons as a form of torture, aimed at destroying the victims’ political strength and harming their male (and female) comrades under the assumption of their vulnerability related to female sexuality (Enloe, 2000: 123-132). The institutionalised rape of “enemies of the state” in prisons and detention centres, including female and male left-wing activists, Kurds, prostitutes, and trans-individuals, has been widely reported in Turkey (Parla, 2001: 81; Üstündağ, 2015). Hence symbols of militarised rape are not only directed at Kurdish militants and local people, but at anyone who criticises the state and/or defies its nationalist patriarchal norms and categories of belonging.

Moreover, through the rhetoric of graffiti, a symbolic link is constructed between sexual violence and other war crimes. **AŞK YÜKSEKOVA’DA YAŞANIYOR GÜZELİM BÖH PÖH...!** (love is lived in Yüksekova, my beauty, BÖH PÖH...!) is a piece of graffiti that mimics the earlier piece which celebrates the massacres in the “basements of horror” in Cizre, with which I began this article. It is sprayed in huge red letters on the wall of a living room. Killing is being sexualised. Passionate love (*aşk*, which is different from *sevda*, a patriot’s feeling for his country or mother; see Sirman, 2005) is used as a metaphoric trope for massacre. Another photograph from someone’s bedroom with the same reference includes a close-up of a dressing table with mirror. A man, dressed in green militarist attire with black boots, green helmet, and black balaclava leans on the dressing table. He looks straight into the camera, holding his big rifle with both hands. On the mirror behind him, a heart is drawn in pink, apparently with lipstick (a symbol of femininity). Inside the heart appear a crescent and star and the words: **AŞK YÜKSEKOVA’DA BAŞKA**

YAŞANIYOR (love is lived differently in Yüksekova). Differently? How? Different from massacre?

The graffiti is like rape. Using the properties of those people who used to live in those houses. They get this joy of rape, like using them, saying erotic things with lipstick which used to belong to a woman. (İdil, 30)

In the mirror, we can see the reflection of a double bed with white sheets. The placement of the violent scene in the bedroom exacerbates the association with sexual violence. This bedroom photograph turned out to be the most memorable of all photographs of graffiti from the urban war zones among my interlocutors.

Ultimately, the violent encounters of the perpetrator graffiti in cyberspace triggered political rage (*öfke, sinir*) in all of my interlocutors, the “feeling of wanting to tear [oneself] into pieces (*parçalamak*)”, as Armi (24) described it. Yet as Rojda (31) said, “I feel that anger gives you also the strength to struggle, to do something. It feeds your passion to... to do something”. Political rage can be mobilised into movement (Ahmed, 2004). “You want to get up and fight”, Sara (29) said. These women channelled their rage into feminist, anti-war demonstrations and solidarity actions in Istanbul and beyond. However, not everyone felt energised by the rage. In the precarious conditions of possibility constituted by war, death, destruction, intense political oppression, and frightening insecurity for the future, some felt helpless, powerless, and hopeless in the face of violence, mediated by the images, and paralysed by the pain and anger that they triggered. As Ewa described it:

Yes, rage, but the rage is getting normalised. And you cannot give a reaction anymore, you remain unresponsive. And after that you get scared. It turns into fear. Because there is nothing to do. [...] Yes, that rage, you are filled with rage, you can't do anything. Things are happening but you can't do anything from here. You are nothing. There [in Kurdistan] you are nothing too, but there you are active, you are that there. But here [in Istanbul] you are nothing, you can do nothing. You just talk, just talk. And how meaningless is this talking! To speak here strikes you as completely meaningless, so then you don't speak anymore. You go quiet. You are not doing anything. You don't read news, you don't follow anything anymore. You just try to live your ordinary life. Because if you turn there [towards the images], again the exploding rage, regret that you didn't do anything... [pauses] Despair. Hopelessness. (Ewa, 30)

This led some into what Cvetkovich (2012) defined as *political depression* – “the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us

feel better” (p. 1). And yet, people’s narratives about their emotional lives during the urban clashes were not only stories of pain, but also of survival. What enabled people to persist through the intense experience of violence was not (always) future-oriented active revolutionary hope (see Bloch, 1986), which only some managed to retain. Rather, it was the struggle against their own emotion of hate, which prevents transformation, refusing to be “like them”, the perpetrators, and a firm stance against the war and the militarised nationalist gendered matrix that enframes it.

Conclusion

In the age of digitalisation of war and militarism, users of social media are constantly exposed to the cybertouch of war and political violence. The boundaries of our skin have never been so permeable to technologies of visual imaging (Spyer & Steedly, 2013: 17). As I have shown in this article, perpetrator graffiti in Turkey is invested with militarised masculinity and sexual violence, and enframed by the normative gender and sexuality of patriarchal, misogynist nationalism. When these images move and circulate, they powerfully affect oppositional viewers. Our skin is formed (materialised) as a border through a history of painful gendered and racialised encounters, and thus contains a history of readings of feelings (Ahmed, 2004: 25). Hence, both meaning and bodily feeling pass through one’s gendered political subjectivity on which the effects (affects, if you like) of political violence get imprinted through emotional experience.

As I have shown, the violent texts and images of perpetrator graffiti are read and felt in the particular cultural, sociopolitical and historical contexts that constitute their frames of reference. The nationalist performances of militarised hypermasculinity remind the viewers of the two parallel lines of structural inequality and routine violence in Turkey: normative gender and normative ethnicity. What is more, they also reinscribe these norms onto people’s gendered bodies as they move in the cyberspace, where they engender and *move* (emotionally affect and politically mobilise) different publics. The cybertouch of the political violence in Kurdish cities is perceived, consciously and bodily, as a gendered invasion of territory, home, privacy, and women’s bodily integrity. Not only do the images include sexual(ised) torture, but the texts addressed to women and the images of violently penetrated and desecrated intimate spaces of (feminised) homes metaphorically refer to rape. The feelings triggered by the gendered spectacles of the Turkish ÖH include disgust and political rage. While disgust was predominantly felt by women as a bodily reaction in the moment of viewing, political rage proved to be a more general and long-lasting feeling. As some of my interlocutors emphasised, it may become a continuous state of being. This rage is what puts the images into movement, intensifies circulation, and generates political movements of people, mobilised around the opposition to violence and injustice.

At the same time, the ambiguous proximity and accessibility through bodily touch of a screen and the affective experience, and simultaneous spatial distance of the war create a sense of complicity and helplessness, which may lead to paralysis and despair. In the absence of movement, enraged women and feminist men breed a silent kind of precarious hope (Parla, 2017), critiquing and rejecting the feeling of hate which feeds perpetrator graffiti. Hate, as my field-mate Sara reminded me, is the most disintegrating feeling of all. Perhaps hope in such precarious conditions is less about anticipating the future than it is about the openness to different futures; futures where reconciliation may not be possible, but where we may nevertheless inhabit a world in a different way, in the absence of hate, and in acknowledgement of our mutual vulnerabilities and the ways in which we might be the cause of each other's anger.

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