

gender<ed> thoughts

New Perspectives in
Gender Research

Working Paper Series
2018, Volume 1

Susanne Hofmann and
Hatice Pinar Şenoğuz

Introduction to the Special
Issue “Gender and Violence
in Contexts of Migration and
Displacement”



GÖTTINGER CENTRUM FÜR
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EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Julia Grulich, Solveig Lena Hansen, and Susanne Hofmann

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“Gender and Violence in Contexts of Migration and Displacement”

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Gender and Violence in Contexts of Migration and Displacement

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This special issue originates from the Summer Symposium *Reconsidering gender-based violence in the context of displacement and migration* held at the Georg-August University of Göttingen on 6-7th July 2017. It was organised in collaboration with the Gender and Migration Network @ Lower Saxony, the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS)/University of Osnabrück, and the Göttingen Centre for Gender Studies (GCG)/Georg-August-University Göttingen and hosted by visiting guest professors Susanne Hofmann and Zeynep Kivilcim.¹

The aim of the symposium was to reconsider gender-based violence in the context of displacement and international migration across different regional and cultural contexts. Interrogating gender-based violence has been a critical part of the project of feminism, with grassroots activism playing a key role in raising consciousness and mobilising support and resources to challenge violence against women and other groups such as LGBTQI. However, we were concerned that recent processes of displacement and international migration had led to an intricate collusion between feminist anti-violence activism and state agendas of border control and migration management.

We therefore wanted to caution against analyses of gender-based violence that reproduce

stereotypes of victimhood and marginalisation. Instead, we were interested in exploring the role of power in different forms of gender violence, and in scrutinising the complex inequalities that structure victims' lives, by taking an intersectional approach to gender violence. As the definitions and meanings of violence are discursively produced by societies and represent sites of continuous struggle, re-examination of changing understandings and cultural codifications of gender violence in the context of human mobility is important. We hold that gender violence must be considered, firstly, in the context of governance structures and border regimes that produce exclusion and vulnerability, and secondly, in conjunction with discourses about migrants and refugees that are gendered, classed and racialised, as well as entwined with global inequalities of power.

At the symposium, ten presenters from the United States, Mexico, Turkey, Spain, UK and Germany discussed gender-based violence along the following themes: 1) state violence and the violent effects of border regimes, 2) masculinities and gender violence, 3) violence against LGBT populations and displacement, 4) processes of institutionalisation and professionalisation of violence in transit migration, and 5) culturalisation and instrumentalisation of gender violence in policy-making contexts.

¹The symposium was funded by the Ministry for Science and Culture of Lower Saxony.

The intension of the symposium was to challenge inadequate conceptualisations of gender-based violence in the context of migration and displacement and seek other approaches to understanding the experiences of violence of differently racialised, classed, ethnicised and sexualised people in conditions of mobility within or across borders of nation states. For this, we considered actor-focused, intersectional and decolonial perspectives as crucial for the development of emancipatory understandings of gender violence.

To introduce this special issue, which includes three of the symposium papers, we explain the academic debate from which the symposium and consequently the special issue emerged, bringing some of the highlights of the presentations and discussions which unfolded in Göttingen into conversation with existing literature on gender violence in migration and refugee studies.

Discussions about particular forms of gender violence within specific groups of immigrants became invigorated in Europe from the early 2000s on, with terms such as “cultural gender violence” or “tradition-contingent violence” (in German: traditionsbedingte Gewalt) circulating in the media and in public discourse. They related to practices such as forced marriage and female genital cutting, hence attributing a clear gender focus to the debate on violence in immigrant communities. In this discourse, immigrant women are defined as a problematic group, and as ethnicised victims in a public discourse that stresses the risk and threat that stems from “dangerous brown men” (Bhattacharyya 2008), from which immigrant women must be saved. This debate has been widely criticised by scholars from different disciplines (Sauer 2011; Strasser 2008; Hess 2012; Neuhauser, Hess and Schwenken 2016; Lingen-Ali and Potts 2016).

In the past decades, we have observed that a focus on women as particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation has generated punitive humanitarian responses, rather than social and economic justice-based responses. In the context of policies to combat gender violence in

situations of mobility, such as anti-trafficking campaigns in the United States, for instance, we have seen the rise of what sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein (2010) calls “carceral feminism”. The concept of carceral feminism refers to a feminist politics that has left behind earlier demands for economic justice,² and instead strives to accomplish gender justice primarily through carceral strategies (that is a focus on criminal justice and the persecution of perpetrators). At present, feminist activists – in different parts of the world – who are concerned with combatting violence and the exploitation of women have embraced the state, its criminal justice institutions and security forces as key agents in their struggle towards gender equality and justice. To save ‘vulnerable brown women’, some feminists go so far as to approve of military interventions in countries of the Global South (for a critique of such “militarized humanitarianism” see Bernstein 2010 or Amar 2012).

Discourses of tradition-based gender violence in the context of migration and displacement invisibilise structural causes of violence, such as lack of educational and well-paid employment opportunities, socioeconomic inequality and women’s economic dependence on men. They also ignore restrictive immigration regulations and laws and exclusions from citizenship rights.

Sabine Hess (2017) points out that gender-specific protection discourses can be considered an instrument of border regimes. Appeals to border securitisation and immigration control are presented in public discourse as measures to protect women and other ‘vulnerable groups’ from the violence and exploitation of traffickers, for instance. Thus, gender specific protection demands are integral to the hybrid military-humanitarian assemblage of border regimes, which Hess terms the “vulnerability apparatus” (ibidem), following Miriam Ticktin’s (2008) work on sexual violence as the language of border control. Ticktin (2011) contends that states pretend to protect ‘vulnerable’ women while

² A process that has been described for the United States by Kristin Bumiller 2008.

protecting borders, yet simultaneously implement state practices that criminalise the majority of undocumented migrants at the expense of care for the exceptional few.

Such a discourse disguises the role of structures that channel people into insecure spaces, as Ailsa Winton (2017) has shown in the context of LGBT communities who are pushed into gang territory in the Central American region. US border externalisation measures in Mexico subsequently further aggravate LGBT migrants’ risk of falling victim to violence in their attempt to seek safety. Sanem Öztürk (2017) asserts that it is impossible to adequately analyse the violence experienced by women and LGBT people in contexts of migration and displacement without discussing simultaneously their access to identity cards and other kinds of documentation and therefore to rights and economic resources.

Frequently, refugees are put into allegedly ‘safe’ camps, where they are exposed to new forms of violence (Freedman, Kivılcım and Özgür Baklacioğlu 2017). Several scholars have pointed up situations where early and forced marriage were on the decline in refugees’ countries of origin, only to experience a resurgence in contexts of displacement. The rise is to do with some parents’ desperate attempts to marry their teenage daughters into safety from war (Öztürk 2017), or with the denial of resources to young women, such as access to schools or health care, leading parents to look for well-off care takers for their minor daughters through marriage (Buckley-Zistel and Krause 2017). Öztürk (2017) also alerts us to the desperate steps that some Syrian women are taking in order to get out of refugee camps, where they experience sexual violence. Seeking partners via Facebook matchmaking pages, they strive to leave the camps, however, in doing so, they knowingly expose themselves to continued risks of rape and sexual exploitation. Turkish scholarship has drawn attention to the Turkish Government’s failure to prevent and sanctioning of sexual abuse in marriage in general, and in polygamous marriage in particular, the latter being socially accepted among some Syrian refugees,

as well as in parts of Turkey (Kivılcım 2016). Rejane Herwig’s (2017) account illustrates an existing tension regarding polygamous marriages in her fieldwork site Şanlıurfa, a Turkish city near the Syrian border. On the one hand, the author emphasises that Turkish women in the area perceive the Syrian refugee women who could act as potential second wives as a threat. On the other hand, she portrays the Turkish women as strong-willed agents who in everyday life are able to pursue their own self-interested strategies.

Úrsula Santa Cruz Castillo (2017) foregrounds the colonial context of violence and war, challenging the common preference for a narrow focus on gender violence over confrontation with structural forms of violence such as colonialism, race and class. Departing from empirical studies that document rising intimate partner violence during war, and thereby emphasising the impact of war and the relevance of broader contexts of liveable life and peace, she challenges Eurocentric understandings of gender violence. She highlights that for many women in the Global South patriarchy is not the only or most significant system of oppression. Consequently, she regards the contemporary hegemonic discourse of gender violence in the context of migration as utterly flawed. Portraying brown men as the principal perpetrators of violence against women from the Global South invisibilises the ways in which brown men are also subjected to different forms of violence and oppressions related to class, race and religion. Santa Cruz Castillo raises the significant question of the place of enunciation and the power that is associated with it. What counts as violence? From which place is spoken? She criticises Western feminist movement’s narrow focus on interpersonal and direct violence, which avoids the denunciation of indirect and structural violence. Santa Cruz Castillo reminds us of colonialism’s legacy – the “colonial matrix of power”³ (Quijano 2000) –, which

³ Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (2000) coined the expression “coloniality of power” to name the structures of power, control and hegemony that have

persists to this day and impacts on contemporary experiences and discourses of violence.

Cecilia Menjívar (2017) calls attention to the multiple forms of violence experienced by women. While gender violence is a common reason for women leaving their location of origin, they often re-encounter violence during their journeys and after arrival at their destination, hence experiencing a continuity of violence in their lives as migrants. Menjívar asserts that cultural explanations for violence constitute a dead-end road and distract from root causes. In the Americas, a focus on the intentionality of violence glosses over structural forms of violence such as global inequality and restrictive immigration regimes, thereby helping conceal the United States’ responsibility for the suffering of migrants. Menjívar draws our attention to the fact that violence always takes place in a context. Often gender violence is exacerbated in contexts in which families have few opportunities. She points to issues such as teen marriage, *femicides* in Central America and the legal violence of abortion prohibition in some states, all of which significantly complicate the lives of young women and increase their risk of exposure to violence. Central America as a region has a history of violence characterised by US military interventions and its legacies, such as corruption and unaccountable state institutions, which continue to produce violent impacts in everyday life. Experiences of violence are multi-layered and cumulative. Women’s and gender non-conforming people’s risk to exposure to violence may be aggravated as a result of limited access to education and employment; trade agreements can function as structural violence

emerged during the modernist era, the era of colonialism, which stretches from the conquest of the Americas to the present. The coloniality of power constitutes a *matrix* that operates through control or hegemony in four interrelated domains: 1. economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labour, control of natural resources); 2. authority (institution, army); 3. gender and sexuality (family, education), and 4. subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education, and formation of subjectivity). The imposition of the colonial matrix of power always simultaneously implied the dismantling of existing forms of social organisation and ways of life.

erasing all opportunities to sustain a dignified life in their community; and racial discrimination against members from Africa-descended and indigenous groups in destination countries constitute overlapping forms of violence.

Nina Held (2017) discusses the re-victimisation of LGBT refugees through the asylum procedure, highlighting that asylum adjudicators tend to recognise only stereotypical narratives of homophobic violence or trafficking, for instance, as credible reasons for asylum. Mirroring Lionel Cantú’s (Cantú, Naples and Vidal-Ortiz 2009) findings about queer asylum seekers in the United States, Held notes that, to be successful, asylum claims must correspond with stereotypical imaginations of LGBT lives. That is, characterised by desires for Western gay lifestyles based on visibility, particular practices of socialising, patterns of consumption and displays of bodily appearance and sexuality. Held discovers that asylum decision makers do not allow for nuanced personal histories or ambivalent sexualities, thereby complicating the asylum claims of queer and bisexual refugees in particular.

What does this debate imply for re-conceptualisations of gender violence in the context of migration and displacement? What counts as violence? How can structural and legal oppressions such as immigration legislation be meaningfully included in both our definition of gender violence and our demand for new policies? How can safe mobility and security be achieved for women and LGBTQI-identified people? Does the concept of gender violence inevitably imply “discursive colonization” (Mohanthy 2002) and hence represent a Western perspective?

Some scholars opt to entirely disregard gender violence as an analytical concept – the experience of women in the Global South not being separable from the oppressions of brown men in a meaningful way – and instead focus purely on larger contexts of structural violence. Gender itself (obviously a crucial component of the concept of gender violence) has been heavily challenged by decolonial scholars as a Western

concept that was transported into other parts of the world during colonialism and imposed on cultures that were not structured in that way (Lugones 2008; Espinosa Miñoso 2016).

Following this analysis, it is relevant that re-conceptualisations of gender violence take the heterogeneous experiences of violence in different regions of the world into account, with “Global South-ness”, for instance, being dissimilar to and implying different forms and experiences of violence than “racialised minority-ness” or “refugee-ness”, specifically avoiding Eurocentric interpretations of violence as well as hetero-centric perspectives. It is imperative to expose, counter and abandon conceptualisations of gender-based violence (and subsequently policies based on those) that are grounded in the experiences of white, middle-class Euro-American feminists, as they often contribute to perpetuating and exacerbating racist oppression of native or brown men.

Doing justice to gender violence as experienced by people from the Global South means taking seriously the multiple oppressive and harmful impacts of the “contemporary modern/colonial/capitalist world-system” (Grosfoguel 2002)⁴, in which gender violence cannot be eradicated while other oppressions such as resource extractivism, war, invasion and racism against brown men prevail. Considering the systemic embeddedness of gender violence in the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system, to what degree can then policy changes help to

address gender violence? How can state institutions be pushed to regard gender violence through a lens that takes experiences and perspectives from the Global South seriously? What should be the role of the state in our academic theorising of gender violence and our activism to achieve safety for women, LGBTIQ communities, migrant minorities and refugees?

A crucial insight that came out of this symposium, which allowed us to bring together critical migration and border regime scholars from the Americas and Europe, was that security is relational. Firstly, individual security cannot be established and maintained if the communities the individual forms a part of are not themselves able to survive and flourish. Secondly, individual freedom from violence and exploitation is intimately related to unequal global power relations, which currently impede the flourishing of vast communities located in the Global South. Whilst the following working papers do not answer the above questions in a theoretical way, they deeply engage with the structures that form the basis of migrants’ and refugees’ gendered experiences of violence.

⁴ The concept “modern/colonial capitalist world-system” departs from Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1974) modern world-systems approach that uses historical systems, rather than societies, as a central unit of analysis. Grosfoguel, however, reinterprets important aspects of Wallerstein’s capitalist world-systems theory by integrating Walter Mignolo’s (2000) proposition of the modern/colonial world-system, which integrates an epistemic perspective from the subaltern side of the colonial difference, and helps counter certain limitations of the world-systems approach. Mignolo’s (2011) basic argument is that “modernity” is a European narrative that conceals a “darker side”, which is “coloniality”. Coloniality, however, is constitutive of modernity. Mignolo contends that coloniality has brought about modernity, hence there is no modernity without coloniality. “Global modernities”, for instance, always simultaneously imply “global colonialities”; hence the compound word “modern/colonial”.

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National Belonging and
Violent Norms of Gendered
Migrant Citizenship

With a Commentary by
Johanna Neuhauser



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National Belonging and Violent Norms of Gendered Migrant Citizenship

Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers' Appropriation of a National Ritual

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Abstract

This article takes into view negotiations over the behaviour of Hong Kong-based Indonesian domestic workers as morally upright and respectable citizens. In collaboration with private agencies, the Indonesian government has actively promoted the temporary outmigration of female workers into low-waged and precarious employment arrangements as a strategy to combat unemployment and generate remittances, foreign exchange and development. The Indonesian labour migration program is, however, faced with the public's anxieties and indignation over migrant domestic workers' experiences of gender-based violence abroad and concerns over national dignity. As pointed out by a number of feminist studies, "labor brokerage states" (Rodriguez 2010) meet the gendered contradictions of their labour migration programmes with appeals to migrant domestic workers' morality. This article makes use of Judith Butler's notion of "normative violence" (Butler 1999, 2004) to frame these appeals as subtle forms of discipline that police and regulate Indonesian migrant domestic workers. It addresses the strong role of female morality in defining which workers deserve protection and which workers can adequately represent the Indonesian nation on the international stage. By taking the case of Hong Kong-based Indonesian domestic workers' self-organised and distinct enactment of a national ritual on Independence Day 2014, I discuss how they appropriate norms of national belonging and how at the same time they challenge the subtle forms of violence inherent in moralising notions of gendered "migrant citizenship" (Rodriguez 2010).

Keywords

Indonesia, gender norms, migrant citizenship, violence, domestic workers

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit den Verhandlungen über das Verhalten indonesischer Hausangestellter in Hongkong als moralisch aufrechte und respektable Bürger_innen. In Zusammenarbeit mit privaten Organisationen hat die indonesische Regierung aktiv die temporäre Abwanderung von Arbeitnehmer_innen in prekäre Beschäftigungsverhältnisse gefördert, um die Arbeitslosigkeit zu bekämpfen und Rücküberweisungen, Devisen und Entwicklung zu generieren. Das indonesische Arbeitsmigrationsprogramm ist jedoch mit den Ängsten und der Empörung der Öffentlichkeit über die geschlechtsspezifischen Gewalterfahrungen der Hausarbeiter_innen im Ausland und Bedenken hin-

sichtlich der nationalen Würde konfrontiert. Wie in einer Reihe von feministischen Studien festgestellt wurde, begegnen „Arbeitsvermittlungsländer“ (Rodriguez 2010) den geschlechtsspezifischen Widersprüchen ihrer Arbeitsmigrationsprogramme mit Appellen an die Moralität von Arbeitsmigrant_innen. Dieser Artikel verwendet Judith Butlers Begriff der „normativen Gewalt“ (Butler 1999, 2004), um diese Appelle als subtile Formen der Disziplinierung darzustellen, die indonesische Hausangestellte überwachen und regulieren. Er bespricht die ausgeprägte Rolle der weiblichen Moral bei der Definition, welche Arbeitnehmer_innen Schutz verdienen und welche Arbeitnehmer_innen die indonesische Nation auf internationaler Ebene angemessen vertreten können. Anhand eines selbstorganisierten und eigens konzeptualisierten Rituals von in Hongkong lebenden indonesischen Hausangestellten am Tag der Unabhängigkeit in 2014, diskutiere ich wie sie sich die Normen der nationalen Zugehörigkeit aneignen und gleichzeitig die subtilen Formen der Gewalt, welchen moralisierende Vorstellungen von geschlechtsspezifischer „migrantischer Staatsbürgerschaft“ (Rodriguez 2010) innewohnen, herausfordern.

Schlagworte

Indonesien, Geschlechternormen, migrantische Staatsbürgerschaft, Gewalt, Hausarbeiter_innen

Introduction

“You know the issue is very, very sensitive. Because of the occurrence of harassment, violence.” With these words, Pak Muchsin,¹ an Indonesian recruitment agent, commented on the Indonesian government’s migration policies. He brokers Indonesian domestic workers to places such as Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. I met him in 2014, when I was doing research on the state-sanctioned migration scheme for Indonesian domestic workers, which the Indonesian government introduced in the 1980s as a strategy to combat unemployment and generate remittances and foreign exchange (Silvey 2004, 2007; Palmer 2016: 22–30). While contemplating, Pak Muchsin reasoned: *“But this concerns the good name of the nation, right? The image overseas is also whoa, ugly. Indonesia will only be considered to send helpers who are not skilled, right?”*

On the one hand, my interlocutor pointed to the outrage with which the Indonesian public meets the gender-based violence that migrant domestic workers experience abroad due to their employment in jobs that make them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

¹ I changed the names of the protagonists of my study for reasons of confidentiality. An exception is posed by those protagonists who are depicted in their functions as leaders of migrant workers’ organisations and thus represent public figures.

On the other hand, he expressed worries of being viewed as a ‘nation of servants’ on the international stage. Considering that the Indonesian government has, in collaboration with private agencies, actively promoted the temporary outmigration of female workers into low-waged and precarious work arrangements as a strategy of development, Pak Muchsin’s recourse to feelings of national shame intimates *“intrinsic contradictions that are critically gendered”* (Rodriguez 2010: 94) and permeates *“labor brokerage states”* (ibid., x) such as Indonesia or the Philippines.

A large body of academic literature has shown that in countries sending migrants, official and public representations of migrant domestic workers’ experiences of gender-based violence meet these contradictions with assumptions about female workers’ morality (Chan 2014; Killias 2009: 148; Robinson 2000; Rodriguez 2010: 93; Silvey 2004). Previous studies have shown that gendered morality and respectability are crucial to state officials’, recruitment agents’, and the wider public’s ideas of “migrant citizenship”, a term with which Robyn Rodriguez describes the particular relations between labour brokerage states and their national citizens residing abroad as temporary labourers (2010: xix–xxi). Migrant citizenship promises provisions that are supposed to protect migrants from abuse and exploitation, for

instance, by introducing labour attachés responsible for the temporary migrant workers in Indonesian diplomatic representations overseas. Moreover, migrant citizenship stimulates migrants to sustain ties to the ‘homeland’ and expects them to exemplarily represent the nation overseas. In the eyes of state officials and recruitment agents, morally upright female migrants work hard for disproportionately low wages, they adhere to strict and bureaucratised migration procedures, and they carry out their familial responsibility of loyally sending remittances to their places of origin. Essentially, they are supposed to uphold the good name of the nation, thus, rectifying the image that afflicts the low status of domestic work. In official and public discourses, migrant workers who do not meet these expectations are scandalised and accused of lacking moral rectitude (see e.g. Chan 2014; Guevarra 2006; Killias 2010, 2014; Rodriguez 2010: 93–115).

A number of studies have critically stated that, in neoliberal fashion, the moralising representations of migrant domestic workers emphasise migrants’ individual responsibility for either success or exploitation and distress (e.g. Chan 2014: 5956; Killias 2009: 163; Robinson 2000: 259). Furthermore, these representations legitimise “restrictions in the domestic workers’ freedom of movement” (Killias 2010: 901), since they define the use of private placement agencies not only as legally compulsory for domestic workers but also as a moral duty. For the migrants this means having to accept loans for their recruitment, wage deductions for several months, preparation in secluded training camps, and being channelled into *live-in* employment arrangements in places where their “deportability” (De Genova 2002) shapes their particular precarity.

In Hong Kong, the site which this article focuses on, a large proportion of migrants employed in private households are made up of the 150,000 Indonesian domestic workers.² A num-

² The approximately 180,000 workers originating from the Philippines form the largest group of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Fewer migrant domes-

tic workers originate from Thailand, Sri Lanka, and other countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia. ber of regulations set by the Hong Kong government, by the Indonesian government, and by the Indonesian consulate in Hong Kong set the conditions of these workers. Migrant domestic workers have to take out loans for their training and placement through Indonesian and Hong Kong agencies. While they are to pay these off through sizeable deductions from their first monthly salaries,³ many workers are hesitant to report mistreatment, abuse, and deprivation of their entitlements because they risk terminating their contracts without having earned anything (Rother 2017: 964). Furthermore, a so-called two-week rule requires migrant domestic workers to leave Hong Kong within two weeks after their contract ends or is terminated either by the employer or the worker. This key policy adds complexity to the strains experienced by many Indonesian domestic workers (Constable 2007: 145).

I build on a twelve-month multi-sited ethnography at government briefings for migrant domestic workers in Indonesia and Hong Kong, at a recruitment agency training centre in Java, Indonesia, and among migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong.⁴ My observations allow me to juxtapose Hong Kong-based migrant worker organisations’ enactment of migrant citizenship with concerns about Hong Kong-based migrant workers’ moral behaviour and respectable appearance as they are voiced by government officials, recruitment agents, training instructors,

tic workers originate from Thailand, Sri Lanka, and other countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

³ At the time of my research, Indonesian domestic workers were to deposit 2,596 HKD – almost two thirds of their monthly salary of 4,010 HKD – during their first six months of employment in order to pay back the loans for their training and other services related to their placement.

⁴ I would like to express my deep appreciation to all protagonists and research participants who provided me with precious insights. I acknowledge the Volkswagen Stiftung for funding my research. Furthermore, I am deeply grateful for the cooperation with Sri Budi Eko Wardhani and Anna Margret Lumbangaol, who directed the Centre for Political Studies (Puskapol) at Universitas Indonesia in Depok, Indonesia during my fieldwork. Lastly, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editors for their valuable feedback and support.

and other actors involved in shaping Indonesian migrant citizenship. I discuss these gendered and classed anxieties as articulations of normative violence and illustrate fields of tension between migrant domestic workers and the Indonesian migration apparatus, in which norms of national belonging and migrant citizenship are negotiated.

1. Gendered migrant citizenship and normative violence

In this article, I frame the disciplining and policing implications of moralising notions of gendered migrant citizenship as “normative violence”, a concept that derives from Judith Butler’s (1999: xx; 2004a) reflections on subject formation and ethical responsibility. Norms can be restrictive when *“they tell us what we can and cannot do at the most personal and intimate level of life, and we are not ‘allowed’ to become what we might be”* (Boesten 2017: 102). Furthermore, norms define *“[t]hose who become beyond and outside existing normative frameworks or understandings of truth”* (ibid.) as illegitimate and illegible.

Through moralising gendered migrant citizenship, for instance, the Indonesian labour brokerage state demands migrants’ resilience to emotionally distressful migration and working conditions but disapproves of migrants who follow their aspirations by pursuing migration projects outside the state-sanctioned migration scheme. Olivia Killias has shown that the Indonesian labour brokerage state, therefore, renders its own citizens ‘illegal’ and morally defective if they do not comply with the strict regulations (2010: 901). Migrants’ desires to make use of their labour market mobility in their “quest for more autonomy” (ibid.: 910) are thus silenced.⁵

⁵ Killias’s argument is based on her reading of the *National Law on the Placement and the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers Overseas*, which was enacted in 2004. In October 2017, a new law titled *Law on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers* was enacted, which contains substantial revisions of the previous law. To what extent this new law impacts migrant workers’ realities still remains to be examined.

Normative violence can imply physical violence, however, not inevitably. Thus, the notion of normative violence points to the subtle practices of defining whether subjects are legitimate and whether lives are worth living. Carol Chan’s argument on “gendered moral hierarchies” (2014: 6959) is a case relating to this aspect of normative violence. She observes that media representations of “immoral victims” of death row sentences, physical abuse, and distress, depicting migrant domestic workers as *“promiscuous, greedy, or disobey[ing] their elders”* (ibid.: 6962), implicitly contend that there are migrants who deserve less protection and whose precarity remains *“invisible, mundane, or irrelevant to policy-makers”* (ibid.: 6963).

Regulatory norms operate through repetition in social practice and through “daily social rituals of bodily life” (Butler 2004b: 48). The *“necessity of the repetition of norms [...] ensures the possibility of social and political transformation, since it renders norms open to misappropriation, to being reiterated and re-enacted differently”* (Mills 2007: 136). Rather than undermining norms as such, disenfranchised subjects do relate to hegemonic norms and normativity – “the regulatory function of norms” (Dhawan et al. 2016: 2). As Nikita Dhawan and her colleagues have argued, distinct norms *“can function as a site of political agency, even as the vulnerability of the subject is closely related to normative regulations”* (ibid.: 6). In distinguishing different manifestations of resistance to hegemonic norms from the perspective of postcolonial critique (ibid.: 10–15), they discuss appropriation as one particular term that illuminates *“the ways in which the colonised have applied the tools of the dominant discourse to displace and, potentially, to challenge its hegemony”* (ibid.: 12).⁶

⁶ Dhawan et al. distinguish ‘appropriation’, ‘contestation’, and ‘transformation’ as modes in which normativity is negotiated. Through this distinction, they underline that marginalised subjects reject potentially violent normativity through cultural and discursive practices, as well as through struggle and conflict, and that normativity can be reconfigured and transformed. This article focuses on appropriation as a way of negotiating modes of national belonging; however, it also addresses contestation and implicit possibilities of

This article addresses this openness of norms and illustrates how migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong negotiate and re-signify the norms of migrant citizenship by reiterating norms that define national belonging. Taking up the term of appropriation from Dhawan et al., I apply it to the context of Hong Kong-based migrant domestic workers. I examine their distinct performance of a national ritual on Indonesia's Independence Day in 2014 as an appropriation of norms of national belonging. The article argues that the official flag ceremony conveys hegemonic norms of national belonging and analyses the alternative performance as a form of self-assertion of migrant domestic workers' manifold subjectivities in light of normative violence inherent in appeals to migrant domestic workers' morality. I suggest that with this, the performers challenge the affective underpinnings – national shame and dignity – of moralising gendered migrant citizenship.

Thereby, I complement previous studies discussing migrant domestic workers' agency, which is supported by the freedom to organise and appear in public as they are guaranteed in Hong Kong's labour legislation. These studies address how migrant domestic workers actively negotiate "moral identity" (Chang and Groves 2000: 75), they discuss everyday resistance to daily denigration (e.g. Constable 2007: 166–80) and explore migrant Hong Kong-based migrant workers' manifold forms of (transnational) political activism (e.g. Constable 2007: 159–66, 2009; Lai 2010; Rother 2017; Sim 2007: 122–67). Previous studies have acknowledged female migrants' cultural performances as sites in which migrant workers ludically negotiate official notions of citizenship (Winarnita 2016), as well as the migrant domestic workers' movement as a setting where they build community, perform agency, and visualise diversity (Lai 2010). I underline that for migrant domestic workers performing subjectivities that do not comply with the rigid normative rules of migrant citizenship during the national ritual is a

transformation in negotiations of norms and normativity.

meaningful practice of self-assertion in light of the multiple forms of (normative) gender-based violence migrant domestic workers are exposed to.

In the following sections, I will discuss how, through their embodied practice, Hong Kong-based migrant domestic workers defy some of the hierarchical culture inscribed in the use of national symbols in Indonesia and how they challenge dominant motifs of hegemonic nationalism.

2. Independence Day in Hong Kong: performing the nation

Every 17th August, Indonesia commemorates the declaration of its national independence from 350 years of colonial Dutch, British, and Japanese rule. All over the archipelago, villages, towns, and urban neighbourhoods decorate streets and central places with lampions and pennant chains, all in red and white – the colours of the national flag. Residents engage in playful activities: they run hop sack races, compete in eating crackers hung above their heads, and play tug of war. Apart from the playful gatherings, no Independence Day omits the flag ceremony – a re-enactment of the first raising of the national flag and of the declaration of independence by Indonesia's first president Sukarno and his vice president Mohammad Hatta in 1945. On Independence Day, the best-performing school children are selected to be part of the team to raise the national flag at district or town halls, provincial governments, and even at the State Palace in Jakarta. The ceremony is led by the highest-ranking government officials and follows a strict procedure that was codified after independence.

Indonesian Independence Day is also commemorated in Hong Kong, where the majority of residing Indonesian citizens are domestic workers. It is usually celebrated on the Sunday following 17th August, as this is the day of the week when most domestic workers have their day off. In 2014, a staff member of the consulate uploaded a video of the official flag cere-

mony on his YouTube channel (Sahardi 2014), thus sharing the consulate's ritualised mise-en-scène of national identity. The consulate's flag ceremony symbolises some of the aspects of idealised citizenship: in perfect synchronicity, a squad of uniformly dressed female migrants hoist the Indonesian flag, while the consul, elevated on a platform, directs the ceremony. The flag-raising brigade members' knee-long skirts, which resemble the uniforms of Indonesian government officials, can be read as a marker of female state servants' normative femininity. "*Civil servants' uniforms are a powerful symbol of the Indonesian state*" (Moser 2008: 129). As "*example[s] for the rest of society*" (Suryakusuma 1996: 92), female civil servants represent the ideal "national feminine" (Sunindyo 1993).

In dominant government circles, this ideal is influenced by the notion of (working) women's responsibility for the model of a 'happy family' (*keluarga sakinah*), which imposes a strong moral role on women (Wieringa, Bhaiya, and Katjasungkana 2015: 43).⁷ This ideal echoes state ideologies of president Suharto's authoritarian period, during which the *kodrat*, the destiny and duty of middle-class women, was defined as being nurturing mothers and wives, even when waged work was promoted for women (Chan 2014: 6955; Silvey 2004: 252; Sunindyo 1996: 125). In view of the salience of religious discourse and influence of religious organisations, the contemporary 'happy family' model puts strong emphasis on (middle class) women's piousness (Wieringa, Bhaiya, and Katjasungkana 2015: 97; Robinson 2015: 60). In the case of (lower class) female migrant workers, ideal female migrant citizenship has been defined by the expectation to be a compliant⁸ worker and a good daughter or mother and wife in the service

of her family as well as to contribute to rural and national development (Chan 2014: 6955; Killias 2010, 2014: 890; Silvey 2004: 253).

The elevated position of the ceremony leader, the consul, marks the hierarchical relation between citizens and state institutions. This arrangement evokes the position of female members of the armed forces as "little daughters" (Sunindyo 1993: 14) and of female industrial workers as "factory daughters" (Wolf 1996: 156). As pointed out by feminist scholars of nationalism, such familial iconographies imply appeals to the nation's daughters' dutifulness and restraint (McClintock 1993; Sunindyo 1993: 15; Rodriguez 2010: 100). In the same vein, Daromir Rudnyckyj (2004: 420) highlights that the Indonesian migration apparatus establishes hierarchies between bureaucrats, recruitment agents, and training instructors through forms of address. At the training centre, where I conducted research, for instance, but also in other voluntary sector organisations that I visited during my fieldwork, migrant domestic worker trainees were called 'kids' (*anak-anak*) – although a large portion of them had their own children already – and thus placed in subordinate roles.

I will expand on the ambivalences of normative notions of gendered migrant citizenship below, but first, I will discuss the migrant domestic workers' distinct ceremony organised by migrant domestic workers themselves, since the consulate's ceremony was not the only flag ceremony that took place in Hong Kong on Independence Day. 2014 was the first year a broad coalition of Indonesian migrant workers' self-organisations in Hong Kong staged their own flag ceremony, which in some aspects significantly contrasted with the consulate's ceremony.

3. Migrant domestic workers' alternative flag ceremony

The Hong Kong Network of Indonesian Migrant Workers (JBMI) is well-known for mobilising thousands of workers on the city's streets to claim their rights, demand fairer wages, criti-

⁷ Saskia Wieringa (2015: 53) argues that after the end of the Suharto regime, an independent women's movement was successful in mainstreaming its women's rights agenda. Yet, as she claims, "*the emphasis on women's rights seems to have evaporated, replaced by a conservative gender discourse that stresses women's pious obedience to the so-called keluarga sakinah ('happy family')*".

⁸ According to my own observations, workers are also expected to be committed workers who love their work and take initiative.

cise a lack of protection by the consulate, and condemn exploitative practices of private placement agencies. On Sundays, members of the coalition meet to pursue the activities of their respective organisations: they provide education on labour rights, celebrate religious holidays such as Eid-al-Fitr, rehearse dances or song performances for upcoming competitions among migrant workers' organisations, or carry out discussions on political topics such as the presidential elections.

On those Sundays that preceded Independence Day in 2014, members of the coalition rehearsed and prepared the ceremony on the sports fields in Victoria Park. On one of these Sundays, Sringatin, the coalition's coordinator, explained to me that the coalition invited all domestic workers and Indonesian citizens residing in Hong Kong to this distinct ceremony, because there was no other option for the wider public to perform the ritual, as the consulate's event was only open to a select group of migrant workers and Indonesian expatriates. When I asked her why she found the flag ceremony important, Sringatin explained: "*The ceremony has been planted in the migrants' minds since they were children. Why shouldn't they be able to perform the ritual while they are here?*"⁹ On another occasion, she further underlined the importance of the ritual for the workers' feelings of national belonging. Knowing about my intension to discuss the migrant workers' alternative flag ceremony in my academic work, she expressed her hopes that my article would "*explain the meaning of [the performers'] love to [their] homeland and [their] national feelings*". While Sringatin positively highlighted the norm of enacting national belonging through performing the ritual on Independence Day, as will be discussed in the following paragraph, the performers defied and re-signified a

number of the hegemonic norms that define national belonging.

On 17th August 2014, about 450 performers gathered in Kowloon Park to celebrate Independence Day and carry out their own, distinct flag ceremony. With the exception of one expatriate citizen, all performers were migrant domestic workers. The performers' red and white attire matched the russet paving of the piazza and the sparkling glass facades of the skyscrapers that formed the background of the scene. A commander's instructions echoed in long-drawn-out sounds across the square: "Si-aaaap gerak!"¹⁰ The ceremony performers lined up in squads and followed the instructions. A squad of performers in white uniforms and black velvet *pecis*, a type of cap that was worn by president Sukarno and vice president Hatta, marched along the square. Their lockstep produced synchronous clattering sounds. Muthi, coordinator of the League of Indonesian Migrant Workers, Sumber, chairperson of the *Beringin Tetap Maju*-group who won every song contest with their splendid Hip Hop performances, and a third performer formed the trio that led the squad to hoist the flag. They could, however, only imitate the flag-raising because there was no flagpole. A choir made up of performers wearing white blouses and red hijabs or red ribbons sang the national anthem and a song that is part of a canon of national songs recalling the independence fighters. Yima, vice chair of the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union in Hong Kong, was part of a group of separately lined up performers waiting to read the preamble of the Indonesian Constitution, the Indonesian state philosophy *Pancasila*, and a prayer out loud. She was wearing a red and white scouts' bandana and red sneakers. Earlier that day she had worn big pilot glasses which resembled the emblematic glasses worn by the first president Sukarno in historical photographs. As coordinator of the ceremony, Sringatin held a speech – a task carried out by the president himself at the Presidential Palace in

⁹ It is to be noted that in 2017, representatives of migrant workers organisations were invited to the consulate's ceremony, which I consider a gesture of respect towards migrant workers' self-organisations. This suggests a dynamic relationship between Hong Kong-based migrant workers' organisations and the consulate, which is open to reconfiguration.

¹⁰ This precise instruction is used in military language and means "*Stand in formation!*".

Jakarta. Speaking into a microphone, Sringatin reminded the audience of colonial oppression. She spoke about the “spirit of resistance” that was evident in the early days of the independence struggle. Her speech made an appeal to learn from the heroes and heroines¹¹ of that struggle saying: “*We must keep on learning, support migrant workers who are in need, and support the struggle of the Indonesian people for prosperity*”.

I observed the ceremony from the side. There was practically no audience for the ceremony, because everybody was involved in it. An exception were the few journalists – migrant workers who freelanced for Indonesian-speaking newspapers in Hong Kong – documenting the event. Standing next to me was Andi, a *tomboi*, that is, in Indonesian contexts, a female-bodied person who dresses and acts like a man (Blackwood 2010: 25). He¹² could not take part in the marching and saluting due to a leg injury. A crutch supported him and a straw hat protected his head from the sun, while he was filming the 40-minute choreography. Without mercy, Andi lectured the journalists who entered the ceremony field to capture the unique scene with their reflex cameras. He kept commenting: “*Wow, this gives me goose bumps!*”. Other participants shared Andi’s feeling: “*I haven’t done the flag-raising for 14 years*”, exclaimed Fidah, another performer who had worked in Hong Kong for more than a dozen years. Other participants lamented that the midday sun had made them dizzy. There was no doubt, however, that this morning had been a highlight among the manifold events migrant workers organise almost every Sunday. Photos of the event were shared enthusiastically on social media afterwards.

The successful event sparked the organisers’ enthusiasm not least due to a “controversy”

among the Indonesian community in Hong Kong, which arose on Facebook, calling into question the lawfulness of the ceremony. An Indonesian expatriate was upset about the call for an alternative independence ceremony. He claimed that performing the flag ceremony was unlawful, because it took place outside the consulate, which is Indonesian territory. He called the organisers “odd (*nyelenah*)” and “stupid (*bodoh*)” (Nuraini 2014). The organisers felt insulted but, referring to relevant regulations, they could show that the event was fully lawful.

The expatriate’s complaint and insult of the performers is evocative of Monika Swasti Winarnita’s (2016) study of dance performances by Indonesian female marriage migrants in Australia. Winarnita shows that the self-chosen representatives of the Indonesian culture and nation constantly negotiate their legitimacy and aesthetics, as they are questioned by members of the Indonesian consulate and the Indonesian expatriate community in Perth, the site of her study. It seems that the upset expatriate similarly questioned the flag ceremony in Kowloon Park as a legitimate representation of Indonesia on the international stage. The fact that the ceremony took place in a public space outside Indonesia, virtually in front of an international audience, is crucial to the controversy. In Indonesia, communities perform the ceremony in non-government spaces without being questioned. However, as revealed by Pak Muchsin in the introduction of the article, in the case of (female) migrant workers, the image of the nation is at stake. As Winarnita has argued, non-official representatives of Indonesia evoke fears “*that they will publicly embarrass the nation*” (2016: 133).

Against this background, I will argue, in the following section, that by iterating the national ritual and by referring to norms of enacting national belonging, the ceremony performers in Kowloon Park attached particular meanings to nationalism and challenged the idealised gendered migrant citizenship as promoted by the consulate and other stakeholders involved in Indonesian labour brokerage. I will contrast the

¹¹ The term *pahlawan* in Indonesian does not have gender-specific forms, but Sringatin also refers to the women involved in the struggle for independence (Wieringa 2002: 52–96).

¹² In Indonesian, personal pronouns are not gendered. Since Andi was addressed as *mas* – a respectful form of address used for men – among fellow migrant workers, I use the English third-person singular form ‘he’.

ceremony in Kowloon Park with observations from my fieldwork which reveal the ways in which normative violence operates through statements of government officials, training instructors, and other actors involved in Indonesian labour brokerage, thereby taking into account the “*potentially debilitating injuries effected through language*” (Mills 2007: 137 with reference to Butler 1997). I aim to carve out how the performers negotiate norms that define Indonesian migrant citizenship: particular definitions of female behaviour and imaginations of appropriate representations of the nation overseas.

4. Negotiating norms of female behaviour

The performers’ uniforms and identical movements did not bring their diverse gender subjectivities into line: some performers were wearing a hijab, others had integrated accessories such as ribbons into their hair. Some of the performers had unique hairstyles, whether dyed or cut short. Some *tombois* took leading roles, just as in their Hong Kong communities, in which *tombois* often take leading roles of responsibility (Chang and Groves 2000: 82; Sim 2007: 294). This composition of diverse gender subjectivities depicts the lived everyday realities of Hong Kong-based migrant domestic workers. While for the performers, diverse gender subjectivities are compatible with their feeling of national belonging, they challenge official conceptions of gendered migrant citizenship.¹³

During my fieldwork, I repeatedly met bureaucrats, recruitment agents, instructors, villagers, and migrant domestic workers who expressed their unease with Hong Kong-based workers’ outward appearances and same-sex intimacies. Among Indonesian migrant domestic workers, the clothing styles of *tombois* are a

“*main statement of alternative sexual orientation*” (Sim 2007, 230).¹⁴ At a government pre-departure briefing, for instance, an instructor, who spoke about government regulations on migration issues, opened her speech by expressing her wish that the participants would become “truly dignified, professional, and successful” workers. The instructor, quickly went on to warn about the challenges workers would face abroad: if the workers’ faith was not strong, eventually “lemon would drink lemon” – she was referring to a metaphor for same-sex intimacies. During the same pre-departure briefing, a cleric, responsible for spiritual guidance, reminded the prospective workers to be mentally prepared to resist the “infection” of sinful behaviour in Hong Kong, such as “lavishing money”, “being intimate on the streets”, and “dyeing their hair blonde”.

Throughout my research, I met government officials, instructors, recruitment agents, and bankers, as well as migrant workers who voiced their concerns about workers who “become lesbian”, “have their hair dyed blonde”, and “come back in high heeled shoes” (see also Chan 2017). Often these concerns were voiced in casual comments or informal chats, but they were almost omnipresent during my fieldwork. My interlocutors reiterated the motifs of “becoming lesbian”, “dyed hair”, and “high heeled shoes” to address what, in their eyes, were deviant and morally reprehensible forms of behaviour and characteristics peculiar to Hong Kong-based migrant domestic workers: “odd behaviour”, “thriftlessness”, “narcissism”, “disrespect towards the workers’ families”, “contradicting Indonesian culture and values”, and “being eerie”. I talked to bureaucrats who who praised Hong Kong’s regulations for guaranteeing a relatively high degree of protection. They were

¹³ The flag ceremonies carried out in the migrants’ home towns and villages likewise do not comply with norms of perfect synchronicity and uniformity at official flag ceremonies. The diversity in gender performance would, however, generally not be seen in the migrants’ home towns and villages.

¹⁴ Same-sex intimate relationships among Indonesian migrant domestic workers are “*patterned on gender roles and stereotypes found in heterosexual relationships*” (Sim 2007: 217): “*Dress and demeanour distinctly divide lesbian Indonesian women into masculinised and feminised groups*” (ibid.). To some extent, the array of squads at the workers’ flag ceremony in Kowloon Park also reproduced dominant gendered notions – no *tomboi* was singing in the feminine-coded voice types of the choir, for instance.

concerned about the flipside of the liberality in Hong Kong, lamenting uncontrolled sexual intercourse, drug use, or the risk of being cheated by fellow workers or foreigners. An instructor for housekeeping at the *Sukses dan Makmur Nusantara* training centre once complained during an informal conversation that, in contrast to other destinations, workers in Hong Kong behave oddly, waste their money, and “are *lesbi*”. An article by a Hong Kong-based migrant worker blogger once warned: “*lesbians can destroy their homes in Indonesia*” (Utami 2014). The chief representative of the Hong Kong branch of an Indonesian bank once admitted: “*I am sorry for them. They have worked here for years, but then they have not been able to save up any money. There a lot of workers like that. Their money is all used up for dyeing their hair red and blue!*”.

By defining some migrant domestic workers as ‘non-Indonesian’ and ‘sick’, ‘rampant’ and ‘abnormal’, their lived subjectivities are denigrated as the deviant *others* who do not meet the gendered norms of migrant citizenship. As the above statements show, the violence of the norms of migrant citizenship does not necessarily consist of openly aggressive statements but is put forward by excluding certain subjectivities from what is defined as ‘normal’. The effect of defining migrant domestic workers’ non-normative subjectivities as deviant is that their aspirations, experiences, and claims for respect are downplayed. Varieties of hairstyles and high heeled shoes are a common sight in urban, middle class Indonesia; however, in the view of my interlocutors these styles are not suitable for women belonging to the lower class and working abroad. Being *lesbi*, in turn, is largely tabooed and often not lived openly all over the country (Blackwood 2010; Findeisen, Großmann and von Vacano 2015; Thajib 2014). Recently, people identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) have become the target of attacks and were alleged to be a foreign threat (Boellstorff 2016; Hegarty and Thajib 2016). Being in Hong Kong allows the workers to withdraw from strict control of parents, husbands, and parents-in-law and from

experiences of gender-based violence (Sim 2007: 174, 181). Hong Kong provides them with a space where they can experiment with diverse lifestyles and cultural activities and visibly live non-normative subjectivities and relationships in public on their days off, when they are not subject to their employers’ control over their appearance (ibid., 246).

Nicole Constable’s, Lai’s and Amy Sim’s ethnographies among Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong demonstrate the particular meaning of the *visibility* of diverse subjectivities. *Tombois* who assume male roles, for instance, provide security and defence against “male sexual predation” (Sim 2007: 248; see also Chang and Groves 2000: 82 for the Filipina/o/x community). Furthermore, in the light of “*the quadruple marginality of being migrants, women, a distinct minority and occupiers of low-status jobs*” (Sim 2007: 246), the visibility of diverse subjectivities in public spaces allows migrant workers to demonstrate that they are not reducible to being ‘foreign domestic helpers’ (Constable 2007: 170; Lai 2010: 505; Sim 2007: 230). Constable’s, Lai’s, and Sim’s studies echo the words of Indah, who I met at an NGO-shelter for migrant domestic workers: “*Within the walls of our employers’ flats we are servants, but outside, we are artists!*”

The above-cited instructors, government officials, the blogger, and the banker seem to either silence the migrant domestic workers’ claims to respect, or, due to “‘*epistemic silences*’ in [...] *socio-political and cultural structures*” (Dhawan 2012: 46), they have not learned to read them as such. In the light of the ethnographic studies mentioned above, the ‘othering’ of migrant domestic workers’ subjectivities can be read as forms of anxiety provoked by their autonomy. The moralising notions of gendered migrant citizenship are, hence, an articulation of tensions triggered by migrant domestic workers’ agency. Chan (2017) has shown that migrant domestic workers who returned to their home villages in Central Java and adopted non-normative femininities negotiate acceptance and are able to gain a certain degree of autonomy

due to their economic contributions to their families. Against this backdrop, the denigration of migrant domestic workers' non-normative femininities as rampant and thriftless, described above, can be read as an ambivalent suspicion towards female autonomy. Such lack of restraint deviates from the Javanese ideal of refinement and control of one's passions (Brenner 1998; Winarnita 2016: 24). In her ethnography of Javanese female merchants, Susanne Brenner (1998) has shown that lower class female traders' non-conformity to the norm of female restraint is somewhat more socially accepted than in the upper class. This acceptance is closely tied to the traders' capacity to control money. However, "an autonomous woman is always somewhat suspect", since "a woman who is not subject to any man's control is potentially threatening to the male-dominated social order" (ibid.: 162–63). It should be noted that the othering of autonomous, politically active women has a particularly violent iteration in Indonesian history, as members of the communist women's organisation Gerwani were demonised as deviant 'maniacs' under president Suharto (Tiwon 1996).¹⁵

In light of this history, the self-organised flag ceremony is significant, because by enacting diverse subjectivities, the performers defied the historically charged normative violence, which is articulated in othering migrant domestic workers' non-normative subjectivities. They performed a particular form of national belonging, which, in contrast to the moralising function of cultural norms of restraint and decency in dominant notions of migrant citizenship, accommodates their desires and claims. Reflecting on

Indonesian migrant domestic workers' activism, Lai, similarly, characterised the role of cultural performances as "embodied representations of differences in unity" (2010: 508), which "with their expression of individual and collective longings, multivocality and diverse identification and subjectivities [...] weave together a tapestry of an imaginary alternative world for [migrant domestic workers]" (ibid.: 509). Thus, the flag ceremony in Kowloon Park can be read as an appropriation of the motif "unity in diversity" (*bhinneka tunggal ika*), which, as the official motto of the nation, is crucial to the image of the Indonesian post-colonial nation. During president Suharto's New Order, the national motif of unity in diversity was reduced to depoliticised multiculturalism (Barker 2008: 534; Pemberton 1994). Remarkably, by reiterating this motif, the flag performers re-politicise it, thus, challenging the exclusion of non-normative gender subjectivities from national belonging.

Conclusion

The missing flagpole and the fractures in the performers' uniformity, which contrast with the sublimity of the official flag-raising ceremony and the uniform appearance of its performers, did not give the organisers any reason for embarrassment. The self-confidence of the organisers is noteworthy, given the salience of government officials' and the Indonesian public's concern about the image of the Indonesian nation overseas. The Indonesian consulate encourages migrant domestic workers to represent the Indonesian nation and carry the nation's good name, as flag-raising brigade members or as members of groups practising and rehearsing Indonesian cultural performance at the consulate. Norms in physical appearance and attitude, articulated in the selection process of the flag-raising brigade, regulate whether a migrant domestic worker qualifies as a representative of the nation. In contrast, the performers in Kowloon Park neither hide imperfections in their performance, nor their background as migrant domestic workers who claim legitimacy to per-

¹⁵ The military contrived a powerful myth that the Gerwani members, as part of a failed communist coup, cut off the genitals of a group of kidnapped generals and sexually seduced them. This myth was kept alive to support president Suharto's rule. Under the Suharto regime, the former Gerwani members experienced severe forms of physical, psychological, and social violence (Wieringa 2003). Allegations of lesbianism were one way to defame women's political activism (Wieringa, Bhैया and Katjasungkana 2015: 43). Gerwani was banned and destroyed under Suharto, while the state introduced its own mass women's organisations, which promoted sub-ordinated roles of women (Wieringa 2003).

form national identity and, thus, negotiate the norms that define who is eligible to represent the nation in the international arena.

This article tries to carve out the subtle forms of policing and regulating migrant domestic workers as compliant worker-citizens, on the one hand, and respectable national citizens, on the other. It takes into account practices and moralising statements by government officials, recruitment agents, and other stakeholders involved in Indonesian labour brokerage, which define normative migrant citizenship and thus contain certain migrants' subjectivities, desires, and aspirations by defining them as illegitimate. I discuss the performance of a national ritual by Indonesian migrant domestic workers as an

appropriation of norms of national belonging that publicly challenged the violence inherent in moralising notions of gendered migrant citizenship.

When in 2014, the organisers of the flag ceremony in Kowloon Park convened such an event for the first time, they contested the normative violence affecting the lives of marginalised subjects in Indonesia's current search for national strength and dignity. They (re-)defined and performed national belonging in *their* terms – in a way that opens up the rigid grid of moralising gendered migrant citizenship; asserts their diverse subjectivities, interests and aspirations; and, ultimately, claims respect and equality.

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Commentary

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On a symbolic level, women are not members of the nation like men, but instead represent the nation itself, as Ivecovic (2001) points out. In the same vein, Yuval-Davis (2004) writes about the analogy of gender and nation that “*women are often required to carry the ‘burden of representation’, as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively*” (ibidem: 26). In the ethnographic research of Samia Dinkelaker, this theoretical insight becomes empirically visible in the example of the gendered nature of ‘migrant citizenship’ of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Dinkelaker reveals that negotiations about the domestic workers’ morality as representative of the Indonesian nation bear deeply-rooted gendered and classed anxieties, and must be read as ‘normative violence’, a term borrowed from Judith Butler. The author illustrates that the “burden of representation” borne by migrant women is not merely symbolic but translates into evaluative practices of determining “*whether subjects are legitimate, and whether lives are worth living*” (see Dinkelaker above). In the case of underprivileged migrants, this takes on special importance, since it differentiates implicitly between migrants who deserve state protection

(for example against exploitive labour conditions), and those who do not. However, by means of the flag ceremony celebrated on Indonesia’s Independence Day in Hong Kong, Dinkelaker’s research also demonstrates that normative frameworks are never hermetic, but that there is always the possibility of agency within them. This echoes Butler’s concept of performativity, which operates through the “*reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains*” (Butler 1993: 2). From this perspective, in the repetition necessary to generate the dominant discourse, there always lies the possibility of interruption and change. However, whereas Butler thinks of performativity as starting from discourse, Dinkelaker derives it more strongly from the subjects themselves. The migrant women of Dinkelaker’s study counter the normative power of gendered migrant citizenship by performing it in their own terms. For the notion of agency, this means that the power of the socially marginalised lies not only in the (passive) reiteration of hegemonic discourse, but also in the active appropriation and thereby resignification of it.

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Tebessüm Yılmaz

**Song of My Mother.
Remembering and Representing
the Forced Displacement
and Resettlement of
Kurdish Women**

With a Commentary by
Tül Sualp Akbal



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Song of My Mother

Remembering and Representing the Forced Displacement and Resettlement of Kurdish Women

With a Commentary by Tül Süalp Akbal

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Song of My Mother

Remembering and Representing the Forced Displacement and Resettlement of Kurdish Women

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Abstract

In the 1990s, Bakur (also known as ‘Turkish Kurdistan’) was exposed to mass state-inflicted violence. To suppress the Kurdish insurgence and cut off the logistic support of the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers’ Party; Kurdish: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*), the Turkish state introduced new war strategies, such as forced disappearances and village evacuations executed by its security forces (TSK) and state-fostered counter-paramilitary forces (JITEM, Hizbullah), leading to the displacement of three million people. Within a couple of years, thousands of Kurdish people were tortured, mutilated and forcibly disappeared. Their whereabouts remain unknown. This article investigates how state violence in the 1990s is depicted, represented, and recreated via cinematic narration. Erol Mintaş’s first feature film *Song of My Mother* (*Annemin Şarkısı*/2014) serves as a case study to analyse how forced displacement and resettlement of Kurds are visualised. Further, this account focuses on how the violence is remembered, represented, and recreated and which emotions are revealed while dealing with the traumatic events of the past and, finally, how the past is imagined and commemorated in the present. The visualisation and memorialisation of the 1990s in Kurdish culture contrast with the official Turkish discourse on memory and also provide a basis for collective societal confrontation.

Keywords

state violence; forced displacement; resistance; Kurdish collective memory; remembrance; trauma

Zusammenfassung

In den 1990er Jahren war Bakur (auch als „türkisches Kurdistan“ bekannt) Massengewalt ausgesetzt. Um den kurdischen Aufstand zu unterdrücken und die logistische Unterstützung der PKK (Kurdische Arbeiterpartei; Kurdisch: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) abzuschneiden, führte der türkische Staat neue Kriegsstrategien ein, wie das Verschwindenlassen und Evakuieren von Dörfern durch seine Sicherheitskräfte (TSK) und staatlich geförderte paramilitärische Einheiten (JITEM, Hizbullah), die zur Vertreibung von drei Millionen Menschen führten. Innerhalb weniger Jahre wurden Tausende Kurden gefoltert, verstümmelt und gewaltsam verschwunden. Ihr Aufenthaltsort bleibt unbekannt. Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie die staatliche Gewalt der 1990er Jahren durch filmische Erzählung erinnert, dargestellt und neu erschaffen wird. Erol Mintaş erster Spielfilm *Song of My Mother* (*Annemin Şarkısı*/2014) dient als Fallstudie, um zu analysieren, wie Zwangsvertreibung und Umsiedlung von Kurden sichtbar gemacht werden. Darüber hinaus konzentriert sich dieser Artikel darauf, wie die

Gewalt erinnert, dargestellt und neu geschaffen wird und welche Emotionen sich bei der Bewältigung der traumatischen Ereignisse der Vergangenheit zeigen, und wie die Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart vorgestellt und geahndet wird. Die Visualisierung und Erinnerung der 1990er Jahre in der kurdischen Kultur kontrastiert mit dem offiziellen türkischen Gedächtnisdiskurs und bietet auch eine Grundlage für kollektive gesellschaftliche Konfrontation.

Schlagworte

staatliche Gewalt, Zwangsvertreibung, Widerstand, kurdisches kollektives Gedächtnis, Erinnerung, Trauma

Introduction

In this article,¹ I examine how the past is remembered and represented in the present in relation to the state violence of the 1990s in Erol Mintaş's first feature film *Song of My Mother* (2014). The atrocities that took place in Bakur (also known as "Turkish Kurdistan") in the 1990s play a significant role in Kurdish remembrance and in Kurdish collective memory. Human rights institutions report that 1,353 people were forcibly disappeared (Göral 2017: 122), more than 3,700 villages were evacuated and three million people were displaced (Yıldırım 2012). Yet the Turkish state has failed to acknowledge its responsibility. Instead, it fostered a discourse on memory based on denial of what happened. This research paper focuses on how gendered experiences of forced migration and resettlement are visualised, what type of coping strategies are deployed via cinematic [re]presentation, and, finally, what kind of narratives are [re]produced to confront the official state discourse.

This article aims to contribute to the contemporary academic debate on Kurdish-related topics by combining trauma and memory studies with critical film studies. By focusing on

Mintaş's film, I hope to fill a gap in related studies, which have been focusing mainly on historical aspects of the so-called Kurdish question. Considering the fact that the films released in the 1990s idealised Kurdish national identity and reproduced melancholic victim narratives, it is crucial to focus on the productions of the 2000s, in which Kurdish film-makers deconstruct and reverse victim narratives and turn them into acts of resistance by recognising the agency of the Kurds (Sustam 2016: 218-19).

In the following pages, the theoretical foundation of memory studies will be presented in order to explain the research questions and the choice of methodology within the theoretical framework. Then, the paper will move on to a brief discussion of contemporary academic work related to Kurdish studies. This part will be followed by a section on Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey, especially regarding its potential to challenge an official state discourse and reveal different aspects of Kurdish collective memory. Finally, at the beginning of the analysis of Mintaş's *Song of My Mother*, the film is introduced to the reader by means of a synopsis.

1. Memory studies and studying Kurdish memory

Memory has always been a topic present in academic work, but only since the 1980s have scholars from the humanities and social sciences increasingly started to consider "memory" as a central concept in their critical research (see Olick 1999; Kansteiner 2002; Erlil 2008; Antze and Lambek 2016; Casper and Wertheimer 2016). It has even been suggested that in parallel

¹ This article is dedicated to Rozerin Çukur who was shot to death at age sixteen by Turkish snipers in the Sur district of Amed/Diyarbakir in 2016. Her parents were denied receiving her body for months. I am grateful to Erol Mintaş, Jakob Wilke, Tuncay Şur, and Çağhan Kızıl for their critique and input as well as for encouraging and supporting me throughout the way. I also extend my thanks to the two anonymous reviewers whose helpful comments aided me in further developing this paper.

with global social developments, the rise of the so-called “memory studies” points to a more global tendency, “*the transition from forgetting culture to remembering culture*” (Sancar 2010). The rising focus on alternative histories, history-telling, and performances of counter-memory stemming from collective memory (Halbwachs 1992) has been a recurring theme in recent years (Antze-Lambek 2016). Indeed, the attempts to disregard collective experiences of minority groups, particularly those resulting from oppression and state-inflicted violence, does not mean that they are eliminated from the people’s collective memory. Inevitably, also the possible perpetrators of violence will be part of forging memory, thus, imposing a certain discourse of memory on those sharing it. This continues to be reflected in inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Turkey.

I claim that memory studies in Turkey give a different point of view to contemporary sociopolitical and cultural analysis. A review of existing literature suggests that these studies predominantly deal with communities that were exposed to mass state violence in processes of Turkish nation state-building and identity-making (Neyzi 2002; Neyzi 2008; Neyzi 2010), such as the Greek Orthodox, Jews, and Armenians. Although these studies shed light on counter-memory narratives, their scholarly interest mostly remains focused on communities that are ‘physically gone’. However, research on Kurdish communities in Turkey has recently intersected with memory studies, for example, in relation to the Armenian genocide (Çelik 2015; Çelik and Dinç 2015; Çelik and Öpengin 2016). One of the main reasons why this is a rather recent development, is the extreme state violence forced on the Kurds and the fact that it has, thus far, not been fully acknowledged by both the authorities and the Turkish communities, therefore remaining exempt from punishment (Atılğan and Işık 2011). Consequently, the memories and experiences of survivors of mass violence have been suppressed and silenced. A further reason is connected to the multidirectional features of memory (Rotberg

2009). While oral history, personal narrative, and life course research on the above-mentioned topics sparked public discussion (Neyzi 2010), they also form a substantive and symbolic basis for other excluded groups’ demands for justice (Çelik 2017). Thus, their memories become a space for resistance. Contemporary research on the cultural and political resistance of the Kurdish communities in Turkey has shown that the official state discourse on memory has been challenged and contested by the Kurdish counter-memory narratives.

Despite the great interest in memory and trauma studies (particularly, Holocaust studies), the complexity of research on traumatic events remains a challenge to many scholars (Yıldız 2015: 105). Although there are a number of studies focusing on the cultural aspects of the Kurdish question, they have not said much about the traumatic experiences of Kurds. Those that analyse the ongoing war through a post-colonial studies perspective (Sustam 2015; Sustam 2016) still omit the memory aspect associated with reconciling. On the other hand, studies on cultural productions have omitted the political reflections of their research objects. For instance, critical studies on Kurdish films have mostly focused on their artistic value but not on their political connotations – in other words, they mostly failed to acknowledge their political meaning (Sönmez 2015).²

There is a need for new methodological and theoretical approaches, and this need has inspired collaborations among different disciplines and research areas (Albano 2016), such as film and memory studies and the social sciences, particularly sociology. Although conflicts and wars have widely been presented, represented, and discussed on screen for a long time, visual research in sociology has been neglected for decades (Harper 2015). However, visual sociology as a young discipline (Sztompka 2015) takes a strong interest in the intersection of film and memory and trauma studies.

² Ayça Çiftçi’s (2015) unpublished doctoral thesis remains an exceptional work.

This article aims to analyse the representations of state violence against the Kurdish communities of Turkey through the lens of the feature film *Song of My Mother*. I dissect the role of Kurdish language in the transmission of memory, how the past and present are remembered and represented, how trauma caused by state violence is represented and interpreted, what kind of emotions are performed, and what kind of negotiations are taking place in daily practices of forced displacement. I suggest that the Turkish state is represented as a despotic colonial power in Kurdish remembrance. Furthermore, because existing literature on gendered trauma experiences mostly conceptualises women as a ‘particularly vulnerable social group’ and their political existence has been overlooked (Fiddian-Qasmideh 2014), it is essential to adopt a feminist approach to the matter. Therefore, this article focuses on how gendered experiences of forced migration and resettlement are visualised, what type of coping strategies are deployed via cinematic [re]presentation, and what kind of narratives are [re]produced to confront the official state discourse. Finally, the topics of identity crisis and notions of being in-between and being incomplete will be looked into to understand their impact on Kurdish collective memory and identity.

I will build my hypothesis by applying critical visual analysis (Pauwels 2011; Rose 2016: 1-47). As investigating various themes, signs, and codes requires different research methods to complement each other, a variety of research methods, such as visual semiotics, contextual and conceptual analysis, deep interpretational analysis, and intertextual analysis will be combined within the theoretical purview of memory and trauma studies. In addition to that, some interviews with the director Mintaş will be included, where further information is needed regarding the socio-political background of the film.

I believe that the use of multiple different visual research methods will not only provide a better picture of the socio-political context of

the chosen film but will also mitigate the possible inadequacies of each method.

2. Kurdish film-making as a site for cultural resistance

Kurdish cinema in Turkey emerged in the 1990s, in the midst of the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).³ However, the conflict already is rooted in the forerun to and in the first years of the Turkish Republic. The dynamics of this longstanding conflict changed significantly after the first armed attack of the PKK in 1984 (Açık 2013), which later led to a paradigm shift in the Turkish state’s war strategies. As a result of this change in strategy, Kurds were exposed to intense violence perpetuated by both the state and state-sponsored counter-guerilla paramilitary forces. Widespread, systematic and multi-layered state violence defined the Kurds as deserving punishment, execution, and annihilation⁴ (Göral 2016: 115; Çelik 2016: 91). State killings, murders by unknown perpetrators, forced disappearances, village evacuations, sexual violence, and forced displacement of Kurds were introduced and used as war tools by the Kurdish Hizbullah⁵, JİTEM (Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism)⁶ or the

³ Kurdish: *Partiya Karkeşên Kurdistanê*.

⁴ Meanwhile, the state supported a media portrayal of Kurds as terrorists and, by dehumanising them (Şur 2016; Gönen 2016), degraded them to bare lives (Agamben 1998) that have “to be neutralised” and “terminated”. The need for self-representation on the Kurdish side thus stems from that as well.

⁵ The Hizbollah is a Sunni Islamist militant organisation active in Turkish Kurdistan. The organisation is also referred to as Kurdish or Turkish Hizbollah and has been supported by the Turkish state and its security forces during its conflict with the PKK (Göral, Işık and Kaya 2013: 23).

⁶ JİTEM (*Jandarma İstibbarat ve Terörle Mücadele*; English: Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counterterrorism) is an intelligence agency under the command of the Turkish Gendarmerie. The agency was unofficially involved in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and its existence was denied by Turkish authorities until 2005 when the organisation was restructured and renamed JİT (Göral, Işık and Kaya 2013: 22).

village guard system.⁷ Although the level of indifference, banality, and brutality lend a unique character to the 1990s' state violence, it is necessary to acknowledge the continuity of state violence regarding the Kurdish question. As Bahar Şahin Fırat notes, its effects on the victims continue to be reproduced on a daily basis (Şahin Fırat 2014: 390). Demands for compensation, efficient investigation and prosecution, and, most importantly, for taking public responsibility for the crimes are still pending. Therefore, the 1990s need to be treated as a dynamic and boundless period of time, whose victims are still suffering from the aftershocks. When excessive violence overtakes every aspect of life, what happened becomes unspeakable to its victims (Şahin Fırat 2014: 390). It is no coincidence that the traumatic experiences of the 1990s were to become constitutive elements of Kurdish collective memory.

The *Mesopotamia Cultural Center* (MKM), a milestone in the history of Kurdish resistance and Kurdish memory, was founded in 1991 in Istanbul and suddenly became a social hub for many young Kurds (Candan 2016: 5). A group of Kurds came together here and formed the *Mesopotamia Cinema Collective* (Candan 2016: 6) in 1996 and started making documentary films. These documentary films were the first examples of testimonial cinema.⁸ In this way, Kurdish documentary film-making became a tool for speaking the truth (Şengül 2016). As Cuma Çiçek argues:

Kurdish cinema produced in Turkey is a site where certain unrepresented facts about Turkish history are revealed...Kurdish films reveal certain "histories" of Turkish and Kurdish people and carry an archival potential that shapes the memories of both Kurdish and non-Kurdish people (Çiçek 2016: 75).

⁷ For an in-depth analysis on the village guard system in Turkey please see: Balta Paker and Akça (2013), Gürcan (2014), and Önder (2015).

⁸ According to Álvarez (2014) earlier documentary films merely captured historical events in order to visually archive them. Later productions then shifted towards including subjects and their testimonies – hence the testimonial character of cinema.

The question of how to translate, transfer, or represent trauma into a cinematic narrative, gives Kurdish feature films a similar character. By applying various narrative forms and techniques and different aesthetic approaches, it becomes apparent that they are distinguished from mainstream film-making in Turkey. Not only political agendas and claims found their voice in Kurdish feature films, also different Kurdish subjectivities came into focus. In other respects, film-makers have claimed their own agencies through self-representation. While film-makers, as Kurdish subjects, distill their personal experiences into a cinematic narrative, they, at the same time, become performers of collective memory by being both contributors and preservers.

Erol Mintaş, the director of *Song of My Mother*, may fall into this category. While he confronts identity issues, state violence, and performances of collective remembering in his films, Mintaş's own life story bears a resemblance to his cinematic narrations. In particular, the mother tongue question in Mintaş's cinema is a cross-reference to his personal experiences as well as a symbol of the ban on the Kurdish language in Turkey.

3. Song of My Mother: remembering and representing the atrocities of the 1990s

Erol Mintaş's first feature film, *Song of My Mother* was released in 2014 and, according to box office numbers, it reached a wide audience.⁹ Feyyaz Duman (Ali), Zübeyde Ronahi (Nigâr), and Nesrin Cavadzade (Zeynep) played the leading roles. The film was granted several national and international film awards and gained public attention.

The last episode of a mother-son trilogy,¹⁰ *Song of My Mother* sheds light on the forced migration and resettlement of Kurds in relation

⁹ It reached a number of 11,480 viewers within 13 weeks in Turkey (Box Office Türkiye 2018).

¹⁰ The first two films of the trilogy are *Butimar* (2008) and *Snow* (2010).

to ongoing gentrification processes in Turkey. A young teacher Ali lives with his elderly mother Nigâr in Istanbul's Tarlabaşı district, well-known for its Kurdish immigrant population since the 1990s. When the ongoing gentrification of the old city forces them to move for a second time, as many others, they move to a high-rise building in the city suburbs. Being forced to move again brings out Nigâr's old traumata. She insists on going back to their village in Bakur and is convinced that her old neighbours have all already moved back there. Every day, she packs her belongings, takes her missing son's picture, and seeks ways to return to Doğubeyazıt, while Ali struggles to please his mother. He attempts to locate a *dengbêj* (Kurdish: folk singer) whose song his mother keeps humming and gives her rides to their old neighbourhood. However, he fails to keep up with his personal life and wavers between his mother and his girlfriend.

In order to provide a better sociological analysis of the film, it will be examined by focusing on the different technical and aesthetic choices of the film-maker, the film soundtrack, various themes, topics, and emotions by applying a critical visual analysis. Furthermore, I will draw on the concepts of intercontextuality and intertextuality in film studies (Mazierska 2011) as well as Douglas Kellner's *multi-dimensional film reading* approach (Kellner 1991). Mazierska argues that cinema transforms historical events into a more attractive form for its audience and that cinema itself becomes a new historical discourse. According to Kellner (1991: 9-10), by considering films as cultural texts, it becomes possible to explore challenging discourses, different narratives and their representations, concepts and images, theoretical positions and myths as they mirror everyday life and contemporary political struggles. Through intertextuality, different film narratives are able to 'talk' and refer to each other as well as to other socio-cultural productions, which makes social analysis possible. As Akbal Süalp notes:

The nature of ideological cultural reproduction creates intertextuality on all levels of human experience. Every

mode of production carries some characteristics from the other modes of production, some of them being articulated to the existing forms and some surviving in the dynamics of the cultural reproductions as repressed and hidden forms. These survivals are taken away from their historical context or survive in fantasies, utopias, which might belong to the future, and their reproduction occurs through transformations, remembrance, repression, influence, reference, quotation, representation, misunderstanding, misreading, and also transgression. We also might have the opportunity to have a broader space for dialogues of inter-cultural environment that can also open up a resistant, avant-garde, freed space of representation of technologies and ideologies of the dominant (Akbal Süalp 2009).

We encounter several themes that enable us to perform a sociological analysis of Mintaş's film. In the first place, we observe that the Kurdish language, which is the memory and bearer of Kurdish culture, is both preferred as a cinematic language and used as a reference system pointing towards Kurdish culture – a culture that relies mostly on oral culture due to prohibitions and oppression. I claim that the choice of the director is intimately related to his personal history and collective Kurdish identity.

Erol Mintaş was born and raised in Bakur and went to western Turkey for his studies, where he experienced precarious working and living conditions (Melek and Neyir 2014). Even though the ban on the Kurdish language was lifted in 1991 (Açık 2013), speaking Kurdish in public was (and still is) criminalised.¹¹ Therefore, he was constantly exposed to the Turkish language. The representations of the feeling of "being stuck in-between" in his films may partly be derived from that. He was also stuck between his mother tongue and basic means of communication, Kurdish, and the widely spoken everyday language, Turkish. Therefore, it is

¹¹ Even though they were never explicitly banned, Kurdish language and culture have been de facto criminalised since the earliest years of the Turkish Republic. The current Constitution, ratified after the military coup of 1980, recognises only Turkish as the country's official language, thus limiting the possible use of local minority tongues. From 1983 until 1991, the speaking of Kurdish in public was outlawed, and people were arrested for even so much as the possession of a Kurdish music cassette. In 1991 the use of Kurdish in broadcasting and publishing was legalised.

no coincidence that the question of language is problematised within an identity and memory framework. The right to one's mother tongue is often depicted in relation to cultural memory on a filmic level. Moreover, in Mintaş's cinematic expression, language is also used as a signifier of the state-fostered Turkification (Güneş 2014: 263) processes.

Beginning with the first sequence of the film, the Kurdish language and its use is depicted both as a symbol of the resistance against state violence and as a symbol of Kurdish identity-making. As is widely known, the rejection and prohibition of the Kurdish language by the Turkish authorities, on the one hand, resulted in the denial of Kurdish identity by different sectors of society and, on the other hand, characterised Kurdish identity as a symbol of resistance against state violence and societal oppression. In the opening scene of the film, a teacher at a village school in Doğubeyazıt tells the story of a crow, which, having fallen for the looks of a peacock, tries to look like it and forgets its own beauty. What we understand from the blackboard is that this is a Turkish language class, which is obligatory in all schools. It is definitely no coincidence that Mintaş, who stated that Kurdish plays an important role in Kurdish oral history, chose this story for the opening scene. Indeed, this first scene is important for the continuation of the film, as it opens the discussion for aspects of state violence and social pressure depicted in the film.

The first domain with which the audience interacts is the school – a place which Althusser (2001) defines as one of the ideological tools of the state. In this context, the school is a representation not only of spatial repression but also of the state's Turkification and civilisation policies. Furthermore, Mintaş, with the story accompanying this scene, clearly refers to those who left their Kurdish identity behind, taking on a Turkish identity due to state assimilation policies.¹² Through the cinematic discourse, the

director, on the one hand, reveals the oppression of the state but, on the other hand, simply mocks it. With this representation, a transition from the realm of violence to the realm of resistance is made with children's laughter mixed with the teacher's Kurdish story. Kurdish, which was transmitted from generation to generation with forms of oral culture, is now being transmitted to a next generation by the teacher's storytelling. In this context, the Kurdish language serves as a source and medium for constructing a collective memory which is transmitted over generations.

Kurdish, presented as a tool of discourse and communication in the bilingual film, is also portrayed as the language that strengthens the mother-son relationship and acts as a source for the transfer of collective memory. Starting from the imagination that women are the makers and bearers of culture, the character of Nigâr emerges as the maker and bearer of Kurdish (oral) culture. Women, who are assumed to "naturally" belong to the cultural sphere in patriarchal nationalist discourse (Winter 2016; Yuval-Davis 2002), are in part depicted as trapped in such roles as a result of state violence. While Mintaş states that he owes Kurdish film-making to his mother (Lora 2014), he in fact regenerates the roles of making and bearing that are attributed to women. However, it is noteworthy that based on the representations in the film, the role ascribed to Nigâr correlates with a social reality (Açık 2013). This is to say that continuing to speak Kurdish as an ethnic group, whose language, culture, and memory are threatened to be erased and struggle to exist, points towards the significance of language in the difficult process of revitalising the culture. Thus, Nigâr, through the cinematic narrative of Mintaş, is not only the passive bearer of a culture but also becomes a maker of culture and a symbol of the identity struggle of Kurdish women and their resistance against state oppression.

¹² By drawing attention to the fluid nature of ethnic identity during conflicts, Adnan Çelik identifies the process of gaining a new identity at the expense of an old one (ethnic identity change) as ethnic asylum. This

kind of asylum involves the abandonment of an identity and acquisition of a new one after violent attacks against a person's original identity (Çelik 2014: 105).

Kurdish is depicted as a language that is confined to homes, Kurdish cultural centres, and associations rather than a language being taught in school. As some studies have demonstrated (Çağlayan, Özar and Doğan 2011), Kurdish associations are of utmost importance to Kurds who were banished to cities in western Turkey in the 1990s and for the Kurdish resistance movement. Many Kurdish women who lost male relatives such as husbands, sons, fathers, countered their feelings of loss of language and experience with the Kurdish associations, when they first appeared in the city centre's public sphere, where Turkish had to be spoken (Çağlayan, Özar and Doğan 2011). The women who socialised in associations started to be involved in decision-making processes while learning Turkish and also started to participate in local politics through Kurdish political parties (Çağlayan, Özar and Doğan 2011). Paradoxically, state violence led to the unforeseen consequence of the empowerment of Kurdish women, who began to speak up for their own needs, make demands, and negotiate, hence, ultimately, strengthening their capacities to sustain their daily lives.

Nigâr is described as a woman who has the upper hand in day-to-day arguments with her son Ali. Her insistence on returning to the village is one of the determinants of Ali's tense relationship with his partner and mother. Nigâr's resistant attitude results in her success in negotiating small gains; for instance, she gets Ali to frequently take her to visit acquaintances in the old neighbourhood. At the same time the identity crisis Ali experiences is also revealed. His mother's desire to return to the past and to the village makes it difficult for Ali to turn the page and focus on the future. There is no life for Ali in the village because he is settled in urban life. He teaches Kurdish to children at an association but he has to speak Turkish in the public sphere. As an author writing Kurdish stories, Ali oscillates between Turkish and Kurdish. For similar reasons, he has a tense relationship with his partner, who is portrayed as an insignificant personality. For Nigâr, however, returning to the village would mean returning to a time be-

fore her other son's abduction and days prior to violence. Nigâr remembers and recreates Doğubeyazıt in her mind in the present. The village is simply a place of memory that is frozen and static. Since she does not know about her son's fate, like most Kurdish women, her right to mourn is also abrogated (Yalçinkaya 2016: 62; Göral 2016: 130). Her son does not have a grave but there is a framed photograph of her son that she wipes the dust off of and carries along whenever she sets out to travel back to the village. She frequently irons her son's clothes as if she wants him to find them ready if he were to come back.

Nigâr is one of the "Saturday people",¹³ protestors who have been appealing to the state for many years at Istanbul's Galatasaray Square to account for their lost ones (Çağlayan 2006: 184). Driven to find answers for the disappearance of her son, Nigâr is insistent on returning to the village. She requests her son Ali to find a *dengbêj* (bard) she had listened to in her youth. An important figure in Kurdish oral culture, a *dengbêj*, is not only considered a person who sings but also an individual who gives life and shape to the voice (Scalbert-Yücel 2017). The *dengbêj* Nigâr had listened to in her village, on the one hand, refers to a culture in danger of extinction and the foundational role of songs in the collective Kurdish memory and, on the other hand, implies that those who stake a claim on memory are women/mothers who are the makers and bearers of the culture. When she unsuccessfully searches for the *dengbêj*'s tape, she tells her son: "Everything gets lost, everything... Oh, a cruel fate!" (10:04).

What is lost is not only *dengbêj* Seydoye Silo's tape¹⁴ but also Nigâr's familiar environment, to some extent. Being displaced by the state's policies from her second home in Tarlabası where she socialises with other Kurds, Nigâr was forced to move with her son to newly erected

¹³ The current name of a human rights group, formerly known as "Saturday Mothers".

¹⁴ The film's pressbook characterises Seydoye Silo's work as follows: "She [Nigâr] hangs onto this idea of finding *Dengbêj Seydoye Silo*... a song that perhaps never existed or is a forgotten, an archaic echo from the past."

buildings in Esenyurt.¹⁵ Gentrification is a traumatic trigger for Nigâr, who was detached from her environment. With camera angles and aesthetic perspectives, Nigâr's feelings of being detained within four walls are emphasised. Feelings such as claustrophobia and incarceration are the ones most frequently mentioned in studies conducted with Kurdish women (Çağlayan, Özar and Doğan 2011: 60-61; Çelik 2005: 146).

In Nigâr's case, being in Tarlabası eased the transition for her, whereas Esenyurt brings out her traumas. The feelings of isolation, desolation, and the fear of "dying between the walls" (35:32) reinforce her wish for returning to the village. Moreover, she is firmly convinced that everybody but her had returned. In her memories, 'the village' represents past habits of a familiar lifestyle, memories, and belongings. Nigâr's eagerness to return to the village is indeed a representation of the desire to be reunited with her disappeared son and to retrieve what they had there as a family. Losing her existing social circles, in particular, her neighbours and the Kurdish associations, deepens the trauma of being displaced. Even though 'returning to the village' is often romanticised and nostalgically represented on the screen, this fantasised image is razed in Mintaş's cinema. He disrupts Nigâr's desire by depicting that there is no village to return to and that it is a lost cause.

Like Nigâr, many Kurds identify with Tarlabası. Tarlabası is a well known district in Istanbul which has a large Kurdish migrant population. In *Song of My Mother*, the neighbourhood is acknowledged as a memory

space and represents the forced displacement of Kurds. The historical neighbourhood's drastic change by means of urban regeneration projects (Sakızlıoğlu 2014; Sakızlıoğlu and Uitermark 2014; Öktem Ünsal 2015) has caused its residents – Romani, Kurds, and Africans – to be pushed out. Tarlabası and its residents have been stigmatised and silenced through ethnic criminalisation. In spite of having a bad reputation, Tarlabası promotes a sense of belonging to its Kurdish residents. It has become a social and cultural hub, a community to many Kurds where they can practice their ethnicity. The displacement of Nigâr and Ali as a consequence of gentrification triggers Nigâr's old traumata. Thus, Tarlabası is depicted as a multilayered and multidimensional space offering a social hub for many Kurds, a home, a reminder of Nigâr's village, a space for collective remembrance and commemoration but also a space for ameliorating traumatic experiences.

Despite the AKP¹⁶ government's 'New Turkey' discourse and their claim to be different from previous regimes, I argue that only the form of violence has changed. That is to say, state violence has remained as a practice. With the rapid urban regeneration projects that are promoted by neoliberal policies, new forms of precarity have been introduced. In particular, gentrification processes that go hand in hand with assimilation strategies of the government, push the inhabitants away towards the suburbs of cities (Atkinson and Bridge 2005). Within the scope of this article, I regarded the gentrification of the Tarlabası district as a form of state-promoted violence.

Conclusion

The political oppression against Kurds has been a widely discussed topic in Kurdish film-making in Turkey. Forced disappearances, village evacuations, torture, and the ban on the Kurdish language, are often represented and re-imagined as

¹⁵ Esenyurt is a district located on the European side of Istanbul, 35 km from the city centre. Since Esenyurt has a large Kurdish population, most of whom migrated from Kars, Ardahan, and Ağrı, the district is also called "Kars Vegas", "Esencilis" [a wordplay combining Esenyurt and Los Angeles], and the "Ghetto City", emphasising the segregation of Kurds. However, as a result of the construction boom and urban transformation plans, Esenyurt has become a 'paradise' of gated communities, skyscrapers, and (cheap) mass housing projects in recent years. This transformation does not only reveal the existing oppression, based on ethnic identities and socio-economic class affiliation, of Kurds but also new class dynamics.

¹⁶ Justice and Development Party (Turkish: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*).

a medium of state violence through cinematic narrations. I argue that the Turkish state, in the film, is represented as a repressive colonial power. Similar to other colonial powers, it forcibly exerts its power over its colonised subjects. When the film addresses the right to education in the mother tongue in its initial scene, the school appears as an apparatus for colonisation and becomes a symbol of the oppressive use of state power. While enforced teaching of the Turkish language and the ban on the Kurdish language are considered tools of assimilation, claiming the right to education in one's mother tongue becomes, in the eyes of the sovereign, a criminal act to be punished. The rebellious 'other' must be eliminated from the public sphere.¹⁷

The film *Song of My Mother* reflects what is still alive in Kurdish collective memory. Social traumata, caused by the collective experience of state violence and forced displacement, for instance, are 'intrusive' structures that result from the destructive incidents that a society or social group has experienced, which might continue to harm the collectivity of the group. Incidents, such as institutions fulfilling their functions, governments not providing security to society, or exposing certain groups to wide-ranging economic crises (Sönmez 2016: 23) are hard to confront, to deal with, and to reconcile. This continues to be reflected in inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Turkey.

This article suggests that diverse types of (alternative) narratives, including those produced in art, gain importance through the ways in which they deal with trauma, (re)present resistance, and narrate individual and collective experiences. While mainstream film narratives work as an extension of an official (at times nationalist) discourse and therefore are promoted and supported by ruling powers, alternative film-making by dissidents is often prohibited, since their alternative narratives of truth have the potential to challenge official

discourses. Given the fact that mainstream cinematic narrations could deepen traumata by falsifying memory and shelving the past, I argue that alternative film narratives have the potential to confront traumata and therefore enable communities to come to terms with the past. Thus, dissident films give voice not only to individual victims and their descendants but also to the community that has been the target of state violence. As *Song of My Mother* is an award-winning film that has sparked public discussions, it is clear that those who have remained silent have been made witnesses of the crimes through a cinematic narration of Kurdish testimonies. The film analysis shows that the cinematic performances provide a basis for commemoration and remembrance. Moreover, the examination of co-existing representations of how state violence is experienced and remembered in cinema highlights how Kurdish collective (and cultural) memory is conceptualised, preserved, and transmitted.

¹⁷ In Turkish media representations, Kurds are dehumanised by objectifying them as worthless bodies to be annihilated, eliminated, or terminated (Şur 2016; Gönen 2016).

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Commentary

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Tebessüm Yılmaz's paper is an excellent introduction to new methodological and theoretical approaches to the collaborative study of film, memory and sociology. Specifically, it looks into visual sociology, memory and trauma in Bakur and Turkey from a gender studies perspective.

Yılmaz closely and carefully examines representations of state violence against Turkey's Kurdish communities in Kurdish films, particularly the film *Song of My Mother*. She discusses issues of memory, language, mother tongue and the gender positions in this tension, and how trauma works in such complicated experiences. Many issues, such as state violence, trauma, loss, forced displacement, and multiple forcible experiences of gender, in-between positions, migration and resettlement become interrogated, trespassed and interwoven when investigating such a subject and its forms of representation in film.

The author engages with very complicated material in her paper, using different approaches and perspectives appropriately, simultaneously treating her material in a very sensitive way. Through the analysis of the film *Song of My Mother*, she finds a chance to elaborate the issues of trauma, displacement and memory, and what it means to be a woman in this context of violence and destruction.

Additionally, she proves that once you have become a student of society, you cannot contain yourself within a single discipline; once you have started studying trauma, memory and experience, almost everything under the sun is related to each other and turns out to be relational and mutual. It is necessary to be inventive and find ways of tackling problems in a critical and analytical way.

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New Perspectives in
Gender Research

Working Paper Series
2018, Volume 1

Güler İnce

**Biopolitics and Displaced
Bodies**

With a Commentary by
Sabine Hess



GÖTTINGER CENTRUM FÜR
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Güler İnce

Biopolitics and Displaced Bodies

With a Commentary by Sabine Hess

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Biopolitics and Displaced Bodies

Challenging Message and Representation in Refugee Art

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Abstract

For a geographic “place” to become a “homeland” or “home”, a community sharing a common cultural background has to take root there. The acquired place then forms part of the “body” of that community. Displacement turns individuals and communities into fragile entities by cutting their connection with their “place” and depriving them of their histories and bodies. The concepts of “borders” and “biopolitics” have gained prominence in the context of liberal nation states. In the view of persistent banishment, forced displacement, and population exchange in many parts of the world, contemporary border enforcement based on biopolitics serves to maintain control over bodies. This article will analyse depictions of the phenomena of exile, migration, immigration, and refuge/asylum in modern art with reference to the concept of biopolitics.

Keywords

Bodies, displacement, exile, biopolitics, representation, visual art

Zusammenfassung

Damit ein geographischer „Ort“ zur „Heimat“ oder zum „Zuhause“ wird, muss eine Gemeinschaft, die einen gemeinsamen kulturellen Hintergrund hat dort Wurzeln schlagen. Der erworbene Ort bildet dann einen Teil des „Körpers“ dieser Gemeinschaft. Verdrängung verwandelt Individuen und Gemeinschaften durch das Abschneiden von der eigenen Geschichte und ihres Gemeinschaftskörpers in fragile Gebilde. Die Begriffe „Grenzen“ und „Biopolitik“ haben im Kontext liberaler Nationalstaaten an Bedeutung gewonnen. Angesichts von andauernder Verbannung, Zwangsvertreibung und Bevölkerungsaustausch in vielen Teilen der Welt, dient die moderne Grenzkontrolle auf der Basis von Biopolitik der Aufrechterhaltung der Überwachung von Körpern. In diesem Artikel werden die Phänomene des Exils, der Migration, der Immigration und des Asyls in der modernen Kunst anhand des Konzepts der Biopolitik analysiert.

Schlagworte

Körper, Vertreibung, Exil, Biopolitik, Repräsentation, visuelle Kunst

Introduction

For a geographic “place” to become a “home-land” or “home”, a community sharing a common cultural background has to take root there. The acquired place then forms part of the “body” of that community. Displacement turns individuals and communities into fragile entities by cutting their connection with their “place” and depriving them of their histories and bodies. The concepts of “borders” and “biopolitics” have gained prominence in the context of liberal nation states. By means of either banishment, forced displacement, or population exchange, contemporary border enforcement based on biopolitics serves to maintain the control over bodies. This article will analyse the depictions of the phenomena of exile, migration, immigration, and refuge/asylum in modern art with reference to the concept of biopolitics.

1. “Corpus” and “bare life”

The concept of biopolitics, the politics that governs through life (Greek: *bios*), is continuously expanding and is used ambiguously in numerous fields today. This concept is referred to by studies ranging from the expansion of human life to medical studies, from the prevention of deadly diseases to issues of demographic change, and from abortion laws to ecological problems. However, I will address biopolitics in this article in relation to “displacement”, in reference to Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. But first, I will briefly outline how Foucault and Agamben use the concept biopolitics.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault applied the concept biopolitics in different ways in various texts. In his book *Biopolitics*, the German sociologist Thomas Lemke (2014) describes Foucault’s different uses of the term and adds that he sometimes uses biopower instead of biopolitics without differentiating between the two concepts.

According to Foucault, the human body, as a consequence of capitalism, becomes a valuable resource for those in power. He argues that cap-

italism would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production. Since the 17th century, power has undergone a radical transformation, focusing on the management, protection, development, and nourishment of life. Foucault (1978) regards the replacement of the sovereign power with biopower as a consequence of historical change. Expansion of the human lifespan through progress in medicine, enhanced efficiency of the human body, and industrial developments of the 18th century are among the reasons for this transition of power. Contrary to the right to kill or the right to let live of classical sovereign power, this new form of power tries to promote life and prevent death.

According to Foucault, biopolitics functions in two spheres. One of them is “anatomy politics” and the other is the “biopolitics of the population”. The “biopolitics of the population” (Sargili and Yardimici 2011: 4) incorporates the bodies of all humanity as a living species into its political strategies and aims to regulate parameters such as birth and death ratios, levels of wellbeing, and the lifespan within this framework. This concept includes displacement and immigration policies oriented towards keeping undesirable human bodies out. “Technologies of security” target the “social body” or “corpus” of a population. These technologies of security aim at the general characteristics of a population, and its conditions of variation, in order to eliminate the risks and threats that are innate to the existence of the population as a biological entity (Lemke 2014: 57).

But the transformation of power has not made rule over death irrelevant. According to Foucault, the greatest contradiction of biopolitics resides precisely on the level of importance attributed to security and improvement of life by political authorities. The more a state is focused on the security of its own population, the more it will have created conditions that lead to the death of others (Baele 2016).

Foucault (1978) himself answers the question of why a ruling power whose function is to foster and expand life can at the same time kill: This is where racism is involved. In fact, he ar-

gues that racism, which has been prominent for a significant period of time, has taken root in state mechanisms during the era of biopower. According to Foucault (2003), racism is a way of disconnecting the realm of life that the ruling power takes responsibility for, from the realm of death, in which people can be left to die; it allows a distinction between those who are supposed to live and those who are supposed to die. Therefore, through the discrimination of certain ‘races’ and the creation of a hierarchy between them, the ruling powers ascribe certain ‘races’ as superior and worthy of protection, and others as inferior and therefore unworthy of protection, hence, dividing the biological field they take responsibility for. Thus, racism creates the possibility of taking responsibility only for a single selected ‘race’ whilst disregarding the needs of determined racial sub-groups (Foucault 2003).

Wars were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century, and ... never before did the regimes visit such holocausts on their own populations ... Entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed (Foucault 1978: 136–137).

Foucault refers to death not only in the sense of direct, physical violence against particular bodies, but also in the sense of “killing indirectly”, that is, “leaving people to die” who are considered to be outside of the biopolitical field of responsibility.

When I say "killing," I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on (Foucault 2003: 256).

Another function of racism is expressed in establishing a positive relation of the following kind: “*The more you kill, the more deaths you will cause’ or ‘The very fact that you let more die will allow you to live more’*” (Foucault 2003: 255). For the sake of improving the life of some, it creates the ideological basis for the detection of the identity

of, deportation of, fight against, and even the killing of the other:

The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer (Foucault 2003: 255).

Policies of migration, border enforcement, population exchange, exile and forced displacement are issues that have to be evaluated within this scope. The deaths of people trying to cross borders illegally via dangerous migration routes, as a result of an intensification of EU border security policies, did not become a significant issue on the agenda of the Western world. In Turkey, practices of forced displacement in the midst of an ongoing conflict are justified with the security of the population that is codified as “us”. Therefore, the life outside, or the lives of the others are codified as less valuable than the life inside, or the lives of those attributed to “us”.

According to Foucault, the modern state requires a central authority that recognises society as a biological whole, watches out for its purity and protects it from inner and outer enemies through monitoring and governing. Hence, ever since the late 19th century, racism has been a guide for the rationality of the state’s actions. It attains prominence in political measures of the state and as “state racism” in concrete policies. “*The state is no longer a tool used by a race over the other: the state is the protectorate of the integrity, superiority and purity of the race and it must remain so*” (Lemke 2014: 64).

In his work *Homo Sacer*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes concentration camps as “the biopolitical paradigm of the West” (Agamben 2013: 10). Agamben locates the roots of biopolitics in Greek political philosophy and connects the concept to the concentration camps of 20th century fascism. According to Agamben, biopolitics is the essence of the hegemonic exercise of power and, consequently, the modern era is simply the generalisation and radicalisation of the existing power system. The indispensable condition for hegemon-

ic power is the existence of a biopolitical body (Lemke 2014: 78).

For Agamben, the distinction between “bare life” (*zōē*) and “political life” (*bios*) is the distinction between the natural and legal existence of the individual (see Lemke 2014: 79). It is mere “bare life” that becomes the political criterion indicative of the suspension of individual rights. *Homo Sacer*, the figure of Roman law that Agamben drew on, is the person for whose killing the murderer is free of charges, since he only exists as a physical entity, having been excommunicated by the society of rights. Agamben follows the traces of *Homo Sacer* in Roman outlaws, those pushed outside of the society in the Middle Ages, and in the prisoners of Nazi camps. As examples of “bare life” today we can include asylum seekers, immigrants and refugees; people of different ethnicity, political thought or belief system; and minorities experiencing repression within nation states. What is common to all is that they remain outside of the realm of legal protection; they are offered humanitarian aid only or are perceived as an indistinguishable mass (Lemke 2014: 79). According to Agamben, in this sense, there is no significant distinction between parliamentary democracies and totalitarian dictatorships, or between liberal constitutional states and authoritarian systems.

With camps, Agamben refers not only to Nazi concentration camps or the centres in which thousands of refugees are gathered today. Camps to him are places where “bare life” is systematically reproduced and where the state of exception becomes the rule. Camps symbolise the border between “bare life” and “political life” and simultaneously consolidate it (Agamben 2013: 168-169). Agamben perceives camps as a “hidden tie” between sovereign power and biopolitics, forged into the exceptional basis of state sovereignty. An analysis of the re-emergence of camps, therefore, provides us with a comprehensive understanding of contemporary politics. While the camp is used to function as a concrete example of displaying the difference between friend and foe, in Agamben’s analysis, it constitutes the “materialisation of the state of exception”, where law and fact or

rule and exception cannot be distinguished from each other (Lemke 2014: 82). In this sense, the places into which ‘the other’ is pushed, such as certain neighbourhoods, suburbs, ghettos, and regions within the country where people of different ethnicities or religious beliefs are contained, can be perceived as camps.

2. The representation of “bare life” in visual culture

Representations of victims of war and forced displacement tend to be highly gendered as Rita Manchanda (2004) has pointed out. Mainstream media and often also art present us with a multitude of images “of helpless and superfluous women and children, dislocated and destitute; uprooted and unwanted” (Manchanda 2004: 4179). Whilst there is a growing body of academic research on women refugees and the ways in which they are particularly affected by violence, abuse and discrimination (Buckely-Zistel and Krause 2017; Freedman, Kivılcım and Özgür Baklacioğlu 2017; Freedman 2016; Ward and Beth 2002), feminist scholars have critiqued visual depictions of women as ‘natural’ victims of military atrocities, arguing that these images effectively transform displaced women from the Global South into a spectacle to be consumed by a Northern public (Kozol 2014).

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière contends that our senses and perceptions are fictionalised creations of an existing system of signification. If we take the system of “biopower” that Rancière talks about, we can observe how, in the popular visual world (media, cinema, photography, television, advertisement), immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are reproduced as “bare life”. In many visuals these people are represented as helpless, suffering, passive bodies, isolated from their original identities, without any sign of their lives prior to their current situation. The new identity that is being constructed for them in popular culture is the asylum seeker, refugee, immigrant, and the other. It is impossible for these people to see

their own “self” when they look at these visuals. People crammed into boats, waiting at borders, within wire fences, and those living in camps live a “bare life”. They are identified with certain objects such as orange life vests, life buoys, foil blankets, wire fences, and tents that become symbols for them. The objects that are washed up on European shores are presented to the audience of print and visual media and become symbolic objects of the mass left to die. Representations of poverty, helplessness, and societal threat or danger are constant components of immigrant, asylum seeker and refugee identity. Countless media representations perpetuate such identity constructions. While the movement of bodies across international borders gains visibility, the “forced displacement” that occurs in Turkey is still covered by a curtain of invisibility. Forced displacement remains among the themes that are forbidden to talk about, see, and touch upon.

However, how does art approach the issue of “displacement” that reaches us through various modes of seeing? Does art repeat the identity constructions we know from mainstream visual media and perpetuate the very language used to talk about migration, refuge, and asylum, or does art help to create different representations and ways of speaking? It is quite risky to approach subjects such as pain, violence, and death in art. When the images created present to the audience a truthful representation of reality through an aesthetic language, there is a risk of transforming it into pleasure – a pornographic image. Aristotle (1995: 16) writes hereto in *Poetics*: “An object that we normally look at with discontent becomes a source of pleasure when it is represented in a completed painting; for instance, the depictions of disgusting animals or corpses.”

As a device that transforms the unrepresented into the represented – that renders the invisible visible – the image has a characteristic of repeating the trauma and violence, which is the result of the mechanisms of representation. Communication studies scholar Zeynep Sayın assesses Adorno’s claim that it is barbaric to write poetry about Auschwitz:

What he meant was that from now on an artistic image could be legitimized only on the verge of bankruptcy; the artistic image that did not reside on the edge of reticence and which does not transform the experience of cruelty into an intellectual milestone, by implying to voice something that resides on the edge of reticence, thickens it, renders it available to use by putting it into circulation. Although Adorno did not phrase it exactly like this, in fact an image of pain or cruelty that is aestheticized without carrying the information of reticence was insistently causing a repetition—without trying to break with repetition—such an insistent repetition was inevitably causing anaesthesia (Sayın 2000: 161)

For Sayın, who denotes anaesthesia as the loss of senses – the opposite of the ability to sense – it is impossible to represent the traumatic experience. The visuals that aim to confront the viewer with the images of suffering and pain, by reproducing them, actually neutralise violence and transform the effect of the aestheticised image into anaesthesia (ibidem.).

In the light of all these arguments against representation, we can look at the anaesthetic effect in some works of contemporary art. One example of anaesthesia is the reproduction by the famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei of the image of the toddler Alan Kurdi on the island of Lesbos, whose dead body had washed up on the shores of the town of Bodrum in Turkey in 2015; the image already occupied a significant place in the social memory of an international public. The feminist scholars Yǎn Lē Espiritu and Lan Duong Duong (2018: 587) have criticised such images as they focus “relentlessly on the trauma and spectacle of war atrocities, freeze-frame the ‘victims’ in time and space, prolonging their pain and agony in perpetuity.” Such images, they argue, produced for the Western viewer, intend to shock by presenting ongoing suffering and misery in the Global South, yet the continual representation of death, injury and starvation simultaneously decontextualises the horrors, eliciting pity and sympathy rather than discernment and assessment (ibidem). Ai Weiwei’s artwork aestheticised the image by suppressing the cruelty of the experience of the boy; thus, the effect of the image was an anaesthetic one.

We can see the anaesthetic effect created by the logic of classical representation in parts of the exhibition “Unexpected Territories”¹ presented at ARTIST İstanbul Art Fair-Tüyap, which invited the audience to think about migration. Some of the exhibited work utilised a similar language and similar identity constructions as mainstream media does for displaced bodies and the phenomenon of migration. The primary themes of the exhibits were women and children waiting behind wire fences with bags in their hands; bodies alongside the facades of a modern city, suggesting a contradiction to their traditional clothing; people waiting in need and poverty; wreckages; destroyed pieces of concrete; ghost-like human figures at sea; the dead; a metaphorical link between immigrants and grasshoppers; the association between a child washed up on the shore and a fish; wire fences and children’s shoes; various visual materials that show children who died in the war or on the road; pictures of diverse objects (especially life buoys and life vests) left behind by immigrants; strung up bodies; dead bodies of children in the water; human bodies jammed into boats or vessels. All these bodies presented to us on screen— which we can designate as “bare life” – contribute to reproducing the logic of representation, irrespective of the intention of the artist.

Zeynep Sayın describes the meaning of representation as follows: “*The eye that looks at the world from a previously detected and classified window, thinks that it confronts a world that is narrated and thinks of itself as safe because it is coming to power over objects*” (Sayın 1998: 15). There is a distance between the image and the spectator in the logic of representation that situates humans in front of a window that opens to the world. Representation is positioned outside of existence – against it. Simultaneously, there is a hierarchy between the representative and the represented. The image is ‘the other’, as opposed to ‘imitation’, which positions itself not against exist-

ence, but inside it. Instead of representing the existence of others and trying to speak on their behalf, imitation wishes to transform into the thing it imitates and, hence, desires to overlap with it, becoming passive, and therefore representing nothing (Sayın 1998: 19).

In his seminal text *The Writing of the Disaster*, the French writer, philosopher, and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot states that for extreme pain to become bearable, passivity sometimes might be the only recourse that enables survival. He says, “*Passivity: we can evoke it only in a language that reverses itself*” (see Direk 2015). Adopting a position of radical passivity and surrendering to unbearable pain, however, turns persons into anonymous beings that merely exist. The French writer and poet of Egyptian origin Edmond Jabès, identifying anonymity with silence, says: “*You do not go to the desert to find who you are, you go there in order to lose your identity, become anonymous. You become silence. You become more silent than the silence around you. And suddenly something extraordinary happens: You hear the silence speak*” (see Direk 2015). This provides us with a deeper understanding of the meaning of Zeynep Sayın’s expression “on the verge of reticence” (which she adapted from Adorno).

When the postcolonial scholar Gayatri C. Spivak, in her influential essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, questions the representation of the Third World subject within Western discourse and states that individuals must distance themselves from their mother tongues in order to be able to contest their status as “subalterns” (Spivak 1988), she probably means something similar. Taking the mother tongue as a constructed mode of understanding and narrating, as long as we do not get rid of it, the subaltern will remain subaltern. Therefore, subalterns will not be able to represent themselves, but will constantly be represented. Subsequently, as “the represented” cannot express themselves, but must resort to representation within an existing, hierarchical system, I want to query if means of action, such as imitation, *passivisation*, and distancing from the mother tongue are able to circumvent the logic of classical representation. In order to elaborate on this, it will be useful to

¹ The multi-curator exhibition was displayed in Tüyap at İstanbul Fair and Congress Center between 12th and 20th November 2016.

consider Rancière's reflections on contemporary art, in which he claims that the logic of classical representation has been revoked.

Rancière contends that despite a century-long dispute over the tradition of mimesis in art, some artists who wish to be artistically and politically critical continue the tradition of representation. When talking about "sensible matter", Rancière (2013: 49) indicates that it is linked to what the existing system of representation renders visible or invisible to us. Thus, all forms of sight, hearing, and perception are fictionalised by an existing order. Therefore, the problem is not merely the ethical and political validity of the message conveyed by the mechanism of representation, but the very mechanism itself (Rancière 2013: 52).

The use of irony is a prominent strategy for attempting to re-politicise contemporary art. However, it is important to scrutinise exactly how it is used. How different is the irony produced by artists from that of the ruling powers or media? The use of irony as a means of critique is frequently found in contemporary art, for instance, in the "Köfte Airlines"² photography project by Halil Altındere. Altındere places refugees on top of an airplane, instead of in a boat or a vessel, thereby playing with the audience's perception of the ordinary in an ironic way. For his project, Altındere used a decommissioned Köfte Airlines Airbus A300 in the city of Tekirdağ that is now used as a restaurant. Altındere states that with his art he intends to call attention to refugees whose rights to travel safely are being violated and to simultaneously highlight the European states' hypocrisy.

If you are a refugee you can only cross the borders of a country illegally and the doors of another country are always closed to you. You can escape in boats and vessels by sea under terrible conditions, paying money to human smugglers, yet you are illegal in all public transportation like the bus, airplane, train or ship. If you are lucky, you can survive and it all happens in front of the eyes of the entire world.³

² Displayed in September 2016 in Berlin.

³ The interview with Halil Altındere was conducted by the author in September 2016.

While Altındere, with this project, wishes to draw attention to the rights violations and abuses that refugees experience in times of crises, when escaping from war-torn countries and seeking safety, he in fact reproduces images similar to those we know from mainstream media. The only difference is that people are not in a boat or vessel but on an airplane. The people in his photography project are real immigrants. However, they remain characters, as their story is not real or important to the art project. We cannot see the faces of the people crammed onto the surface of the plane; they remain a mass of passive bodies, unable to become subjects or speak for themselves. These people are deprived of the social and economic rights that biopolitical regimes offer their populations. Excluded from the sphere of rights and with violation of their right to safe travel, contemporary refugees are an example of how "bare life" is represented in Altındere's photographs. The American political scientist Alyson Cole suggests that "*Our solidarity with the vulnerable must aim for an egalitarian position*" (Cole 2017: 90). Therefore, rather than portraying the suffering body, artwork must seriously engage with the political, legal and economic regimes that produce vulnerability and injury.

3. Approaches that suspend the message

Rancière (2013: 55) sets the "aesthetic regime of art" against representation. The breakdown of the system of representation happens when the artist suspends all messages and the relationship envisioned between the object of art and the audience. The aesthetic impression is one that comes with distance and neutralisation. Rancière criticises "aesthetic distance", identified as gazing while passing out in the face of beauty, as it prevents critical consciousness concerning reality and precludes taking action on the subject; yet, it is significant, as it suspends all direct relationships between the production of artistic forms and the production of an influence over the mass of spectators (Rancière 2013: 53). Hence, the au-

dience can freely encounter the artwork and attribute meanings to it, apart from those initially intended by the artist.

How can an artist then work with what cannot be represented? Today, still, many artists think they maintain a political stance by producing “unbearable images”. Rancière emphasises that the idea that such images are able to raise awareness about certain realities and drive people to take action, is completely unrealistic. Instead, people prefer to close their eyes or look away. What renders a work of art unbearable is not merely its content but also the very mechanism and the mode of seeing in which it resides. Rancière (2013: 90) points out the following in relation to this:

In fact, we do not see many bodies in pain on the screen. What we see is numerous nameless bodies, bodies that are unable to return the looks that we direct towards them, bodies who in spite of not having the right to speak themselves, have become the object of speech.

According to Rancière, what makes art political is the metaphors it utilises. If politics is to change the locations and numbers of bodies, then the metaphors utilised in art become political as well. A political statement is made when the consequences of the exposure to an artwork are considered with foresight and sensitivity to those possibly affected, and when the artwork discloses its motivation and treats the phenomenon it depicts in a contextualised and holistic manner. Certain works manage to exceed the logic of representation that plagues visual culture as critiqued by Rancière.

In their analysis of refugee artwork, Espiritu and Duong (2017) ask if spectacular acts of military atrocity are the markers of violence that we see in common media representations of refugee lives, what are actually the violent acts that remain ‘unrepresented’ and ‘off-screen’. Developing the concept of “feminist refugee epistemology” (ibidem) they reconceptualise war-based displacement, shifting the focus of our attention away from the disruption of an existing social order through war to the continued activities of reproduction, creativity and care. It is not women’s lives per se that are central to their feminist analysis of refugee art, but an

“awareness to routine, intimate and private sites where power is both reproduced and contested” (Kevorkian 2015: 2 cited in Espiritu and Duong 2017). Following Angela Davis (1998), they conceptualise the practices of life making as radical acts of social struggle and freedom that are ignored in contemporary visual media representations of refugee lives, thereby contributing to freeze-frame refugees as victims in a present characterised by suffering and pain. In the following I will analyse an example of an artwork that both exceeds the logic of representation and invokes the intimate (feminist) politics of the everyday.

Fatma Bucak’s 84-piece photography exhibition titled “Remains of what has not been said” and her video performance “Scouring the press”⁴ are about the operation that Turkish security forces conducted in the basement of a house in the town of Cizre in south-eastern Turkey, where nearly one hundred wounded people and asylum seekers were staying on 7th February 2016. The date marks one of the most traumatic incidents of recent Turkish history, as on that same day several massacres were perpetrated in Cizre in different basements. Turkish mainstream media have, to date, remained silent about this issue.⁵ Bucak, herself a Kurdish refugee from the Turkish city of Iskenderun, collected daily newspapers for the 84 days following the operation. For the artwork, she washed the papers, put them into individual jars, dated the jars, and took a picture of each one. In the video performance, the artist washes the newspapers she has collected together with two women, stacking them like hand-washed clothes. While portraying the everyday repro-

⁴ Both projects were displayed in the exhibition “And men turned their faces from there” at Brown University’s David Winton Bell Gallery from 19th November 2016 to 5th February 2017.

⁵ After the end of the period of conflict resolution between the Turkish government and PKK in June 2015, the war was carried to Kurdish cities, and between June 2015 and February 2016 there was a curfew in cities where the armed conflict prevailed. Along with the operations carried out by the army and the police, many civilians died as well. On 7th February 2016, nearly a hundred people were wounded and asylum seekers killed by the security forces in a basement in Cizre. For detailed information see the *United Nations’ Report on the Human Rights Situation in South-East Turkey* (2017).

ductive act of washing clothes, she simultaneously decontextualises the papers, hence stimulating our discernment and critical assessment of the atrocities that have occurred (rather than eliciting the viewer's pity or sympathy). The video also reveals that the dark-coloured, dirty liquid in the jars comes from the newspaper ink.

After the incident, hundreds of fighters and civilians from each side died in Turkish cities in which the armed conflict continued; some of the cities were completely destroyed and people were forcibly displaced. During this period, when the rule of law was suspended, people were divided into those who could and those who could not be mourned. Biopolitics functioned, in this case, to establish a hierarchy of 'races', dividing the biological field of the population into Turkish versus Kurdish. The majority of the society remained silent about the issue, which suggests that the division was approved.

Bucak's artwork narrates disaster with bodies that could not be mourned, destroyed cities, and forced displacement by representing the silence of the news media directly after the massacre. The washed newspapers signify the unreported deaths, the destroyed cities, and displaced bodies that were not publicly spoken about. Bucak's photography exhibition and video performance, in this sense, confront us with silence, they do not speak with us or present to us the pictures of destruction. It is exactly the silence that makes the representation of the disaster viable. The name of the work and the dates written on the jars stand for many things. In this way, Bucak makes us understand the entirety by showing a part; by destroying the logic of classical representation, she destroys the framework in which political art is entrenched. As Rancière puts it, it is not about showing or not showing the cruelty that the victims of displacement or violence have gone through. Just as biopolitics determines who deserves to live and who does not, who deserves to be mourned and who does not, the conventional mode of representation also works according to a mechanism that determines the status of the bodies that are represented and to what extent they deserve attention. In this sense, both artworks by Bucak re-

veal the inequality and inequity of the regimes of biopower and representation.

The concept of belonging is primarily linked to the notion of "home". Home is where we feel we belong socially and spatially. "*Our home is where we belong spatially, existentially and culturally, where the family and the community that we are a part of reside, where we have found our own roots, what we miss when we are in a completely different part of the world.*" (Hedetoft and Hjört cited in Suner 2006: 17). Concepts such as "country", "fatherland", and "homeland" become some kind of extensions of "home". While home is sometimes used as a synonym with the word state, meaning the territory considered an organised political community under the rule of one government, it can also mean "*the place where someone was born, grew up; fatherland*" (Suner 2006: 17). Hence, a "place" becomes a "home" through being referred to as something beyond its mere physical or geographical location. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger identifies "settling" or "dwelling" as existential for the human condition. The transformation of land or territory into a "home" occurs whenever over time a culture establishes roots in a particular place (see Akbalık 2015).

Fatma Bucak's art project "Damascus Rose"⁶ deals with the issues of place, home, root-taking, and displacement, avoiding representations of "displaced bodies" and conceptual frameworks that we are used to. The "Damascus Rose", a rose produced in the area around the Syrian city of Damascus and distributed from there across the world on a major scale, cannot be produced today due to wartime conditions and their negative effects on the soil. One of the problems that accompany war and often go unnoticed is that during war nature and soil face contamination and devastation. Through an artist in Damascus, Bucak has two individuals travel with four packs of rose shoots each. The roses reach Europe and the United States via similar routes to those used by refugees. After fifteen days of travel only two packs

⁶ Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery, from 19th November 2016 to 5th February 2017.

of roses reach their destination. Will these roses be able to take root in the new environment? Taking root in a new country is a process that is as hard as migration itself. Rose seeds are planted in Lausanne and in New York. Some of them manage to root and flower, yet some of them cannot. The art project “Damascus Rose” conveys two things: on the one hand, the flowering of the roses makes the audience feel hopeful, on the other hand, the shoots that do not manage to grow represent how hard it is to adjust to a new place. People who are forced to leave their hometowns must establish a new life in countries in which they are viewed as strangers and often regarded as inferior. The newcomers speak a different language, look different and are, in many contexts, not accepted by the locals. For instance, all recent immigrants and refugees who have come to Turkey are assumed to be “Syrians”. Government-conformist media representations relate Syrians to various kinds of criminal activities, unemployment, and rent increases. Through the use of a language of alienation and the logic of representation, Syrians are placed outside the realm of collective life and their lives are marked as worth less, thereby fuelling hatred against this group and victimising them.

By using a “fragile” young plant instead of migrating bodies in her art project “Damascus Rose”, Bucak emphasises the vulnerability of all that is displaced. Besides, she allows for another problem caused by war to become visible and remembered. War does not only produce negative effects on people but also ruins the existing ecological balance; the chemicals that are used during wars poison water, soil, and air, devastating entire regions, sometimes forever.

According to Mircea Eliade, a Romanian historian, fiction writer, and philosopher “*the exile homeland is the language he or she continues to speak in*”. In this sense, everything written or said in their language is, for the exile or the immigrant, an indicator of their connection with their homeland. Apart from the connection with language, the concept of homeland emphasises a primary, essential, original relation of belonging. This primary relation refers to – as it is in repre-

sented in the vocabulary of some languages – the figure of the “mother”; the mother as the “place” where one comes from. Relationships of belonging are often expressed in relation to the mother figure, as for instance in the terms “mother tongue” and “motherland”.

The artist Pinar Öğrenci’s (2017) video mix titled “Mawtini” – part of her exhibition “Under The Red Sky”⁷ – is concerned with issues of displacement, place, and belonging. İstiklal Street in İstanbul is a significant location where street musicians perform. There, one can hear songs of musicians from all over the world. Recently, Arabic melodies outnumber others. While recording on camera one of the most popular of these melodies, the song “Mawtini”, Öğrenci discovers that the people listening have started to cry and therefore begins to investigate the mystery of this song. The roots of the word “mawtini” stem from “mama”, meaning mother in Arabic and “mawtini” denotes the “motherland”. Öğrenci learns that “Mawtini” is also an anthem. It was originally Palestine’s national anthem, then it became famous. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime, it became Iraq’s official national anthem, turning into a symbol significant for all Arabs. Öğrenci explores the versions of the song available on YouTube, which originate from many different countries and creates a video mix. The video begins with Arab street musicians singing “Mawtini” in İstiklal Street. The crowd gathered around them and cries while listening. The video mix strings together the recordings from various countries, merging the different versions into one single song. The audience watches and listens to many different recordings that overlap with each other, until the song ends.

The audience of Öğrenci’s artwork might be surprised to learn that an ordinary song that can be heard on İstiklal Street has such a history and relevance to the identity of people from the Arab world. Further, the people we see in this video return the looks we direct at them. They use their voice to speak back to us in their own lan-

⁷ The exhibition was displayed between 20th April and 21st May 2017 in the community organisation Depo.

guage and express their identities in their own ways. In their book *A Seventh Man*, the writers John Berger and Jean Mohr (2010: 200) described the influence of music on immigrants as follows:

Music takes hold of the present, divides it up and builds a bridge with it, which leads to the life's time. The listener and singer borrow the music's intentionality and find in it a lost amalgam of past, present and future. Over the bridge, for as long as the music lasts, he passes backwards and forwards. When the music stops, the meaninglessness seeps back. To find the present meaningful is to feel oneself dead and condemned.

Conclusion

Biopolitical regimes based on nation states subalternate particular communities that live within their borders, belonging to a different ethnicity, having a different religion or language. Simultaneously, the ruling powers, which trigger wars and conflicts, marginalise refugees and defectors by reducing them to negotiation objects. The decision over who shall be in- or excluded involves deciding over life and death. In discussing the issues of refugees/defectors, immigration, exile, and borders, we can observe two different types of tendencies in the practise of contemporary art: firstly, there is a tendency to reproduce and reify suffering through conventional forms of representation, and, secondly, there is a tendency to emphasise the necessity of

a borderless world by mourning the individuals sacrificed by religious, racial, or resource wars.

Feminist analyses have critiqued artwork and media representations of refugees for a narrow focus on the spectacular and on experiences of pain and suffering, as well as for freeze-framing their lives to the present. Instead, they have stressed “the coexistence of past, present, and future” (Bryson 2007: 100), underscoring refugees’ multilayered and complicated lives, the ways in which they enact their hopes, beliefs and politics, even when their lives are militarised (Espiritu 2014). Focusing on the unseen and unspectacular(ised), feminist analysis emphasises the recognition of the hidden political forces inherent in intimate domestic and familial interactions as possibly radical acts of social struggle and freedom.

I have shown that selected artwork successfully avoided the trap of classical representation in visual art, and resisted the objectification of refugees and their bodies, thereby re-centring the viewers’ focus away from feelings of horror, pity or sympathy to discernment and critical assessment of (gendered) refugeehood, including both the psychological and material realities of refugee precarity.

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Commentary

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The numbers of people on the move worldwide – the UN has just released the figure of 68 million for 2018 – seems to be extraordinary high in a world that is socially and politically organised into nation states. This compartmentalisation is culturally reproduced to such an extent that the concept of ethnic identity has occupied our self-perception, regardless of whether we position ourselves in political terms as right or left.

Güler İnce draws our attention to the question of (artistic) representation; how these people on the move, who we are used to speaking of as “migrants”, “refugees” and “displaced”, and who have increasingly been thought of in terms of “bare life” (Giorgio Agamben) are being brought into representation. Thereby, İnce rests her analysis of different artistic installations on Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, in its necropolitical dimension, and on Giorgio Agamben’s homo sacer, both focusing on racialised dimensions of a “politics of life” (Didier Fassin) that increases “*the risk of death for some people or in a simpler manner political death, deportation, exclusion...*” (see İnce above).

Much has been said about the problem of this kind of over-generalisation of Giorgio Agamben’s work erasing the notion of agency (Kim Rygiel 2011), but even more important is an underlying understanding of migration that on a theoretical/conceptual level replicates the empirically studied exclusion and silencing of migrants through the notion of “bare life”. And this can also be seen in İnce’s discussion of the artistic representations of migration – backed by a common reading of the postcolonial trope of the “subaltern” – that migrants “cannot express

themselves” within the existing regimes of sight (see İnce above). Certainly, the reproduction of a victimising and culturalist reductionist gaze, conceptualising migration only as suffering and loss is widespread, and in fact, under current political conditions, border-crossing is increasingly confronted with the threat of death by the means of the border regime. However, we do not need a “rose” as in İnce’s positively discussed art project “Damascus Rose” to symbolise the experience of forced migration and exile, as there are so many outspoken narratives of, for instance, Syrian migrants themselves. Why don’t we – as scientists and artists – listen to them and collaboratively create spaces for self-representation? There is voice in exile (and not only culture!) and exit itself has to be understood as a practice of resistance, and hence agency. Amidst the enlarging spaces of exception and the emerging hegemony of a politics of death against global migration movements, we should remember concepts such as Asaf Bayat’s (2010) “nonmovements”. With nonmovements he points to the multitude of small acts of refusal and resistance of ordinary people that on an everyday level, in sum, as a multitude, triggers strength, and hence change, without a clear centre. The migration movements that managed to pull down different layers of the border regime in 2015 – and to a much lesser extent still do – have clearly shown similar characteristics. We have to grasp this.

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