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Memory as experience in times of perpetual violence: the challenge of Saturday Mothers vis-à-vis cultural aphasia

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Abstract

The 1990s saw major developments within the Kurdish movement in Turkey, both politically and militarily. The Turkish state responded with a new repertoire of violence, characterized by irregular warfare methods. This article situates the phenomenon of enforced disappearance, employed by the state as part of its asymmetric strategy, within the broader context of memory space and everyday experience. For this, I follow the trajectory of the sittings of Saturday Mothers as performances, focusing on the case of Cizre. First, the phenomenon of enforced disappearance is situated within the historical background of the Kurdish conflict in the 1990s. Then, the Cizre and Istanbul Saturday Mothers' sittings are compared in terms of memory making and the politico-symbolic sites they produce scrutinized as memory knots (*nœuds de mémoire*), tying the past to present and personal to political. Finally, I endorse the introduction of a novel term, cultural aphasia, to broaden and deepen the memory debate. Thus, through a focus on human and social relations, emotions and experiences, forms of state violence are revealed as continuously reproducing specific political subjectivities and struggles in everyday life.

Keywords: Cultural aphasia; Enforced disappearance; Memory making; State violence; Saturday Mothers

Abstract in Kurmanji

Bîrewerî wekî tecrubeyek di demên tundiya domdar de: vexwendina meydanê ya Dayikên Şemiyê ya li hemberî afaziyaya çandî

Salên 1990an di tevgera Kurdî ya li Tirkiyeyê de hem ji bêla siyasî û hem jî ya leşkerî ve bûn şabidê pêşveçûnê mezin. Dewleta Tirk bi repertuwareke tundî ya nû ku xwedî karaktera rêbazên şerê bêpergal bû bersiv da. Ev gotar, diyardeya kujernediyariyê ku dewletê ew wekî perçeyê stratejiya xwe ya asîmetrîk bikar diantî, di qadeke firehtir a bîreweriyê de û di çarçoveya tecrubeya jiyana rojane de dinirxîne. Ji bo vê yekê, bi hûrgilîbûna li ser mînaka Cizîrê, ez reşya ronîstinên Dayikên Şemiyê wekî performans dişopînim. A yekem, diyardeya kujernediyariyê di paşxana dîrokê ya pêçûna Kurdan a 1990an de hatiye bicibkirin. Piştî, ronîstinên Dayikên Şemiyê yê Cizîrê û Stembolê ji bêla çêkirina bîreweriyê ve tîr berawirdkirin û cihên siyasî-sembolîk ku ava kirine, ew cih, wekî girêkên bîreweriyê (*nœuds de mémoire*) ku do bi îro ve û takekesiyê bi siyasî ve girê dide tîr lêkolîn. Herî dawî, ji bo berfirehkirin û hûrgilîkirina nîqaşa bîreweriyê ez bikaranîna termekê nû ya bi navê afaziyaya çandiyê guncan dibînim. Ji ber vê yekê, bi hûrgilîbûneke li ser tîkiliyên mirov û civakîyan, hest û tecrubeyan tîr dîtin ku şevazên tundiya dewletê di jiyana rojane de bi awayekî domdarî bi çêkirina kirdewarî û têkoşînê siyasî yê taybet eşkere dibin.

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Abstract in Sorani

Bîrewerî wek ezmûnêk le katî tundutîjî berdewamda: berengarî daykanî şemme beramber lallî kultûrî

Deyey newetekan pêşkentîni serekî lenaw bizavî kurdî le turkya, lerrîy siyasî û serbaziyewê, be xowê dît. Dewletî turk be kerestey tazey tundutîjîyewê, ke be mitodî cengî narrêk denasrêtewê, wellamî dayewê. Em wîtare diyardey winbûnî zoremlê dexaterrû ke wek beşêk le sîtratîjî nahawsengîyaney dewletda û le çwarçêwey firawantirî fezay yadewerî û ezmûnî rojaneda bekarhatuwe. Bo emêş, be sernic xistne ser keysî cezîre, min şwên pêy rêçkey nîmayîşî danîştnekanî daykanî şemme heldegrim. Yekem , diyardey winbûnî zoremlê dekenwête naw paşxanî mējîyî kēşey kurd le deyyey newetekanda. Dwatir, berawirdî nêwan danîştnekanî daykanî şemmey cezîre û estenboll le rîy yadawerîsazî dekat we ew pêge siyasî-sîmbolîyaney berhemî dênin wek grêy bîrewerî depîşkinêt, (nœuds de mémoire) bestnewey rabirdû be êstave w kesî be syasîyewê. Le kotayîda, bo firawankirdin û quilkirdnewey dîbeytî yadewerî, pêşkeşkirdnî zaraweyekî naban, lallî kultûrî, pesend dekem. Bemcore, le rêgey tîşk xistneser peywendîye mirovî û komellayetîyekan, soz û ezmûnêkan, şevêkanî tundutîjî dewlet wek dúbare berhemhênanewey berdenamî babetî û xebatî siyasî diyarîkraw le jyanî rojaneda aşkera dekerêt.

Abstract in Zazaki

Wextê şîdetê bêpeynî de xatira bena tecrube: duştê afazîya kulturkîye de mucadeleyê Mayanê Şemeyî

Serranê 1990an de tergerê kurdan Tirkîya de xeylê averşîyayîşê girsî dîyê, hem hetê sîyasetî ra hem kî hetê leşkerîye ra. Dewleta tırke bi repertuarê şîdetî yo newe cewab da ci, taybetmendîye kî usûlê cengî yê bêserûberî bîyî. Na meqale fenomenê vîndîkerdîşanê zoraniyan ke hetê dewlete ra sey parçeyê stratejîya xo ya asîmetrîke xebitînyayî, ey keno zereyê kontekstê hîrayî yê xatirgeh û tecrubeyanê rojaneyan. Seba naye, ez sey performansî raywanîya ronîştîşanê Mayanê Şemeyî taqîb kena, tede giranî dana Cizîre ser. Verê, fenomenê vîndîkerdîşanê zoraniyan zereyê tarîxê lejê kurdan ê 1990an de ca beno. Dima, ronîştîşê Mayanê Şemeyî yê Cizîre û İstanbulî hetê xatirasazîye û nîşangehanê sîyasîyan ra yenê têveronayene ke sey girîyê xatirayan (nœuds de mémoire) etud benê û vîyarteyî bestnenê nikayî, şexsî kî bestnenê sîyasî. Peynîye de, ez wazena termêko newe bidî naskerdene: afazîya kulturkîye. Wina munaqeseyê xatirayan bibo hîrayêr û xorînêr. Coka giranî dîyena têkilîyanê komel û insanan, hîs û tecrubeyan ser ke tewirê şîdetê dewlete eşkera bibê sey subjektîvîyî û mucadeleyanê cuya rojanî yê sîyasîyanê taybetîyan ê ke timûtîm xo zêde kenê.

Introduction

Suphiye Durgut is the wife of Süleyman Durgut, who was forcibly disappeared on July 14, 1994 in Cizre. She was 29 when her husband was disappeared, and she has since struggled hard to look after her family, raise her six children, and continue her everyday life. She also weaved a politico-symbolic thread of resistance into her resilience, melancholy, and care, with her acts of remembrance, for Suphiye Durgut attended each and every sitting of the Saturday Mothers in Cizre.

The action of the Saturday Mothers (Kurdish: *Dayîkên Şemîyê*; Turkish: *Cumartesi Anneleri*)—is a silent sit-in protest where the wives and mothers of the disappeared gather each Saturday in Cizre center. They hold the photographs of their vanished relatives, those who were forcibly disappeared, often tortured and generally assassinated by state-supported forces and paramilitaries. Holding up the photograph of her husband, disappeared and presumed dead,

is a profound act of commitment for Suphiye, something sacred. “When you kill someone,” she explains, “you are destroying a sculpture made by God.”²

This article situates the phenomenon of enforced disappearance within a broader context of state violence, memory space, and everyday experience. To this end, I follow the trajectory of the sit-in protests of the Saturday Mothers in Cizre, a city in the province of Şırnak on the River Tigris, close to the Iraqi border. The performances of the Saturday Mothers of Cizre, I will argue, not only reveal quotidian and resilient forms of political mobilisation and acts of memory-making, but also highlight patterns of state violence, colonial hierarchies, and the dialectics of secrecy and visibility. Thus, I seek to unpack these different components embedded in the act of forcibly disappearing people.

First, I will analyse the historical background of the 1990s, when the Kurdish conflict with the Turkish state entered a new phase and rose to a new level of violence. I situate the phenomenon of enforced disappearance within this phase, with a specific emphasis on Cizre. Then, I will explore the trajectory and the performances of the Saturday Mothers and scrutinize the politico-symbolic sites they produce as *nœuds de mémoire* (lit.: knots of memory). My aim is to reveal some of the political subjectivities and struggles produced and reproduced by the response to different forms of state violence in the context of various temporalities in everyday life, focusing on human and social relations, networks, emotions, and experiences.

The findings analysed here are based on fieldwork carried out at the Truth Justice Memory Center (*Hakikat Adalet Hafıza Merkezi*), a national NGO focusing on human rights violations in Turkey, where I worked as the Director of the Memory Studies Program. The empirical findings are derived from 248 semi-structured interviews (188 in Kurdish and 60 in Turkish) conducted between 2012 and 2015, together with four focus group discussions, mostly with the relatives of the disappeared but also with lawyers, politicians, and activists. This fieldwork was conducted in Kurdish cities such as Diyarbakır, Şırnak, Mardin, and Batman, as well as in Istanbul. For the purposes of this article, I focus on the interviews related to Cizre. I also draw on my personal observations of Saturday Mothers sittings that I attended over an extended period in Cizre and Istanbul. In addition, I have analysed the press releases of the Istanbul Saturday Mothers (2009–20) and Cizre Saturday Mothers, obtained either through the *Hafıza Merkezi* archive or through other online resources.

Finally, I should note that the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted at different political junctures during the still unresolved conflict. They would certainly be quite different in many aspects were they to be repeated today. However, the main responses and statements made by the interviewees remain highly pertinent in respect to their general approaches to memory-making efforts. These perspectives were formed through deep experiences that extended and developed over a long time. Indeed, the recent turn of events—in which the conflict flared up once again and was again characterised by extreme state violence—has only, on the whole, sharpened memories and further contributed to a sense of perpetual violence.

² Interview, Cizre, September 2013.

Background: armed conflict, state violence, and memory-making

The conflict in Turkey between the Kurdish Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK*)³ and the Turkish armed forces commenced in 1984 and has thus shaped and reshaped the country's political and cultural landscape for well over three decades now. It has not only constructed the political space through its different forms of violence, with the wide-ranging repertoire of state oppression, the guerrilla actions and military confrontations, and the secretive, off-on political negotiations, but it has also established a contentious space of memory, narrative, and truth. It was in the 1990s that this conflict gained momentum, with a massive wave of politicisation and mobilisation throughout Kurdistan. In other words, there was a constant increase in popular support for the guerilla forces in the region (which began to control large swathes of territory in the rural areas (Jongerden, 2007)), the emergence of new collective challengers voicing politico-legal demands (that were closely aligned to the PKK's political program (Watts, 2014)), and the formal entry into the political arena of the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi, HEP*) (Ölmez, 1995).⁴

This political conjunction was interpreted as a period of *sovereignty crisis*⁵ by the state apparatus, and a novel counter-insurgency politics was implemented in response. The regime of State of Emergency (*Olağanüstü Hal, OHAL*), in which a regional governorship was instituted and equipped with very wide-ranging powers, brought a shield of impunity for state forces. The acts and practices of state agents operating under the jurisdiction of the governorship were taken outside the sphere of law (Human Rights Watch, 1990: 13–16). Meanwhile, the military apparatus was restructured for asymmetric warfare, with newly established counterinsurgency groups involving the participation of Kurdish ex-guerilla fighters (“repentants”) and village guards (civilians enrolled for state militia activities)⁶ alongside state security and intelligence personnel. A novel and crucial state actor appeared on the scene, named the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counterterrorism Unit (*Jandarma İstihbarat ve Terörle Mücadele Birimi, JITEM*).

Although JITEM's existence was denied for many years, this semi-formal organisation became more active and prominent following the end of a ceasefire that had been called in 1993. Thereafter, the team of the then President Süleyman Demirel, Prime Minister Tansu Çiller, and Chief of General Staff Doğan Güreş, introduced a special counterinsurgency security strategy entitled “Territorial Dominance and the Expulsion of the PKK from the Region,” aiming to cut the strategic link between the civilian population and the guerillas. As a direct result of this major shift in strategy, there was a surge in the number of enforced disappearances, extra-judicial and arbitrary killings, and overall gross human rights violations perpetrated on the civilian population (Tezcür, 2010: 780; Göral, Işık and Kaya, 2013: 18–21).

As one of the most ancient settlements in the Şırnak region, and a particularly active center for political struggle within the ideological and political hinterland of the PKK, Cizre became

³ For the ideological roots, and political trajectory of the PKK see. Joost Jongerden, and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya. “Born from the Left: The making of the PKK.” In *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, edited by Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden, 123-142. London New York: Routledge, 2011; Hamit Bozarslan, “Neden Silahlı Mücadele?: Türkiye Kürdistanı'nda Şiddeti Anlamak.” In *Türkiye'de Siyasal Şiddetin Boyutları*, edited by Güney Çeğin ve İbrahim Şirin, 149-164. Istanbul: İletişim, 2014.

⁴ For the concept of the new collective challengers, see. Nicole F. Watts, Sandıkla Meydan Okumak, *Türkiye'de Kürtlerin Siyasal Yolculuğu* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014), 85-113.

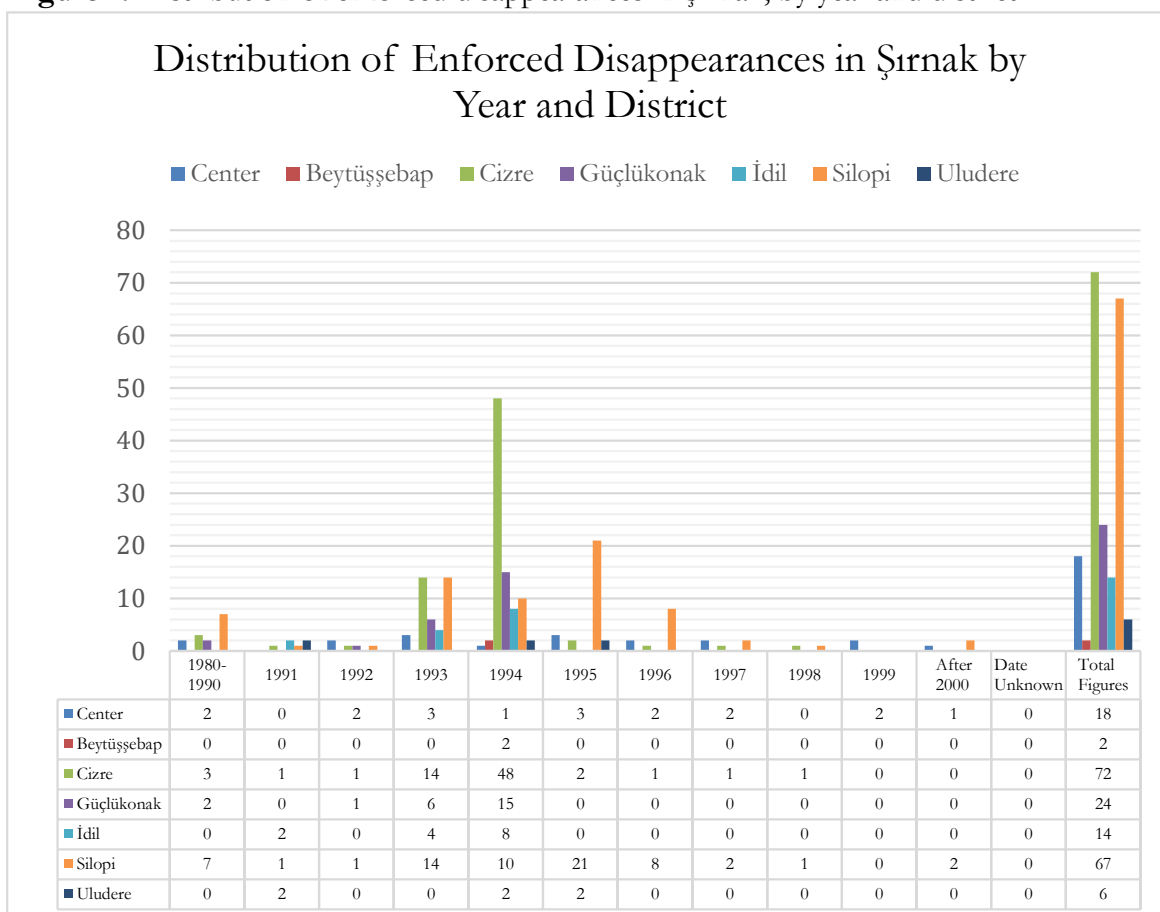
⁵ For an analysis of the notion of sovereignty in its complex and contradictory forms see. Thomas Blom Hansen, and Finn Stepputat. “Sovereignty Revisited.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35, (2006): 295-315.

⁶ For an analysis of the village guard system see Balta, Yüksel, and Acar 2015.

a crucial site of politicisation and, consequently, an immediate target of state violence. A broad spectrum of forms of state violence were implemented in Cizre during the 1990s, which became a “center” of enforced disappearance. These disappearances targeted members (known or alleged) of the PKK’s militia and, more generally, those who were active in the Kurdish political movement. Particularly vulnerable were those that supported Kurdish armed groups logistically and worked to establish military and political links among the guerillas and local people.

According to a tentative list prepared by *Hafıza Merkezi*, some 203 people were forcibly disappeared in Şırnak between the 1980 coup d’état, which signaled the beginning of armed conflict, and 2015. As shown in Figure 1, enforced disappearances were implemented throughout the province during the 1990s, but this was concentrated in the mid-decade period starting from 1993, in line with the new counterinsurgency strategy. Systematic disappearances in Şırnak declined after 1996, although the practice was not totally stopped until the first decade of the 2000s. As the chart also shows, the district of Cizre is where the largest number of disappearances were perpetrated in Şırnak. A total of 72 people were forcibly disappeared from Cizre during the period covered. Süleyman Durgut was one of those individuals.

Figure 1. Distribution of enforced disappearances in Şırnak, by year and district



Source: Göral, 2017: 112.

From the outset of the deadly counterinsurgency strategies and the implementation of the program of enforced disappearances, those affected worked to find the bodies, hold the

perpetrators accountable, and preserve their memory. Enforced disappearances and other forms of state violence implemented during the 1990s were perpetrated on a people whose experiences were already suppressed, distorted or ignored by the hegemonic national and collective Turkish memory. However, they were not only passive receivers of these omissions and suppressions; they actively participated in a struggle over memory. The resulting manifestations, public gatherings, and political claims thus produced different forms of memory-making and commemorations in the already contentious memory space of the Republic of Turkey. One of the most important symbols of memory-making was the gatherings of Saturday Mothers.

“Until my last breath, after the end of this world”: the Saturday Mothers

Organised and participated in by relatives of the disappeared, the Saturday Mothers stands as one of the longest and most important civil initiatives of memory in Turkey. It was first organised on May 27, 1995, at Galatasaray Square, on İstiklal Street, a prime location in the downtown area of Taksim, which is a central part of the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul. Galatasaray Square is frequently used by human rights activists. The origins of the protest lay in the search for one of the forcibly disappeared in Istanbul, Hasan Ocak, which ended when his tortured body was found in a common grave.⁷

While Hasan Ocak’s relatives and human rights activists, mainly from the Human Rights Association (*İnsan Hakları Derneği*, İHD), were looking for him, they found in the registers of the Forensic Medicine Institute, by mere coincidence, some documents referring to another disappeared person, Rıdvan Karakoç (Göral, Işık, and Kaya, 2013: 55). On May 27, 1995, inspired by *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and with the leadership of Hasan Ocak’s family, human rights defenders and families of the disappeared gathered in Galatasaray Square and began the sittings of Saturday Mothers, or People (Günaysu, 2013).⁸

The Saturday Mothers would gather every Saturday at noon, sitting on the cobbled ground with the photographs of the disappeared in their hands, silently demanding to learn what had happened and to have those responsible brought to a court of law. The action was repeated each week at the same time and place, occasionally with red clover in hand; there were no slogans, just photographs, stories of the disappeared, and a final press declaration emphasising the demand for truth and justice. Despite constant state pressure—suffering violent police interventions in the sittings, being taken into custody, and being severely criminalised and threatened by various institutions—the participants continued their silent vigil for 200 weeks. During this period, the Saturday Mothers became one of the most important civil initiatives in Turkey, prompting people from widely differing political stances to examine the phenomenon of disappearances.⁹

The Saturday Mothers can thus be regarded as a local response to Turkey’s Kurdish issue, manifesting the struggle over memory in the context of the conflict at the time, the mid-1990s.

⁷ Disappeared on March 21, 1995, Hasan Ocak was actively involved in a radical leftist organization and was a widely known local political figure in his neighborhood. Ocak’s body was found on March 26, in a forest outside the city; even though an investigation was conducted there, the body went unidentified and was interred in a common grave. His family was able to identify him from the records of the Forensic Medicine Institute and located the severely tortured body two days later (İHD, 1994).

⁸ According to the initial organizers, “*Saturday People*” was first used; feminists participating in the organization of the first sittings had insisted on this name. Although a little inaccurate, the popularly known name of “*Saturday Mothers*” is mostly used here for ease of reference and because it is used as standard in Cizre, the case studied.

⁹ For a comprehensive account of the commencement of Saturday Mothers/People see Günaysu, 2013.

The 1990s and, more broadly, the post-Cold War period was generally marked by this endeavor of facing past atrocities and a struggle for the democratisation of collective memories. Conflicts of memory in Spain and France, over the civil war and colonial experience respectively, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the fall of junta regimes in South America, all represent this global struggle for the establishment of a new and more pluralist memory tendency (Rousso, 2016: 272).

Argentina is one of the most significant examples of this trend in the sense that it was the leading country in the struggle for the disappeared, producing the iconic political figures of the *Plaza de Mayo* Mothers and Grandmothers. Scrutinising these women's performances, Diana Taylor (2003: 171) pointed out the huge impact of the demonstrations, which created a new form of protest. The peculiar combination of gender, family, and politics brought together statements of intimate and personal experience with political utterances in the public realm.

Following this Argentinian model, the Saturday Mothers in Turkey created their own peculiar form of protest, revealing critical insights into the phenomenon of disappearance. By displaying symbolic gestures and treating politics as a performance—including, always giving the front place in the sitting to the families of the disappeared, telling the story of one forcibly disappeared each week, using the formalised personal details and depiction of the time and place of the disappearance, and reiterating the names of the perpetrators and the responsible political authorities—the silent sittings also served to produce a public memory of the disappearances. Significantly, the protests meant that one of Istanbul's most important spaces became haunted by the figure of the disappeared.

A number of performative, even iconic, aspects of the Saturday Mothers' protests – the photographs of the disappeared, the Kurdish mothers sat at the front in their black or white headscarves, and the endless reiteration of the stories of the disappeared and the names of the perpetrators – strengthened the impact of the action. Although the protests in Turkey were similar to those in Argentina in several ways, the latter case followed an army coup in the capital and represented mostly an urban and educated middle-class stratum of Argentinian society. In the case of Turkey, however, those forcibly disappeared after 1990, individuals supposedly connected to the insurrectionist PKK, were mostly Kurds, living in the geographical and societal margins. Memory struggle for the relatives of the disappeared in Kurdistan, therefore, had a more complicated structure due to the ethnic identities and political affiliations of the disappeared. Despite the powerful effect they were able to achieve, on March 13, 1999, the sittings were suspended by the families due to the severe repression endured (Ocak, 2016).

On January 31, 2009, the Saturday Mothers/People sittings recommenced in Istanbul, following the drafting of the indictment of the Ergenekon and Balyoz cases, two high-profile legal actions in which high-ranking military officers were accused of plotting against the government and organising a coup (Avşar: 2013, 33–159). Since perpetrators of the enforced disappearances were reckoned to be among the accused, the primary demand of the Saturday protests was this time the extension of these legal cases to include the crime of forcible disappearance. It was therefore a concrete demand for accountability and justice that initiated the recommencement. Following the action in Istanbul, building on the momentum gained as a result of the Ergenekon and Balyoz cases, Saturday actions were held in a number of Kurdish cities, including Diyarbakır, Batman, Yüksekova and Cizre.

The Saturday Mothers of Cizre and *noeuds de mémoire*

Meltem Ahıska (2014: 164) defined the memory-making process of the Saturday Mothers as the creation of a *counter space*, in the sense that it appropriated the public space with a countermovement. Based on Cynthia Milton's deployment of the notion of *memory knots*, which "make the engagement with the past and the memorialization of traumas intensely difficult," Ahıska argues that two aspects are crucial in Turkey: the knots have a spatiality (being embedded in specific geographical areas) and point out the lack of language for the people afflicted by violence—hence, the countermovement of Saturday Mothers as a spatial appropriation (ibid.: 165–66). I will also use the concept of *noeuds de mémoire* for a deeper understanding, but I will be following Michael Rothberg's definition (2010: 7):

[Memory is] 'knotted' in all places and acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction. Performances of memory may well have territorializing or identity-forming effects, but those effects will always be contingent and open to re-signification.

I argue that, notwithstanding the spatial appropriation of the Saturday Mothers in Cizre, their performance exceeds all sorts of identitarian reductions through a specific elaboration of the personal and the political during their performances. The memory knots they make tie the personal with the political, as well as the past to the present (and future).

Cizre's Saturday Mothers are and always have been quite different from the protesters in Istanbul. In the metropolis, there is a heterogeneous crowd comprised of relatives of the disappeared, human rights defenders, activists, and politicians, whereas the crowd is much more homogeneous in the predominantly Kurdish city, comprising mainly of wives and mothers of the disappeared. Around 20-30 women, wearing the traditional black burkas of Cizre, gather each Saturday in front of the central police station. There is no formal turn-taking for telling stories of the disappeared, which is in contrast to Istanbul, where the choice is made prior to the demonstration by an İHD committee. The gatherings at Cizre still exhibit an informal arrangement, however; approximately five relatives narrate their stories each week.

The person narrating her story stands up while the others stay seated on the ground showing their photographs. Sometimes they carry more than one photograph. If, for some reason, a relative is unable to go to the demonstration themselves, she organises for the photograph to be sent, and the others will show it for her. The women call these sittings "holding-up-the-photograph" (*Fotograf rakirin* [Kurdish]). During the Cizre narrations, plainclothes police, mostly two officers dressed as civilians, watch the action and videotape the group. After the sitting, these police officers ask someone chosen from the crowd to translate what has been said into Turkish.

There is no determined hour for the sitting of Saturday Mothers in Cizre as there is in Istanbul. The weather may be extremely hot in Cizre, so they alter the gathering time in line with the seasons. During the summer, the Cizre gatherings tend to occur toward nine o'clock in the morning, whereas in the fall the Mothers gather around lunch-time. At the end of the sitting, the press release is read. This is far shorter and plainer than the one read in Istanbul, and the reading is performed by a man from the local Mesopotamia Solidarity with the Relatives of

the Disappeared Association (*Mezopotamya Yakınlarını Kaybedenlerle Dayanışma Derneği*, MEYA-DER).¹⁰

Bearing witness, bearing pain

Suphiye Durgut's husband, Süleyman, was detained several times by the Cizre JITEM team before his disappearance, on July 14, 1994. Reportedly, the JITEM team tortured him extensively: he was stripped and beaten, then put in cold water, and parts of his body were cut with blades; members of the team put out their cigarettes on his body, gave him electric shocks and forced him to drink his own urine. As an *imam* and thus firm believer, he pleaded for help in the name of God and the Prophet Mohammed during these sessions. Members of JITEM team responded by saying that there was no God or Prophet Mohammed there and continued.¹¹ Suphiye had wished that her husband would be killed once and for all rather than being subjected to these torture sessions, and she expressed as much during one Saturday Mothers sitting when it was her turn to speak.

Almost all the participants and attendees at the Cizre events are women, except for a smattering of men looking on from MEYA-DER or the Kurdish movement. The Cizre Saturday Mothers thus disclose the gendered aspect of memory-making and mourning processes in a striking manner. Although the majority of the first protestors in the context of Istanbul's Saturday Mothers/People were women too, the individuals gathering there comprised a much more mixed group. In Cizre also, the women are mostly wives, who narrate their stories very often swearing to God that they will continue to look for their disappeared until their last breath, after the end of this world. Clearly, this establishes a powerful iconography.

Against the discriminatory distribution of mourning in the public sphere (Butler, 2009: 75), these Saturday women claim to be the bearers of memory and mourning in the public sphere, but their exercise in memory and mourning are quite differently characterised to that of the metropolis. The dress code of the Cizre women reflects a religious belonging, and their use of the Kurdish language as the sole language of narration establishes their ethnopolitical position. They narrate the stories of their loved ones, name the perpetrators and ask for justice, tell their experiences of hard work after the disappearance and ask after the whereabouts of their loved ones. This narrative borrows from the power of the intimate social relations in the sense that they narrate the specific catastrophe of the disappearance through a language of the *truncated family*.¹²

Radically different from widowhood, however, the narration of these women is expressed in the peculiar horror of disappearance, through the liminality imposed. These are women (partially) unrecognised as widows, and thus without the attached status, caring for children who transcend the category of orphan. The absence of a grave to visit on the requisite holy days is a constant wound in the familial memory. Thus, the narrative of the truncated family, mainly the narration of the suffering and struggle of women and children, becomes sayable according to the political specification of the disappearance; otherwise, these kinds of issues would be closed to the public gaze, kept as secrets of the familial life.

¹⁰ MEYA-DER is a grassroots organisation established in the Kurdish region in 2007 to support relatives of the disappeared in their daily struggle and create networks of solidarity among the families.

¹¹ Interview, Cizre, September 21, 2013.

¹² Gatti (2012) indicates a very similar use of the concept of family in the Argentinian context.

The peculiar catastrophe and liminality of disappearance are constantly reiterated by the Cizre Saturday Mothers during their sittings. This notion of liminality, the ambiguous status of both the disappeared and the wife and children of the disappeared, is mainly narrated through an emphasis on the absence of the grave. The women stress that they want to have the bones of their loved ones (*Em bestiyê xwe dixwazîn*). The horrible despair created by the absence of a grave, and the eternal uncertainty about the fate of the disappeared, is expressed through some commonly repeated themes and enduring concerns, namely the impossibility of putting flowers on the grave or praying there together with the children.

The performance of Saturday Mothers is essentially based on repetition. The same demands are always made, the same stories narrated, and the names of the same perpetrators are spoken—and the theme of the absence of a grave is indeed one of the determinant themes in this ritual of remembrance. The absence of graves also shapes the lives of Saturday Mothers in a more material fashion since they follow closely each and every excavation, all mass grave and other sorts of unearthings. The possibility of finding a grave is, in a way, a hopeful event since it would end the painful uncertainty about the disappeared (Göral, 2013: 75). The demand for a proper grave, therefore, is an urgent call for the *re-humanisation* of the disappeared through the recognition of his dignity and his family's right to mourn properly.

The mourning is omnipotent, though. Mourning is performed and displayed through a gendered division of labor not only during the sittings of Saturday Mothers but also in the course of everyday life in Cizre. Wearing solely black headscarves and clothes, not attending weddings or feasts, not laughing, marrying children without ceremony, and not participating in any public celebration were the most common symbolic performances that I witnessed. There were also other recurrent characteristics—such as a sense of shame when feeling happy, swearing to God to never forget the disappeared, even after death, and talking with the disappeared for hours in the night—which might all be interpreted as personal performances of mourning. As the carriers of mourning, the Saturday Mothers were ceaselessly performing symbolic and material acts to prove that they did not forget, despite a “public prohibition of mourning” (Nichanian, 2003: 112).

Attending closely to the press statement and speeches of the Saturday Mothers of both Istanbul and Cizre reveals another dissimilarity between the two. In Istanbul, the tone of the press statements and individual speeches of the relatives of the disappeared is very much in line with the hegemonic human rights discourse of Turkey's oppositional circles. In Cizre, however, the metalanguage of human rights does not prevail. Firstly, as noted—and except for the brief press statement read at the end of the sitting—all the women speak in Kurdish. These speeches in Kurdish do not, therefore, speak to the political center of Turkey. There is no recourse to the vocabulary of rights but rather a unique amalgam of quotidian experiences, religious curses, commitment to the affiliation of the disappeared, and a more political statement elaborated with experiences of everyday life. The women making these speeches are well aware that they are at the margin; instead of formulating a call to the state they intone words of loyalty, commitment, experience, and political belonging.

Memory as experience

Along with the loss of the grave, another crucial component of the narratives of the Saturday Mothers is the emphasis on economic difficulties. In Cizre, the absence of the disappeared was always remembered through economic difficulties, since the area is generally poor and, in

most cases, the disappeared was the breadwinner of the house. After the disappearance, according to their own words, the women were kneading dough for other people, milling their grains, and becoming their cook; they were going to others' farms for work when their breasts were full of milk for their infants and then emptying their breasts in these farms; they were selling the milk and its cream from their sheep, doing farm-work with their children after they had grown up, collecting cotton and nuts; they were doing all the hard labor from Iraq to Van, being among Turks, being among *those who killed us*; doing everything that men were doing and thus *becoming men* (Kaya and Bozkurt, 2014: 28–62).

Thus, the experiences and feelings of the families of the disappeared, the feelings of absence and catastrophe, were always intertwined with other experiences, such as poverty, discrimination, and suffering due to social class differences. As argued by Diane Nelson (2006: 118) in the context of Guatemala, “[W]e must always think of inter/actions among the imagined and lived body of the bleeding nation, between indigenous rights and the project of nation building, among class war, race war and utopian imaginings, of the simultaneity of modernity and tradition, and between real bodies and social fantasy, solidarity and critique.”

The memory of the disappearance was similarly constructed through several interactions; the disappeared and the disappearance were always remembered in a complicated network of labour, politics, everyday experiences, discrimination, and poverty. Thus, the disappearance, instead of standing alone in the family history as a moment of tragedy now passed, was situated within a complicated, reverberating nexus of acts and experiences. Narratives of women, therefore, reflected a peculiar pendulum of the personal and the political; aspects of the personal were always narrated in an interwoven manner with aspects of the political.

While depicting the melancholy, loneliness and sense of loss following a disappearance, or the fruitless and interminable search for justice, suddenly, reference would also be made to the release of Abdullah Öcalan or the return of the PKK guerrillas in dignity. The raising of children in severe economic difficulties was easily and swiftly directed to a discussion of the political contentions around education in the mother tongue, one of the main demands of the Kurdish movement in Turkey denied by the state. The story of a family moving to another city in Kurdistan was narrated in connection with the demands of the Kurdish movement for “democratic autonomy” under a new constitution. The political was thus constantly expressed through the narrative of the mundane details of everyday life. The famous motto of the feminist movement, that the personal is political, was specifically elaborated by the wives of the disappeared, both in the same manner as in the women’s movements, but also in an idiosyncratic way that combined the acknowledgment of the disappearance and the ethno-political conflict of Turkey’s Kurdish issue.

According to Frantz Fanon (in Mbembe, 2007: 37), memory and language concerning the past and present, identity, and death are inherently related to experience. In other words, memory is not something that is solely remembered but is rather experienced continuously, viscerally. John E. Drabinski, while interpreting the concept of memory in Fanon’s writings, also emphasises its crucial place as a notion inherently related to time, politics, and subjectivity (2013: 16):

Memory, politics, identity, and the new—Fanon crafts an important story across these terms, creating a sense of relationality for the sake of another world, politics,

humanity, and ultimately, *time*. The oppressed must share a time, which, in the end, means that they must simultaneously remember everything and forget too much.

Thus, memory as concrete experience refers to a peculiar understanding of time—past, present, and future—where politics and subjectivity are simultaneously generated. It is of the temporal, a moment in time, yet permanent, enduring. The oppressed must *remember everything and forget too much*. In Cizre, women participating in the Saturday Mothers protest narrate their quotidian experiences, and all of life's difficulties, in the same speech with which they are commemorating their loved ones. The memory of the disappeared is not solely repeatedly *remembered*, but also continuously *experienced*, through the everyday experiences of the post-disappearance period.

Dialectics of secrecy and blatancy: the pact of public secrets

Another crucial component of the narratives at play and work in the sittings of Saturday Mothers is the insistence on the fact that these enforced disappearances occurred with the knowledge of the people, in the context of the coexistence of secrets and blatant show. Indeed, the meticulous calculation of knowing and not knowing, and the simultaneity of hiding and blatantly showing were at the heart of the enforced disappearances, which, as was the case elsewhere during the 1990s, created the dialectics of secrecy and visibility in Cizre.

On the one hand, the enforced disappearances were part of a secret regime whose structuring, functioning, and ambition was, according to rumors, solely known by certain important statesmen. On the other hand, the functioning of the Cizre JITEM team was visible and blatant. The detentions would occur in urban centers during the day and in a routine fashion, involving the reiteration of what became symbolic gestures and images. These included the use of white Renaults, bearded men wearing snow masks, and the sound of the radios used by these men. Then, the bodies of the disappeared, when found, were largely left either at the places of execution, casually buried and covered by rocks, anonymously thrown into a common grave, and found on the roadsides, on unused land outside of the villages, on wasteland near to military zones, in wells, cesspools, and construction sites—that is, poorly hidden or plainly unhidden, deposited in sites where they were easily seen. Thus, the specific horror of the enforced disappearances, the “erasing violence” expressed by Banu Bargu (2014: 44), would be an inadequate notion unless understood in a broader manner through the dialectics of this blatant carelessness, this openly furtive, macabre show.

The dialectics of secrecy and visibility as a discursive politics of enforced disappearances is characterised by Michael Taussig (cited in Gordon, 2008: 75) as a “*public secret*,” something known about but unspoken and unacknowledged. Enforced disappearance is simultaneously public and secret; known, heard, or felt in a way but unstated and inadequately recognised: “everyone must know just enough to be terrified, but not enough either to have a clear sense of what is going on or to acquire the proof that is usually required by legal tribunals or other governments for sanction” (ibid.: 110). Thus, there develops an implicit agreement about what everyone knows but does not say, a type of *pact* of public secrets.

The pact of public secrets constructed around the enforced disappearances in Kurdistan was a prime example of this. People in Cizre and elsewhere in the region were generally aware that there were kidnappings, torture, and killings going on, but their acknowledgment was discredited by the complicated structures of the colonial hierarchies. More importantly than

that, and confirming the pact, these deadly strategies became normalised and legitimised for the majority of the population, since there was almost no protest or demonstration against the deadly strategies of the state, with the exception of the mass demonstrations (*serbıldan*) of the Kurdish movement in Kurdish cities during the 1990s.¹³

The sittings of Saturday Mothers should also be interpreted as a way of unpacking the pact of public secrets, both in Istanbul and in Cizre, although in slightly different manners. In Istanbul, the participants of the sittings themselves are designed as a space of encounter, an encounter between, on the one hand, the mothers and wives of the disappeared seated at the front of the crowd with the photographs of their loved ones in their hands, and, on the other hand, the people passing by on the famous İstiklal Street. Thus, the Istanbul sitting aims to engage the heterogeneous community of cultural consumers and suchlike, walking around the metropolitan space of Taksim square and the Beyoğlu district on a Saturday noontime, with a vocabulary of law, legality, and citizenship.

The sitting of Cizre, inherently more homogeneous, does not aim to speak to a crowd. It does not claim a space of encounter. Rather, it situates itself as an act of loyalty and resistance. The choice of the place of the sittings in Cizre, in front of the police station, is clearly selected to signify the political framing of the Saturday Mothers. They do not desire to inform, convince or change any unknown interlocutor's mind; instead, their concern is to express their existence and perform their storytelling as an act of visibility and loyalty in the struggle against state violence:

We go there every Saturday. In front of the police station, we choose this place deliberately. We wanted to say to the Turkish state, "We're not scared. We're here to annoy you. We're here to tell you the things that you know very well. We're here to say to your face that you are the murderers of our husbands. [...] Even if nothing changes, even your Turkish courts do not decide for us, your Turkish police do kill us, your Turkish press do not hear us, we are here. We will tell their stories until the end of our lives, inshallah."¹⁴

Forms of insistence, repetition, and resilience represented by the Cizre Saturday Mothers as practices of memory-making are crucial to a broader understanding of the memory space and the memory debate of Turkey. For a long time, it has been argued that the Turkish state and society were *amnesic* and that the contentious memories of the 1990s – which so deeply affected its southeastern, Kurdish region – were *forgotten* or *unseen* in the western part of the country. I claim, however, that the term *amnesia* is inadequate to describe the memory space of Turkey and its relation with the 1990s.¹⁵ I will use a term interpreted by Paul Bijl (2012) in his analysis of colonial violence in Indonesia in relation to the Netherlands.

Scrutinizing colonial memory and forgetting in the Netherlands and Indonesia, Bijl argues that total amnesia is not possible by definition; we always *know* that there is something that we *forgot*. Thus, according to Bijl, memory and forgetting should not be conceptualised as a binary opposition and forgetting should not be held equal to absence; the memory and

¹³ For a detailed analysis of mass Kurdish mobilization, including *serbıldan* see Güneş, 2012.

¹⁴ Interview, Cizre, 13.10.2014

¹⁵ One can even talk of a *memory boost* instead of amnesia in this context, insofar as different contentious narratives on state violence positively flourished in Turkey during the 2000s. Esra Özyürek (2007: 3) interprets this thus: "Yet, at the turn of the twenty-first century, cultural practices are replete with memory, and people relentlessly struggle over how to represent and define the past. The growing laments about amnesia attest to the shared desire to have even more memory in Turkey."

forgetting occur as simultaneous acts. Thinking the case of Turkey and the memory space in respect of the memory-making along with forgetting and erasures related to Kurdistan promises productive outcomes. The selectiveness of the *components* of forgetting, meaning components delineated by discursively produced silences and non-recognition, reveals the content of the pact of public secrets. The pact of public secrets renders forms of state violence and their broader consequences *unmemorable*, a conceptualisation that has essentially been accepted and strategically unquestioned by the larger part of Turkish (non-Kurdish) society.

Inspired by and with reference to Ann Laura Stoler, Paul Bijl suggests using the notion of *cultural aphasia* instead of amnesia. Rather than a forgetting, this is a “dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts to appropriate things” (Stoler, cited in Bijl, 2012: 449). Cultural aphasia has also a direct link to memorability; unlike amnesia, which is mostly perceived and understood in terms of memory and the remembering/forgetting binary, in cultural aphasia, “the lack of language inhibits the production of a memorable past” (Bijl, 2012: 449).

The concept of *cultural aphasia*, therefore, opens up a space for thinking about the dominant frames of remembrance and how these produce some experiences as memorable and others as non-memorable —meaning not remembered as fact because of a political or other context that renders this ideologically impossible. In short, *cultural aphasia* refers to the memory-making process as the production of a certain type of *memory content*. Highly pertinent to the memory debate of the contentious histories of Turkey and Kurdistan, this is also, I believe, very much in resonance with the struggle of Saturday Mothers. Participants of Saturday Mothers challenge cultural aphasia and its lack of a vocabulary, with appropriate words and concepts to appropriate things, through their own performances of memory-making. Telling and repeating the story of the disappearance, naming the perpetrators, narrating concrete experiences of the post-disappearance period, altogether establish a performance of resilience, which constantly attacks the voids and refusals of the cultural aphasia.

Everyday politics, belonging, and memory-making

The Saturday Mothers of Cizre also represent a center of moral and political authority in both Kurdish society and the Kurdish political movement. Unlike Istanbul’s Saturday Mothers/People, where, despite the majority of Kurdish relatives, there is nevertheless a heterogeneity of relatives of the disappeared, all of the participants of Cizre are personally, directly, and very consciously affiliated with the Kurdish movement, as a matter of self-identity that also helps to keep the memory alive. The Kurdish political movement itself has a specific moral and political hierarchy amongst its members and its dead, based on different organisational networks.

From my fieldwork observations and based on my interviews, I can claim that the most valued families are those of the *martyred guerrillas*; the family of a fighter who lost his or her life is defined as a *value family* (*değer ailesi*). Then comes the families whose members were influential local leaders and died (were killed) in the struggle. The families of the disappeared seem to rank next. In any case, they represent an important center of gravity in the existing inner circles of power in the Kurdish political movement. This moral power has significant political outcomes. If, for instance, they veto one of the parliamentary candidates from their electoral region, it is very unlikely that this person will be named candidate.

Not every family of the disappeared has the same status in the existing schemes of the moral hierarchy, however. Those with a closer relationship to the Kurdish political movement, or with more guerrilla participation, and those who contribute (im)materially to the movement have more influence. Socio-economic strength, being part of a respected family or tribe and of a larger network also contribute to high-level status. The families with lesser ethical-political authority tend to experience a less well socially integrated and melancholic process.

Several Saturday Mothers were also politically and socially mobilised after the disappearances. Some of them went into the ranks of the Kurdish movement's legal political party, and some of them began to struggle in different Kurdish NGOs, while others again became local political leaders. During the Kurdish conflict, women from both sides were deployed in different ways under the influence of Turkish and Kurdish political mobilisations, based on martyrdom, motherhood, and other types of familial, personal, and political labels.¹⁶

Politicisation in the ideological milieu of the Kurdish movement brought with it a crucial process of empowerment and the flourishing of new subjectivities for Kurdish women. Those Kurdish women involved in the Kurdish political movement gained a paradoxical power, in the sense that they attained a recognised status, but only within the limits of the dominant values and paradigms of the movement. This, in fact, is a common feature of women's mobilisation in different social movements. However, the moral authority of Saturday Mothers goes somewhat beyond these limitations, largely because it transgresses and transcends the existing conventions of the nationalist and leftist politics and their associated organisations. They have, for instance, the right to criticise the movement's concrete political tendencies, or the ruling elite, without being suspected of wanting to leave or harm the movement.

For instance, as the carriers of mourning and as the preservers of the moral values of the movement, the Saturday Mothers of Cizre were closely following the BDP participants in the ongoing trials of perpetrators of disappearances. They were criticising the recruitment policies of their municipality, stating the municipality was ignoring the children of the value families. In a way, the women were transforming the status attributed to them as stable carriers of mourning to intervene in daily politics with a certain authority.

However, this transgressive effect and power should not be overemphasised. First, not all Saturday Mothers are imbued with such authority; those who are distanced from the Kurdish political movement, the poorer ones, the lonelier ones with less social, communitarian, and familial resources and networks, are further marginalised in a powerless situation. Poverty is not a limit per se, but it delimits the possibility of mobilisation and, in turn, restricts access to material and immaterial resources. Also, there are important restraints to this transgression. The ethico-political debt owed both to the guerrillas and the "martyrs" of the movement operates as an important demarcation line concerning the expression of criticisms vis-à-vis the daily political issues, guiding Saturday Mothers back to their primary role of mourning and remembrance.

In a way, this primary role also consists of several transgressions. During the sittings, by their reiterated narratives, they produce and represent a specific form of memory in which a unique mixture emerges. Suphiye Durgut was a typical example of such uniqueness. On the one hand,

¹⁶ For a thorough analysis of women's mobilisation during the Kurdish conflict from both sides, see Ahıska, 2006; Aslan, 2007; Çağlayan, 2007; Şentürk, 2012; Göker, 2015.

she names all the perpetrators of her husband's disappearance, one-by-one, and on the other hand, she relates how she regularly dreams about Süleyman. She swears to God, saying that she will continue to call the perpetrators to account and to pay for what they did, even after her death. She narrates the story of Süleyman, of his repeated detentions, his political beliefs, the cruel torture that he was subjected to, his relationship with his children, and his honesty, uniqueness, and perfection.

Suphiye's narrative thus oscillates between the mundane details of everyday life and the demands of the Kurdish political movement. Its power stems from the fact that she interprets something so personal using vocabularies of law, justice, and religion. She knots a memory of mourning, witnessing, and belonging. At the end of our interview, Suphiye spoke about her dreams, about how her husband was coming to her dreams. Listening to her oaths before God, one would believe that her soul really would continue to struggle after her death. One would believe in the possibility of an afterlife hearing her powerful words of longing and belief, and one might well put one's faith in a divine justice.

Conclusion

Currently, the Saturday Mothers have suspended their gathering in Cizre. Following the curfews commenced after the summer of 2015, the neighborhoods where most Saturday Mothers participants lived were destroyed in the latest round of state violence, acts of urbicide¹⁷ that included curfews and blockade, multi-force operations and paramilitary incursions involving state snipers and mercenaries, the shelling and raising to the ground of entire neighborhoods.¹⁸

Some of the wives and mothers migrated to other cities, while others are now preoccupied with rebuilding their houses and continuing with everyday life. The immediacy of the current situation has also revealed that the dead of the *now*, those of the curfews, are intertwined with the dead of the *past*, those of the 1990s. Carrying solely the photographs of loved ones disappeared and killed during the 1990s seemed to be undoable for the relatives of the latest civilians killed by the state. They continued to gather for a couple of weeks after the raising of the curfew and carried the photographs of their husbands, sons, brothers. After a few weeks, however, they terminated the gatherings.¹⁹ In Istanbul, the sittings continued longer, although not at the usual place but in front of the main IHD building there.²⁰

Using the case of Cizre, I have examined the production of memories in relation to enforced disappearances in Kurdistan during the 1990s. I claimed that such production of memories has unpacked the pact of public secrets and overcome cultural aphasia through the creation of a language of recognition, acknowledgment and responsibility in the memory knots that tie the personal to the political, and temporality to endurance. For this, the performances of Saturday Mothers have been crucial. The peculiar position of the Cizre Saturday Mothers, and their employment of a ritualised political protest and intimate, emotive claim to truth and

¹⁷ Literally "violence against the city," the term "urbicide" in political theory has been used extensively to analyze multifaceted forms of political violence in the urban space, in the context of an armed conflict (Graham, 2003: 63–78; Abujidi and Verschure, 2006: 126–54).

¹⁸ For the details of the urbicide of Cizre see. İnsan Hakları Derneği, Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı, Diyarbakır Tabip Odası, Pratisyen Hekimlik Derneği, Şırnak'ın Cizre İlçesinde 04.09.2015 Tarihinde Başlayan ve 12.09.2015 Tarihinde Sona Eren Sokağa Çıkma Yaşamı ve Meydana Gelen Hak İhlalleri İnceleme Raporu, 15 Eylül 2015.

¹⁹ Personal communication, members of Cizre Meya-Der, December 10, 2016.

²⁰ Following the introduction of pandemic restrictions, the demonstrations have been transformed to a virtual format.

justice, can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the official national and colonial memory. Memory is produced in Cizre on a daily basis, with different traces and signs, both material and immaterial, through simultaneous erasure and exhibition, including not only victimhood but also resilience, persistence, and political mobilisation.

In Turkey, various official security agencies implemented violent counterinsurgency strategies that specifically targeted the civilian population, and other official, semi-official, and pro-state militias, paramilitaries and public organisations ensured the feasibility of such strategies. They were implemented with the implicit and explicit cooperation of most media outlets, academic institutions, and representative bodies, including NGOs. This cooperation was also acknowledged and constantly emphasised by the relatives of the disappeared.

Remembering the forcibly disappeared, therefore, meant holding power to account by narrating the story, by performing the ethical and political duty of publicly going against the grain on behalf of the disappeared, presumed dead. These narratives and memories of enforced disappearance became organically intertwined with current life experience, which they intimately informed. Experience reverberates and recurrence continues to prevail in the memory-making processes of Kurdish society and their impact on the Turkish civil society and body politic. Memories of the 1990s, therefore, do not represent the 1990s as a distant and terminated historical period but rather contextualise this period as tightly knit with the deadly experiences of the present. In general, for the relatives of the disappeared, narrating the 1990s is rather an act of ethical and political loyalty, which necessarily transcends the moment and takes memory out of time.

Memories of the 1990s in the west of Turkey are completely different from those in Kurdistan. In western Turkey, there is a crucial lack of acknowledgment and recognition of the violence of the past, as a result—or rather *function*—of cultural aphasia. This un-acknowledgement is an actively produced non-memory, in which events and experiences *far away* were not just forgotten but expunged from the Turkish national narrative, meticulously distorted, manipulated, and erased. Official representations of Kurdistan during the 1990s—as well as at the recent moment, when the Kurdish conflict intensified once again—serve to block the production of alternative vocabularies through the routinised reproduction of the vocabulary of terrorism, nationalism, and ethnopolitical criminalisation.

It was this vocabulary that determined the officially memorable parts of the 1990s and systematically rendered invisible other experiences and representations, mainly the state oppression and violence. With the production of such vocabulary established through the intermediary of the asymmetrical political landscape, it has been easier for larger societal segments of the western parts of Turkey to collectively decide not to even know, let alone speak about, its relentless and violent histories—and not to consciously have to do that.

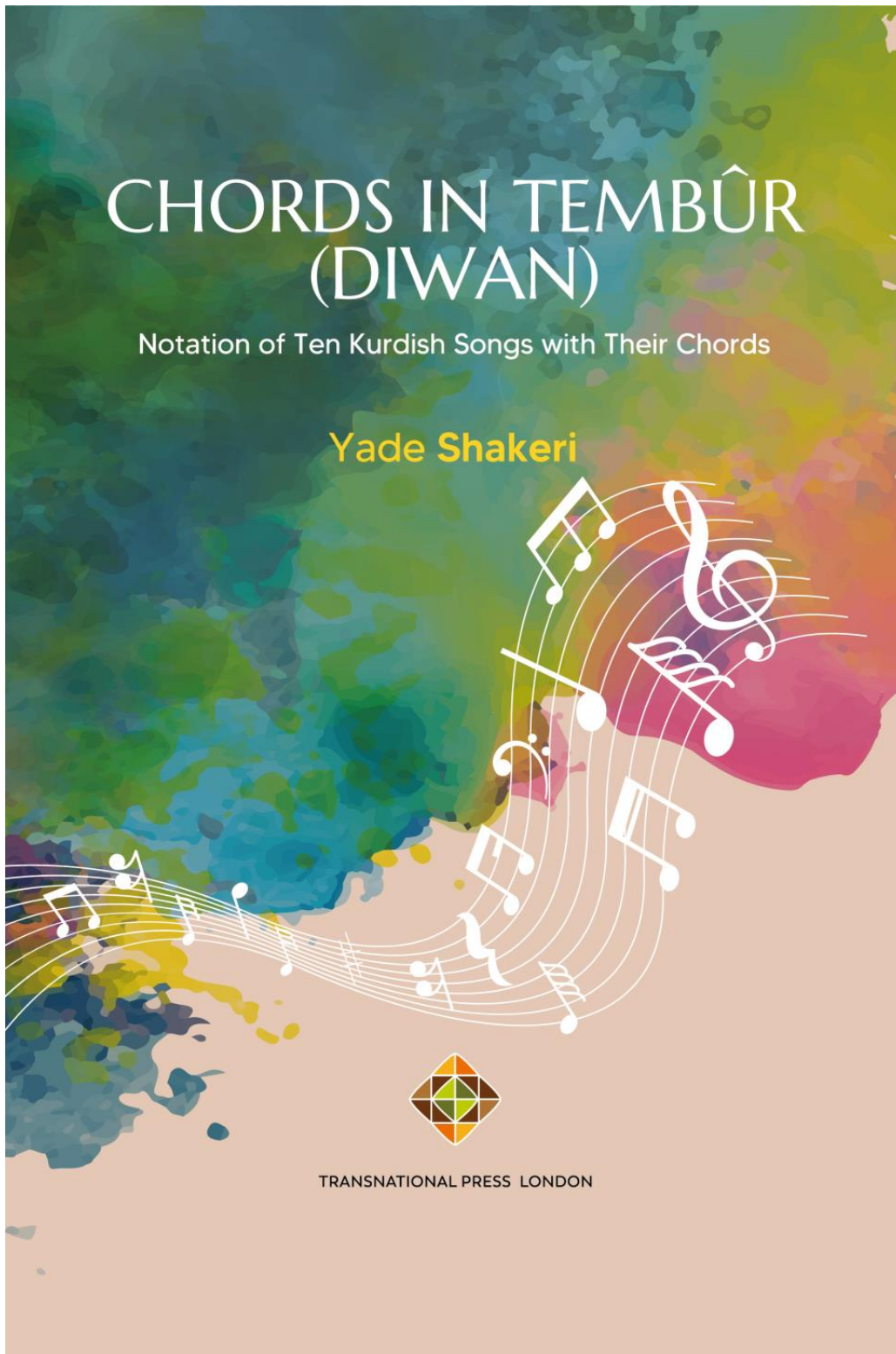
“Cultural aphasia,” therefore, becomes an appropriate term with which to characterise the material basis of the pact of public secrets, of the known but unspoken, and not adequately acknowledged and recognised. Diverse forms of Turkish state violence implemented in Kurdistan throughout the 1990s were essential components of the colonial effect. The dehumanised bodies of Kurds challenging the existing sovereignty of the Turkish state in novel forms of political mobilisation and belonging, *deserved*, in this respect, torture, beating, displacement, execution and disappearance. Apathy and un-acknowledgment also made possible the endurance of the violent strategies (Göral, 2017: 316).

Recently, the recommencement and re-intensification of the Kurdish conflict has aggravated the cultural aphasia further, merging present with past in the memory and non-memory. The dead bodies found lying in the streets of Cizre from 2015 have made it even more difficult to develop possibilities for a vocabulary of recognition and acknowledgment. Direct rule from the center has been reimposed in another iteration of the permanent state of emergency as the norm rather than the exception, further extending and deepening the experience of perpetual violence. As all the women that I interviewed emphasised in one way or another, the past always navigated within the present in Kurdistan, restless, determined, and haunted. Yet, the political performances of the Saturday Mothers have already opened up a space to deal with this past and present, to construct a new vocabulary vis-à-vis the aphasia and establish new links between state violence, acknowledgment, and responsibility.

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