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Darkness Unbound. Insights from Ethnographic Research with Nationalist Groups in Contemporary Turkey

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Abstract: Drawing on anthropological research conducted with nationalist communities in northeast Turkey, this article reflects on methodological, analytical, and ethical questions arising out of ethnographic engagements with communities that support anti-democratic and authoritarian policies, circulate xenophobic or racist discourses and conspiracy theories, and participate in vigilante violence against minorities and political dissenters. Focusing on how I managed to gain access and establish rapport with my interlocutors despite our different ethico-political ideals and goals, the article aims to underline how the frank acknowledgement of this irreconcilability allows us to get a better grasp of the violent nationalisms we live by and how they can generate new methodological, theoretical and ethical pathways for future research.

[nationalism, radical right, violence, ethnography, subjectivity, ethics]

As I we sipped our seemingly endless supply of tea in small glasses, Mustafa, a retired worker in his sixties and one of my key informants in the field, continued talking about politics and occasionally read bits and pieces from the newspaper that was lying on the table in front of him. Reading statements by Etyen Mahçupyan, a Turkish-Armenian commentator working as an advisor to the then prime minister, Mustafa grumbled with visible anger: “As if no one else is left in the country, they get advice from an Armenian!” When I responded that Mahçupyan was a Turkish citizen and had every right to advise the government, Mustafa started a long discussion, consistently arguing how, for socio-political and historical reasons, “Armenians could not want the good of the country” and therefore had to be excluded from such key positions in government. In response to my objections, his arguments further extended to “reveal looming threats” posed not only by the usual suspects of Turkish nationalist imaginary (Kurds, Armenians, Americans, and increasingly Israelis), but also by the Syrians who have fled the wars in their country and taken refuge in Turkey in the past decade: “Arabs cannot be trusted either”, as they had “betrayed the Ottomans through their collaboration with Western powers during World War I”. Many others in the coffee house agreed: since “they stabbed us in the back then”, Arabs were to “suffer the consequences of their betrayal” now.

Although the strength of these nationalist sentiments came as no surprise even before I entered the field, which was already infamous across the country for its staunch support

for reactionary Turkish nationalism (Bakırezer and Demirer 2009), I still felt some anger growing inside me, especially in the face of such ruthless remarks coming from someone whom, by then, I had spent considerable amounts of time with and considered a “friend”. As one of my primary interlocutors in the field, I enjoyed listening to Mustafa’s stories and insights into the past and present of the area, a rather secluded valley in Trabzon, northeast Turkey. Mustafa was a self-identified nationalist but was well accustomed to the presence of foreigners, thanks to his work experience both abroad and across Turkey prior to his retirement. As a witty and fairly open-minded man in his sixties, he had become one of the key contacts people turned to, especially for visiting Greeks, due to his fluency in the local variety of Greek (Saglam 2019 and 2020a).¹ However, his familiarity with the antagonists of the Turkish nationalist imaginary had not undermined his nationalist convictions but had transformed them. As I have described in more detail elsewhere (Saglam 2020b), Mustafa’s engagements with Greek visitors included elements of dissimulation and surveillance through which he “pretended to be one of them so as to be able to see their true intentions and oversee their movements” across Trabzon.

Even though Mustafa and I had a rather cordial relationship and had treated each other respectfully up until this point, the discussion we had in the coffee house that day grew heated, like every other political discussion in Turkey. He reiterated his claims about the impossibility of bridging “essential differences between different nations”, which he took to be a perennial and unchangeable element of one’s identity, and hastily left. As I later contemplated my position as a researcher and my rapport with my interlocutors in the field, I struggled to come up with strategies to negotiate such eruptions of discriminatory rhetoric that incessantly targeted women, LGBTQ individuals, minorities and refugees, as well as foreigners. Should I not, for instance, have engaged in such discussion in the first place? Was it even ethnographically pertinent to counter the political arguments of my interlocutors?

My “friendship” with Mustafa survived, but I still struggled to find appropriate ways to relate to another key interlocutor, who generously hosted me at his place, introduced me to others and helped me with all sorts of practical errands. Alongside his compassionate assistance to me, Faik, a well-educated but hot-tempered man in his fifties, was an activist in a paranoid ultra-nationalist party that often took small-scale but symbolic actions against any kind of democratic initiative, ranging from discussions about the socio-cultural rights of Kurds in Turkey to remembrance of the violent destruction of Armenian communities in the early twentieth century. Through their

¹ The communities scattered across this secluded valley, where I conducted my field research, are staunch Turkish nationalists, but they have also preserved a local variety of Greek, called Romeyka, which has a number of specific and relatively archaic linguistic features (see Sitaridou 2014). As my interlocutors were identify as Turkish, they generally restrict their use of Greek to their encounters within the community and carefully manage its public visibility. Discretion, drawing on the articulations of Lilith Mahmud (2014), denotes a regime of public in-visibility, which requires intimacy and familiarity to be able to “see” what is enacted in public.

targeted demonstrations and social media practices, the political group Faik identified with was striving to “protect the Turkishness of Turkey” and “challenge subversive discourses by the enemies of the nation”. As Faik was an active member of the local party organization, he often invited me to its meetings downtown and introduced me to other members. Even though the political party he supported was rather marginal and its rhetoric was too paranoid even for the contemporary Turkish political field, their incessant online and offline activity profoundly affected the tone of wider political discourses, especially after 2016, when the failed coup attempt in Turkey caused further authoritarianization and a crackdown on political dissidents and minorities.

My other interlocutors in the field had similar political orientations. Despite mounting criticism of the grave human rights violations across the country, almost all found the legal framework to be too permissive and demanded a more draconian response to political dissent, often making reference to the political conflicts that had plagued the country in the 1970s. For instance, one of my closest friends in the field, Mehmet, a craftsman in his fifties with whom I have spent considerable time in coffee houses and in his shop, staunchly supported the government’s reformulation of the anti-terror law, which had significantly extended the “scope of crimes that can be considered terrorist offences [...],] legalized breaches of fair trial rights and paved the way for the categorization of political crimes as terror crimes” (Yonucu 2018:3) in order to incarcerate disproportionate numbers of Kurdish political activists. For Mehmet, such harsh measures should have been not temporary provisions but a permanent fixture of the politico-legal field. My other interlocutors similarly opposed democratic initiatives advocating socio-cultural rights for minorities (e.g., education in Kurdish), depicted the parliamentary opposition as terrorists or separatists/subversives (*bölücü*), defended torture and the extra-judicial killings of criminals without due process, and demanded the return of capital punishment for crimes against the state—a theme that was occasionally taken up by the government subsequently. For almost all my interlocutors, whom I considered friends, any opposition to such oppressive and at times illegal practices was synonymous with terrorism and had to be countered viciously. More crucially, the political orientations of my interlocutors, I noted (Saglam 2020b and 2021b), were not confined to the realm of such discursive representations but extended to vigilantism as well as violent demonstrations, lynchings of political activists, and shoot-outs with terrorists—all without legal repercussions, since both the state and the media consistently portrayed them as patriotic citizens whose nationalist sensitivities had been unfairly incited by provocateurs.

Even though my interlocutors were generous and open towards me, the very politics and society they demanded and laboured to realize promised nothing but the oppression and/or annihilation of any non-Turkish groups and political dissenters, me included. How was I to resolve this divergence between my ethico-political standing on the one hand and the political orientations of my interlocutors on the other? How could this divergence affect my analysis?

Although, as Sindre Bangstad emphasizes, “in any given ethnographic field, ethnographers are likely to have encountered individuals whose politics, behavior, or mo-

rals they disapprove of on a personal level”, (Bangstad 2019:422–423), how were my rapport with my interlocutors and my subsequent analysis or representation of them to be reconfigured when a substantial proportion of them, if not the outright majority, endorsed xenophobic, nationalist, sexist, misogynist, homophobic, repressive and violent attitudes and practices that I personally opposed (see also Goodale 2019; Kulick 2009)? How was my “friendship” with my interlocutors situated in relation to the wider political conflicts that directly affect minorities and political activists (see Goodale 2020)? Within this context, can the fundamental anthropological claim to be “work[ing] across difference” (Tsing 2015: 29) include such engagements? Or should we rather employ anthropological analytics solely “for studying people whose values and actions we find agreeable” (Teitelbaum 2019:422)? More practically, how should I adhere to the conventions of anthropological praxis and its ethical codes and sensitivities in supporting the “common good” and not justify or defend the nationalist-vigilante violence that was targeting “subversives”? How does ethnographic research with violent nationalist communities – that is, the “dark ethnography” as this special issue posits, contribute to the advancement of our knowledge, of the well-being of my interlocutors and the wider society, and of our political articulations? What elements of this ethnographic endeavour contradict, justify, or supersede our wider commitments and engagements?

Drawing on ethnographic research I have been conducting in Turkey since 2015, this article reflects on the reverberations of ethnographic rapport (especially friendship and/or advocacy) during and in the aftermath of my research with communities that maintain nationalist and xenophobic political views and engage in vigilante violence against foreigners, minorities and political dissenters. Ethnographic rapport, I argue, is a dynamic process that has to be renegotiated in relation to the ethico-political orientations of interlocutors as well as their agency. This dynamic reconfiguration of our relationality, I will demonstrate, continuously amends the methodological and ethical code of conduct of anthropological studies and requires one to work with the irreconcilable differences. Although our discipline was conceived “to interrogate values and practices from a position of epistemological openness” (Scheper-Hughes 2004:41), such openness does not entail a neutral observation of what we come across, but requires, especially in cases of ethnography-at-home, the reworkings of conflicts and negotiations with interlocutors (Beek and Göpfert 2012; Goodale 2019; Jones and Rodgers 2019), as well as participating in them.

Rethinking disciplinary limitations, as well as the productive potential unlocked through such ethnographic engagements with “nationalist” communities (a term I explain further below), I aim to demonstrate how we need to rethink conventional anthropological imperatives concerning “giving voice to our interlocutors”, as well as the “moral virtue of collaboration, reciprocity, and advocacy” (Teitelbaum 2019:414) in engaged anthropological work. By attending to questions arising out of my own research experience in contemporary Turkey, I pose further questions on the analytical worth of such engagements, how one may forge and retain rapport with their interlocutors alongside, not despite, clashing ethico-political orientations and political violence, and

how our subsequent advocacy of them requires us to tread carefully both to uphold our adherence to social equality and justice and to preserve the agency of our interlocutors. In this sense, the article addresses the analytical potential unlocked by dark ethnography, as well as the ethical questions arising out of rapport we forge throughout these research journeys.

I use the term dark ethnography to delineate anthropological explorations with communities that desire to maintain social inequalities in the form of oppression and discrimination, or inflict violence on others, including jihadists, racists, perpetrators of violence and criminals (see Gauvain 2018 and Shoshan 2016) and do not necessarily evoke ethnographic sympathy. This term does not, for this reason, simply entail a dangerous anthropological endeavour where violent confrontations pose a threat to the well-being of interlocutors and researchers alike (Nordstrom and Robben 1995; e.g., Scheper-Hughes 1993), as was the case with studies in Northern Ireland at the height of the communal conflict and the subsequent repression by the British army (Aretxaga 1997; Feenan 2002; Feldman 1991; Sluka 1990). Rather, I deploy dark ethnography as a term to refer to endeavours striving to comprehend socialities that are not necessarily violent but conventionally abjected due to the pejorative ethico-political reverberations they give rise to, as in the case of jihadists, fascists, misogynists, or racists (e.g., Li 2020; Pasięka 2019; Shoshan 2016). Similarly, the subjects of dark ethnography do not necessarily evoke the same degrees of compassion, empathy and advocacy (cf. Vanderurst 2019) that inspired Nancy Scheper-Hughes to call for a more engaged anthropology that construed researchers as “*comrades* (with all the demands and responsibilities that this word implies) to the people who are the subjects of our writings, whose lives and miseries provide us with a livelihood” (Scheper-Hughes 1995:420, emphasis in the original).

The challenges such endeavours generate, I emphasize, arise not solely from the presence and prevalence of suffering and violence across social relations and how to navigate them (Ayimpam and Bouju 2014; Sluka 2020); they also emanate more directly from the very way violence and exclusion are organized across interlocutors’ social and political lives in order to perpetuate social, economic, racial, socio-cultural and political inequalities, as well as from how everyday enactments of this unequal diffusion of violence affect the researcher’s relations with their interlocutors.² Dark ethnography, to be clear, focuses not on those who are subjected to such violence, suffering

2 If one is to illustrate this demarcation, it might be worth revisiting the research of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2004), whose analysis of organ trafficking includes both the donors/victims as well as recipients/buyers of these bodily transactions, which are undergirded by cross-border structural inequalities. Although Scheper-Hughes also brings in the perspective of donors/victims and describes them as “living and dead, [...] political and semiotic zero, an ideal place for critical medical anthropologists to begin” (Scheper-Hughes 2004:64), her engagements with brokers, surgeons and buyers/recipients can be considered as an example of how ‘dark ethnography’ has been an aspect of ethnographic thinking and analysis for some time.

and dehumanizing deprivation (e.g., Warden 2013), but on those who desire, maintain, uphold and/or inflict it, that is, perpetrators and collaborators, as well as those who explicitly legitimize it. In relation to conventional ethnographic accounts written “from the perspective of victims rather than victimisers” (Rodgers 2007:459), dark ethnography entails the researcher exploring such socialities of oppression, discrimination and suffering by forging rapport with the perpetrators.

In the following sections, I first provide details about the field and my methodological trajectories within it to describe the conditions of my access and entry into it. I then move on to reflect on my interlocutors’ political leanings and describe their everyday discourses and practices to underline the modalities of subjectivity and agency included under the category of dark ethnography. In this section I will elucidate my preference for the term nationalist and its analytical underpinnings before I move on to discussions of my advocacy and ethical trajectories emanating from this ethnographic engagement.

Field and Horizons: Entry and Settling

The arguments I put forward throughout this article draw on ethnographic research I conducted in Trabzon, northeast Turkey, in 2012 and 2015, as well as my interactions with my interlocutors both online (via social media platforms) and offline since then. Even though Trabzon has not been that much of an outlier in the contemporary Turkish socio-political field, where lynchings of Kurds and political dissidents have worryingly become increasingly common, the city has grown quite infamous across the country and is often represented as a hotbed of violent, reactionary nationalism (Bakırezer and Demirer 2009). This situation contrasts especially starkly with its cosmopolitan past as one of the epicentres of Hellenistic culture. While the economically and culturally eminent Greek-Orthodox community was forced to leave its ancestral homeland in 1923 as part of the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, my research also found that Greek heritage is still alive in the area, as can be observed in the discreet preservation of a local variety of Greek, called Romeyka, among communities inhabiting the elevated valleys to the south (Saglam 2019 and 2021a; Sitaridou 2014). This preservation of fragments of Greek heritage, however, did not necessarily lead to a political orientation that is open to socio-cultural diversity.

In the preceding two decades, local communities in Trabzon blocked the visit of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch who was leading an international campaign on environmental protection around the Black Sea basin, organized demonstrations to show their strong disagreement with democratic initiatives and displayed their solidarity with the murderer of Hrant Dink, a Turkish-Armenian journalist who was assassinated by a young man from Trabzon in 2007. Local eruptions of societal violence also included the stabbing and subsequent murder of a christian priest and more than a few in-

stances of lynching of political activists. In the aftermath of the coup attempt in 2016, similarly, rural communities started participating in armed “hunts” for and shoot-outs with terrorists alongside or even before the arrival of the security forces. Reflecting the centrality of the city for the reconfigurations of the political field, the much-debated People’s Special Squad (*Halk Özel Harekat*), an ostentatiously paramilitary organization established after the coup attempt in 2016 (see Akarsu 2020), was founded by local groups till its dissolution in 2018. In all these instances, the political and juridical authorities accommodated such breaches of the law and often praised the “patriotism” of local communities.

Soliciting access to the field is one of the key problems of dark ethnography. One crucial factor that facilitated my entry into the field and further access to my interlocutors, who otherwise displayed rather exclusionary and suspicious attitudes toward outsiders, was my ancestry. Even though I had never been to the field site prior to my research, my paternal origins in the province of Trabzon greatly helped me establish cordial rapport with local men and women in a relatively short time, given the strength of *hemşehrilik* ties in the Turkish context. In this sense, *hemşehrilik*, the ties between those who hail from the same area or city, generates the assumption that one shares similar socio-cultural attitudes and instantiates senses of intimacy, familiarity and trust. This sense of familiarity propagated by *hemşehrilik* ties also undergirds a degree of political coalescence: most of my interlocutors, like many others outside Trabzon, assumed that I shared their political convictions, which almost unanimously centred around a staunch version of Turkish nationalist ideology. Even when I expressed my disagreement with the political arguments they presented, my interlocutors did not automatically condemn me as a “subversive”, possibly due to this strong link between the city and Turkish nationalism. I came to suspect that they simply ignored my political objections as the antics of an academic who hails from the nationalist heartland and hence could not actually be anything but a nationalist.

And yet, it should be stated that I have not always been treated as a local either. Due to my socio-cultural standing, educational attainments and linguistic abilities (my use of standard Turkish and my inability to speak the local variety of Greek, Romyka), I occupied the position of a semi-insider and semi-outsider, making visible the liminal dynamics undergirding social relations between my interlocutors and outsiders (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984; Tsuda 2015). Being a semi-insider nevertheless allowed me to openly disagree with the political discourses my interlocutors circulated, as described above, thus giving me a degree of autonomy that would hardly be granted to anyone who does not have the aforementioned ties. However, this advantage, unlocked by my ancestry in the city, was not without its limits, as I came to realize through a number of encounters that laid them bare.

As noted by other scholars working on nationalist communities, access to such social groups is often limited due to the fact that nationalist and racist groups view researchers with suspicion (see Gauvain 2018; Shoshan 2016; Westermeyer 2019). Unlike studies in the West, however, the suspicion I received from my interlocutors in

the initial phases of my research drew not on the possibility of negative representation and complicity with juridico-political surveillance, but on the prevalence of paranoid attitudes and conspiratorial narratives among men I worked with, as I explain further below. As *milliyetçi olmak* (being a nationalist) is the default position of Turkish political subjectivity, most of my interlocutors were not anxious about me representing them in this light, which, for virtually all of them, could only be a virtue one could be proud of. The suspicion they directed at me resulted from their conspiratorial attitudes, which sought to identify intrusions into the fatherland by malicious foreign forces as potentially doing harm to Turkey.

In the first week of my field research, for instance, I had a discomfiting encounter with a number of old men I had just met in a coffee house. Upon learning that I was a researcher affiliated with a university in the UK, one of the older men I was trying to talk to confronted me: Who was I to do research in the area? How could they know that I was not a spy? Had I solicited official permission from the state bodies to conduct such research? Had the *kaymakam* (district governor) approved my stay in the area? Although that encounter subsequently led to my establishing a friendly relationship with the district governor, who greatly facilitated my research in the subsequent months, the paranoid outlook that generated the confrontation in the first place could only have been resolved through the official mediation provided by the governor's approval, as the highest representative of the state, of my stay in the area.

Similarly, the factors that facilitated my entry into the field could not always withstand the weight of political disagreements. My friendship with Kerem, for instance, started and progressed rather fast thanks to the facilitation provided by my *hemşehrilik* ties, as well as his educational attainments and socio-cultural outlook. As our friendship progressed, I revealed more and more about my political orientations, which were contradictory to those he held. In time, however, Kerem, a college-graduate professional of my age working in finance, came to disapprove of my political "deviation" from the region's staunch nationalist outlook and accused me—a serious shortcoming in his view—of being antithetical to the (violent) nationalist discourses and sympathetic toward political arguments endorsed by the opposition, especially the HDP, the Kurdish political party represented in Parliament. The disconnection I had with Kerem—he stopped meeting me afterwards—as well as certain other threats I received from a number of other men throughout my research, revealed how the extent to which I revealed myself to my interlocutors affected the research directly and sometimes negatively. The fact that it was Kerem, not myself, who discontinued our conversations showed that it is not always up to the researchers to resolve the ethical dilemmas they face, and that one's interlocutors also have agency and can sever relations in accordance with their own perceptions of incompatibility.

Terms and Navigations

As part of my objective to understand the local dynamics that generated and sustained the violent nationalist fervour among men in Trabzon, I accompanied my interlocutors in their everyday routines and engagements. Alongside my socialization with men in houses, shops and political party and other offices, I worked part-time at a local coffee house and as an apprentice to a carpenter, who eventually became one of my key contacts and a friend. My other interlocutors, mostly men due to local customs around gender and sexuality, included a great variety of educational achievements, political attitudes and socio-economic statuses. Some of them, for instance, were in their late twenties and thirties, working as civil servants, accountants, carpenters and construction workers. Others were in their forties and fifties, with some having university degrees, working as engineers and businessmen, while others owned shops or worked as day labourers in informal jobs. Despite these socio-economic differences, however, all my interlocutors described themselves as “nationalist” [*milliyetçi* in Turkish], a term that not only entails a preference for right-wing political parties, but also encompasses a more comprehensive fashioning of their subjectivities.

Throughout my analysis, I use the term “nationalist” for two analytical reasons (see also Teitelbaum 2017). First, my preference for overriding the multiplicity of other potential terms (e.g., racists, far-right, radical right, fascists etc.) is undergirded by the determination to distinguish the Western and non-Western settings within which such oppressive, xenophobic and anti-cosmopolitan socialities and politics take shape (Davies and Lynch 2002). While such formations in the West (e.g., the English Defence League in the UK, *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, or the *Sverigedemokraterna* in Sweden) draw on racist and/or colonialist legacies, deindustrialization, white supremacy and discussions around immigration, as well as racialized perceptions of Islam (see Blee 1998; Koch 2017; Shoshan 2016; Teitelbaum 2017; Westermeyer 2019), the experience of Turkey seems to depend more on implicit racialisations, imperial nostalgia, paranoid perceptions of the world and unresolved socio-historical traumas emerging out of massive displacements, disjunctions and transformations, such as the violent conflicts of the early twentieth century. Through this strategy, I aim to attend to the peculiar socio-economic and politico-juridical factors of the Turkish context, where nationalism has historically been a default element of the political field. This endeavour to understand does not necessarily justify or legitimize the political objectives, discourses and practices of my interlocutors, nor does it undermine the significance of the violence it traces.

Second, by not using labels that are widely assumed to belong more to the fringes of the political field (e.g., racists), I underline the prevalence of nationalist imaginaries across the political spectrum (left-right or centre-fringe), as well as their implications for the fashioning of mainstream politics and society in the Turkish context (Yegen

2007).³ Although useful in differentiating the nationalisms of different political groups, labels such as (neo)fascists or far-right give the (wrong) impression that the discourses and practices undergirding these terms survive *solely* in the margins and do (or can) not penetrate the “normal” echelons of society, economy and politics (Shoshan 2016). Reflecting my interlocutors’ self-identifications, I choose to deploy the term “nationalist” to underpin how these racist-paranoid political discourses and their violent reverberations (ranging from denunciations to lynchings) are part and parcel of the political mainstream in Turkey. Contemporary debates around (Afghan) refugees, in fact, illustrate this “mainstreamization” of the radical right rhetoric (Mondon and Winter 2020).

In this sense, my strategy of sticking to the term nationalist is also a critique of naming patterns across studies focusing on the West, where such categories as “far-right extremist” suggest a non-mainstream phenomenon (cf. Shoshan 2016:9), “as if these nationalist, anti-liberal, and culturalist trends remained annoying developments on the margins [...] when in fact it was the opposite” (Goodale 2020:349; see also Westermeyer 2019). Such naming patterns, I suggest, pertain more to the analysts’ desire to demarcate the socio-political distance between the self/reader and political actors (see Teitelbaum 2019b:432) with whom s/he cannot identify.

Hanging Out with Nationalists

The communities I worked with in Trabzon self-identify as “nationalist” (*milliyetçi*) above all else and consistently vote for nationalist political parties: up to eighty percent of the votes cast locally went to the two major right-wing parties in the last parliamentary election, with the remaining fifth going to a party on the centre which also relies on a secular-nationalist position. Their representations by others across the country as staunch Turkish nationalists who oppose minority rights and democratization (see Bakırezer and Demirer 2009) also seem to be in line with my interlocutors’ self-identifications.

The political parties my friends and interlocutors in Trabzon supported and voted for included not only the major nationalist-conservative ones, such as the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, AKP) of President Erdoğan and its ally, the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (Nationalist Movement/Action Party, MHP),⁴ but

³ Nationalist discourses and imaginaries, it must be noted, permeate almost all spectrums of political life and can be observed as a default element across the right-left divide in Turkey. Only the *Halkların Demokrasi Partisi* (HDP, People’s Democracy Party), the coalition that includes both the Kurdish political movement and other progressive formations, such as feminists and environmentalists, may be considered an exception.

⁴ *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* [Nationalist Movement/Action Party] is often discussed to be an example of violent nationalist mobilization. Rooted in the pan-Turkist organizations of the early 20th century, the party was founded in 1969 and has asserted itself its youth organization, *Ülkü Ocakları* [Idealist Hearts].

also more “radical” ones that challenged the fundamental tenets of democracy and the rule of law, such as the *Vatan Partisi* (Fatherland Party, VP), which uses conspiracy theories extensively to prop up nationalist sensitivities, the *Büyük Birlik Partisi* (Great Unity Party, BBP), which has synthesized a darker tone of nationalism and Islamism through its paramilitary youth branch (*Alperen Ocakları*), and the *Hak ve Eşitlik Partisi* (Rights and Equality Party, HEPAR) of ex-military commander Osman Pamukoğlu, who, despite the name of the party he leads, advocates a ruthless military solution to the ongoing socio-political problems.

Reflecting the fact that a substantial majority of the votes cast in the area have gone to the two main right-wing parties, around 70% to Erdoğan’s AKP and around 10% to the MHP, most of my interlocutors in the field preferred these mainstream political parties and overwhelmingly supported Erdoğan’s nationalist rhetoric and securitarian outlook. Highlighting how this political orientation is not confined to a particular socio-economic class or age group, I show that the men I have spent considerable time with constituted a heterogeneous constellation of generations, educational achievements and professions. Ali, for instance, one of my closest friends in the field, who was in his early thirties and worked hard as a carpenter to support his stay-at-home wife and three children, was a staunch supporter of Erdoğan’s AKP, justifying his support with reference to economic stability and development, as well as the growing presence of religious symbols in governance. Muzaffer and Kerim, two local businessmen in their early forties with university degrees, were active members of the local AKP organization, as was Veli, a middle-school graduate working as a janitor at a local school. As they were strongly supportive of Erdoğan’s vision of “Turkey as a global player”, the only alternative to the AKP was the MHP, the historical flag-bearer of Turkish nationalism in the political field, with whom Erdoğan’s AKP has been in alliance in recent years. In addition to these two right-wing parties, I also frequented the gatherings of the local bureau of the main opposition party, the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People’s Party, CHP), whose members considered themselves to be on the centre-left and were critical of Erdoğan and the AKP because, for many of them, Erdoğan was not nationalist enough.

Over time, I have come to meet and befriend a number of other men who were active supporters of the “radical fringe” parties mentioned above. As already noted above, Kerem, a young university graduate working at a bank, adamantly supported HEPAR because of the party leader’s ferocious promise to destroy the separatists through war-like measures. Although soft-spoken and rather timid in his dealings with others in both private and public, Kerem’s tone changed whenever he talked about the Kurds, the country’s largest minority and the most politically-organized proponents of democratization, incessantly claiming that the only solution going forward was a military one. He often grumbled about how, in the previous election, “even in his own village” there was one “traitor” who voted for the *Hakların Demokrasi Partisi* (People’s Democracy Party, HDP), a political coalition mostly associated with the Kurdish political movement. In a similar vein, one of my key interlocutors in the field, Fahri, took me to meet-

ings of the *Vatan Partisi* (VP), a political party known mostly for its paranoid attitudes and highly symbolic acts against democratization. As Fahri often hosted me in his village house and greatly facilitated my research through his personal and professional connections, I knew that he had many friends from Greece and France and found his involvement with the VP rather at odds with his cosmopolitan outlook. Once at the meeting, however, I was able to observe first-hand that he too circulated conspiratorial narratives pinpointing Greek irredentism in relation to Turkey and suggesting counter-strategies. Depicting the government as “oblivious” to or complicit with these threats, Fahri demanded a radical overhaul of Turkish politics and society in the direction of nationalist corporatism. He also tried to recruit me into the VP’s local network and, when I challenged his political views, he went on to explain the imminent threats the country faced and how he was labouring incessantly to counter them.

As voting for nationalist political parties could not always reveal one’s political orientation completely and with certainty, I will also briefly describe how my interlocutors engage in politics generally through their everyday discourses and practices.

Reflecting their political orientations, my interlocutors drew extensively on conspiratorial narratives stipulating a covert plot by malicious foreign forces targeting Turkey. All my interlocutors, including those who support the opposition parties, were convinced that the country was going through a crucial phase and was faced with the sinister and clandestine machinations of foreign forces. These clandestine operations, according to my interlocutors, took many forms: Christian missionaries working across the region to proselytize the youth, manipulation of the genetic composition of local seeds to undermine Turkish men’s bodily capacity and integrity, the attempts to corrupt Turks’ moral standing through cultural innovations, incitement of and support for dissent against the government through monetary promises, or outright sabotage against government projects to hinder the “ascendance of Turkey” under Erdogan (see Saglam 2020 and 2021b).

Suspicious undergirding these narratives, however, were not solely directed toward outsiders but also permeated local relations. As a researcher, I was often asked by my interlocutors if I were working for MI5 (*sic*), the British secret service, or the CIA, the US intelligence agency. Although I was dumbstruck by the accusation in the beginning, I eventually got hold of the reasoning: I was supposed to gather relevant data and insights about the local community and the area only to pass them on to these secret services. Incessantly taking on new forms in relation to the changes to socio-political alignments in Erdogan’s government and the country more generally, these conspiratorial accounts surveyed the socio-political field for covert threats and marked sinister others from abroad (e.g., Israelis or Americans) as well as “traitors” (e.g., political dissidents, minorities, researchers, the opposition, journalists, academics etc.) allegedly collaborating with foreigners to harm the country.

This aura of suspicion required incessant verification of one’s allegiance and trustworthiness, since even the most loyal could have been misdirected or seduced by material gains allegedly promised by foreign agencies. Throughout my research in the

area, some of my interlocutors have questioned my loyalty to the national(ist) ideals and threatened to report me to the security forces, who, in the past, had obliged other researchers to leave. Furthermore, especially at the beginning of my stay, it was not unusual for me to be faced with implicit and explicit threats. Upon learning about my research in the area, for instance, one local man confronted me about the “hazards” of pursuing any agenda that is in any way detrimental to the interests of the state. The prevalence of such aggressive confrontations seemed understandable given the strength of local nationalist sentiments and the paranoid suspicions that I was supposed to pass on secret information to foreign intelligence agencies. The fact that my interlocutors also participated in vigilante violence against anyone they deemed to be “working against the state” nevertheless increased my overall sense of insecurity, even though I was semi-local.

As I have explained elsewhere (Saglam 2020a and 2021b), the circulation of conspiratorial narratives cannot be understood simply as discursive fashionings of the political subjectivities of my interlocutors (as nationalist Turks): they also generate concrete socio-political reverberations. To begin with, most of my interlocutors desired and supported stringent penalties against political dissidents and argued that the state should act firmly and decisively to tackle the subversive demands of minorities, academics and political activists. In most cases, they viewed demands for socio-cultural rights and democratization as interventions by foreign forces behind closed doors to distract Turkey from becoming a global player. In the aftermath of the elections in June 2015, for instance, my interlocutors extensively supported the crackdown against Kurdish communities, which they viewed as a necessary assertion of the state’s control over an insurgent local population. In such instances, many thought, the legal framework to guarantee the basic human rights could be suspended for effective control and authority.

As I explained earlier, this conspiratorial viewpoint was not confined to discursive exchanges among men but led to vigilantism and extra-legal violence targeting political dissidents, foreigners and visitors, the Christian clergy and minorities both in Trabzon and across Turkey (see Saglam 2020b and 2021b). In addition to the prevailing demand and support for a more controlling, uncompromising and authoritarian state, my interlocutors also engaged in vigilante violence. When a boat arrived at the city’s port bringing a group of activists led by the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew to highlight the environmental problems around the Black Sea basin two decades ago, local communities organized a protest to prevent the ship from docking, as they accused it of secretly harbouring a Greek irredentist agenda. In the 2000s, political activists who were protesting against the isolation of political prisoners were targeted and lynched by local men. The lynchings, I came to learn, had been ignited by a rumour that these political activists were covertly supporting the PKK, the outlawed movement recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the EU and the US. In the meantime, young delinquents in the city murdered a Christian priest whom the community accused of being a missionary and of trying to proselytize young people with the aid of

promises of money. My interlocutors and many others across the city also engaged in surveillance of and shoot-outs with “terrorists”, some of which ended in fatalities. Most recently, a number of tourists from Iraqi Kurdistan were attacked by some of my interlocutors when they donned scarves decorated with the flag of the Kurdish Regional Administration of Northern Iraq, an internationally recognized autonomous region. The attackers, it was later revealed, had been incited by the inscription of Kurdistan on the tourists' scarves, which they claimed to be a provocation in the heartland of Turkish nationalism.

Here the critical point must be underlined: studies of far-right groups in the West stress the sense of persecution felt by the subjects being investigated, namely that they are the targets of both security services and mainstream political rhetoric and actors (Li 2020) in an underlying power dynamic that is antagonistic to and alienated from the state. However, the same dynamic cannot be observed in the case of Trabzon, where such political orientations are aligned with the ideological workings of the state. For this reason, while the subjects I worked with also expressed their suspicions towards the rest of the world generally, this suspicion was radically different in the sense that it was intricately related to vigilantism and surveillance, through which the self is endowed with political agency and a sense of potency (Saglam 2021b).

Negotiations in the Aftermath of Fieldwork

Whenever, after completing field research and while writing up, I presented my research to others, most of the audience automatically concluded that communities in Trabzon were thick-headed nationalists who felt vulnerable because of the Greek heritage of the region and therefore “over-acted” to compensate for this alleged scar on their loyalties to the Turkish state. After all, I was told more than once, “*dönmenin imanı kuvvetli olur*” [literally, converts have the strongest faith, like the “zeal of the convert”], implying that my interlocutors were motivated by a perennial anxiety that they were not actually what they claimed to be. Even a number of linguistic studies by scholars reproduced the same essentialist-nationalist assumptions by claiming the existence of “a Greek (T Rum) identity lying beneath their Turkish national identity” (Özkan 2013:138).

Needless to say, drawing on scholarly discussions of how identities are socially constructed (Jenkins 1996) in relation to the wider socio-political dynamics, I do not share such essentialist articulations of identities, stressing instead how identities are always already fragmented, heterogeneous and inclusive of their others. In every such encounter, I hence explained that the intracommunal circulation of narratives around conversion to Islam and the preservation of the Greek-Christian heritage in the region do not necessarily contradict my interlocutors' strong identification with Turkishness, not for themselves, nor for me. I also explicitly strove to underline the embeddedness

of local communities in both imperial and republican structures (see Lowry 2009; Meeker 2002) in order to attend to the ways in which Turkishness is woven into socio-economic possibilities, juridico-political orientations and distinct local heritages.

My solution, which I adopted in many similar settings, was to focus on the very strategies my interlocutors have employed to create social, political and economic opportunities in the face of the deprivation they encountered in a rather secluded and infertile region and how they came to forge their identities as Turkish-Muslim in the present while reconciling this identity, albeit discreetly, with elements of the region's Greek heritage. To counter the automatic deductions of the audience, I also often argued that Trabzon reflected only the wider socio-political dynamics in contemporary Turkey, where social violence against minorities and dissent has become the norm (Bora 2008; Gambetti 2013). For me, depicting my interlocutors as existing on the far-right fringes or as a violent aberration from the normal mainstream in Turkey, therefore, emerged as a problematic assumption, not only because it mistakes violent nationalism as an exception (as if it were observable only in Trabzon, but not in Sakarya, Kayseri, or İzmir, other cities with strong nationalist voting blocs), but also because it reduces the socio-historical complexity of the question to a cultural dynamic. Moreover, as my interlocutors themselves rejected such associations by highlighting their identification with Turkish identity, I also felt I had an ethical responsibility to raise their objections in public in order to counter these accusations. Eventually, despite my own disagreements with the ethico-political orientations of the communities I worked with, as Teitelbaum (2019) recalls of his own research, I began to notice that I had become an advocate for them in public.

Navigating New Socio-Political Terrains

The changing dynamics of society and politics, especially since the 2000s, have forced us to recalibrate our positions, discourses and outlooks (Posocco 2017). The post-9/11 world, as Darryl Li stresses (2020), has normalized the securitization of our social lives. The wars, paralyzing attacks, socio-political destabilizations, uprisings and waves of refugees in the aftermath, and most recently the pandemic have radically altered the political scene, which has witnessed the growing visibility, credibility and legitimacy of previously abjected political discourses. In the Turkish context too, the post-2000 period reflected a radical reconfiguration of the political field, first with the glimpse of a democratic reorganization in the early 2000s, and then with the strong return of the nationalist-authoritarian ethos right into the centre of social and political life. The 2020s, similarly, witnessed the rise of anti-refugee rhetoric and paranoid-conspiratorial outlooks both in everyday and political levels.

Emergent modalities of negotiation, contestation and oppression have generated much of the suffering and vulnerability that anthropology has long been concerned with, especially in non-western settings, through its focus on marginalized, disenfran-

chised and oppressed subjects and groups (see Scheper-Hughes 1995). Recent transformations, such as the rise of ethno-populism and the radical right across the globe, however, have brought these conflicts closer, requiring us also to pay attention to how these sufferings are made in the everyday. Without attending to these social dynamics, with which researchers may not necessarily agree, anthropological analysis would lack a critical element of the constitutive tensions and polarizations that characterize our times and societies. For this reason, researchers ought to envisage alternative methodological pathways (especially those unlocked by new online tools and platforms) in order to engage with the intimate elements of their interlocutors' lives without necessarily being drawn into these sometimes toxic and suffocating relationalities. Within this new configuration, I argue that new limits as well as opportunities will only arise for ethnographic conduct if researchers are ready to undergo the necessary methodological, ethical and analytical changes and manoeuvres that are needed to cope with this radical rupture.

Methodologically, how we enter and exit the field, establish rapport with our interlocutors and analyse their involvement in society requires a radical overhaul in the face of such comprehensive transformations. Some of the socialities we focus on — especially those prosecuted by the juridico-political establishment (i.e., Shoshan 2016) — are plagued by a profound suspicion of outsiders, thus rendering the very study of such groups an arduous journey. In my case too, suspicion has been a quite prevalent attitude, albeit not one solely directed towards researchers and other outsiders but permeating all social relations among my interlocutors. Conducting research in such settings, where not only discriminatory rhetoric but also distrust is rampant, emerges as a particularly significant hurdle to be overcome.

Once successful in establishing a rapport, however, researchers must then be prepared to equip themselves with the necessary psychosocial tools to work alongside racist discourses, explicit discrimination and sometimes violence directed at minorities, other disadvantaged groups and political dissidents. The management of these psychosocial reverberations does not merely involve distancing oneself from such repugnant activities, it also requires one to acknowledge, engage with and process such discourses and practices, as well as strategizing what to do in such circumstances. For instance, should one rebuke one's interlocutors' racist rants, as I did with Mustafa? What is to be done when the relations we study actually generate discrimination and violence right in front of our eyes? Should we not intervene? While drafting such strategies, however, one must be aware of the fact that the research process is immensely dynamic: our interlocutors have as much say in the way we are situated in the field as we do. Kerem's discontinuation of our friendship, recounted above, highlights this agentic dynamic. The days of the anthropologist as a rather aloof figure, both geographically and socio-symbolically, seem to be long gone. The conflicts we study surround us all and require us to find new methodological paths along which to continue our craft.

In addition, these experiences demonstrate how what seem to be obstacles to research can be transformed into productive strategies to be pursued analytically, indicat-

ing that the limits the researcher faces might actually say a lot about the way socialities are woven together. The way the state mediated local men's relations to outsiders in Trabzon, for instance, was revealed only through the initial obstacles I experienced. Underscoring how changing socio-political configurations generate and mould new modalities of subject formation, and tracing these seemingly senseless and imminently dangerous narratives, also enabled me to explore how the state's authority is reinforced through extra-legal violence at the hands of civilian actors, in clear contrast to conventional Weberian theorizations of the state as enjoying a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. Rather than withdrawing completely from these seemingly meaningless utterances in the face of threats and insecurity, one can indeed trace their almost incessant eruptions across socialities to determine how the culture of suspicion takes different forms and is enacted eagerly by subjects from different walks of life. Similarly, what seemed, at least at the beginning, to be the senseless circulation of conspiratorial narratives, which can easily be dismissed as untruthful accounts, emerged to be rather productive in revealing how political subjectivities are forged through this masculine performativity of "passing on" (Das 1998) conspiratorial narratives and how the state is enacted through the vigilantism and violent encounters that conspiracies generate.

Theoretically, these endeavours should yield new perspectives, radically changing how we conceive and represent individuals and society. Especially in relation to studies that focus on non-western contexts, such engagements first and foremost challenge our conventional articulations of subjectivity and agency in circumstances of antagonism to power. Radically challenging how the "emancipatory model of agency" and the subjectivity of the liberal-humanist tradition have permeated the anthropological literature so far (see Fassin 2014; Mahmood 2005), the findings of dark ethnographies indicate that subjectivity and agency are not exclusively associated with resistance and subversion (see Butler 1995, 1997), but must be accounted for through instances and processes of docility, consolidation and conformity, obedience and reproduction, as well as negotiation (Mahmood 2005). How can we comprehend the different ways of (political) subjectivation through which subjects align themselves with power and its normative impediments? Attending to the fashioning of subjectivities and the agency of those communities that oppress and inflict violence upon others, anthropological endeavours with nationalist communities that oppose democratic equality, for instance, may very well reveal that subjectivity and agency cannot solely be comprehended through the binary of power and resistance but must also accommodate the modalities within which subjects come to occupy, amend, enforce, extend, hollow out but also consolidate unequal power relations in different contexts (see Saglam 2018).

And yet, analytical insights aside, how was I to proceed with these experiences while forging and maintaining ethically grounded rapport with my interlocutors? Was there a way for me to call my interlocutors friends while distancing myself from their political discourses? How does dark ethnography, as this issue puts it, help us work with new ethical conundrums?

Forging Pathways Ahead

From the outset, ethnography has been characterized by “an ethical orientation to ‘the other’” (Scheper-Hughes 1995:418), even when the socio-cultural gap involved seemed unbridgeable in rethinking the everyday dynamics of the socialities we work with, hence profoundly informing our perspectives in our “work across difference” (Tsing 2015:29). While the ethnographic code of conduct has mostly been configured for our engagement with distant and exotic others that generated insignificant degrees of power over researchers (Asad 1975 and 1979; Kapferer 2013; Moore 1994; Robbins 2013; Trouillot 2003), the wider socio-political changes that have profoundly shaken the contours of our societies in the contemporary world remind us, once again, that the very conventions of our disciplines are about to change. While Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ call (1995) for a more socio-politically engaged anthropology unmistakably imagined ethnography “as a field action” (Scheper-Hughes 1995:419) through which the researcher “colludes with the powerless” (Scheper-Hughes 1995:420) to amend the structural conditions of existence, what are we to do when such collusion with our interlocutors inevitably leads to the oppression of others? Complicating the picture further, we must ask questions as we increasingly live with our interlocutors and live by their decisions — that is, as they are no longer geographically and socio-culturally distant others but co-inhabit our spaces and lives. My interlocutors’ support for nationalist-conservative politics, for instance, had a direct effect on my everyday life in the country. How are we to handle the seemingly unbridgeable political and moral cleavages between our interlocutors and ourselves as researchers in cases when our interlocutors oppose the presumably universal progressive goals and ideals that we cherish and labour to advance?

In his discussion of the afterlives of his research on Scandinavian “nationalists” and the way he negotiated the political backlash, Benjamin Teitelbaum (2019) emphasizes that he defends the honour and integrity of his interlocutors in public, but not their nationalist or racist views and actions. He also stresses that his public advocacy emanates from the reciprocity and friendship — both fundamental principles of the ethnographic craft — he developed with his interlocutors. His endeavours hence aim to generate alternative modalities of ethical engagement for dark ethnography, a process that Hübinette calls “dancing with wolves” (Hübinette 2019:426). In his response to Teitelbaum’s articulations, many prominent anthropologists, including Sindre Bangstad and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, underline their opposition to extending such public advocacy to nationalists, with Bangstad (2019) citing his refusal to defend his radical Islamist interlocutors across public debates. Scheper-Hughes argues that “solidarity is surely not the only intersubjective role and relationship with our informants in the field” and that this “does not mean that one has to be a bystander, let alone a collaborator with radical Nationalist/neofascist genocidal dreams” (Scheper-Hughes 2019:430). This passionate divergence only underlines the urgency of our need to find a path ahead. In this sense, the fundamental question that created and motivated the anthropological craft returns: How are we to relate to and represent the difference?

The cleavages created by dark ethnographies, I note, underline both our approach to difference as an ethical endeavour and how we conceive anthropology as a practice. Our relationship to difference, as I have come to learn through my ethnographic study of nationalist communities in Turkey, was only made possible by recalibrating the ethnographic outlook itself in recent decades to focus on non-victim/subaltern agencies, unlike what Scheper-Hughes does. It does not need to involve an endeavour that both analyses and knows the socialities our interlocutors forge *and simultaneously closes the gap* between our interlocutors and ourselves as researchers.

In his articulations of the practical tactics employed in studying violent and politically charged socialities, Jeffrey Sluka (1990), for good reason, urges researchers to keep their mouths shut and not pose “questions about sensitive political topics” (Sluka 1990:121). Such strategies on the part of the researcher, in which one is not personally engaged in such “sensitive” processes and encounters, no doubt make the research proceed more smoothly. And yet, how would that imperative to distance oneself from one’s research subjects work when one has clear political leanings in contradiction to those that are unfolded in front of one’s eyes, especially when the researcher works “at home” (see Lederman 2006)? My endeavours in contemporary Turkey involve a desire to know more about the dynamics of nationalist-violent socialities, but also strive to forge an ethico-political counter-current. Given my pre-field orientations, why would I not reveal my objections to my interlocutors’ arguments? Plus, if anthropologists are to be clearly differentiated from spies – an accusation we have come to experience more and more (see Açıksöz 2020; Gauvain 2018; Saglam 2021b) – why would researchers disguise their disapproval or obscure their views with academic jargon when our interlocutors pose their challenging questions thanks to our “genuine” rapport? Isn’t this withholding our own views the very definition of a spy, that is, someone who collects data but does not reveal genuine information about themselves?⁵ Especially in this day and age, when we are committed to accounting for the reflexive aspects of anthropological writing, why should one refrain from giving a voice to one’s own political disagreements: would that not be a franker form of rapport deepening our ethical orientation to “the other”?

Here I am not suggesting a we-agree-to-disagree sort of deliberation suitable for Western notions of the public sphere, nor simply advocating to present an “honest” account of one’s research (Sluka 1990:122) with the hope that it fits the expectations of one’s interlocutors. Rather, I suggest creating, or at least not deliberately withdrawing from, instances of contestation, difference and disagreement that, I think, would help the research and its subsequent analysis in two ways: revealing the depth and extent of the political articulations presented by one’s interlocutors, while at the same time transporting the rapport to a different level so that the researcher is not a passive observer who keeps his or her socio-political orientations confidential but who also “opens up” to

5 I am grateful to Dr Silvia Posocco for raising this point during our discussions.

interlocutors. The first point underlines how, through such strivings and breaches, the researcher may acquire a much more comprehensive picture of what really matters to interlocutors. Certainly, my debates with Mustafa, mentioned at the beginning, alongside many others, I felt compelled to initiate or participate, had similar reverberations, demonstrating the socio-cultural judgments undergirding my interlocutors' political orientations. The second point, I argue, underlines the fact that the ethnographic craft is not unidirectional and is especially of value for native ethnographers (see Lederman 2006). Following our debate that day, I came to realize that Mustafa was very eager to provide political insights, even when he knew I would disagree — even without my verbally expressing them. A sense of genuineness, I noted, had been formed through strife.

In this sense, the very acknowledgment of the gap between the values we cherish and those our interlocutors advocate may put forward a new analytic within which these two ethico-political positions do not need to, and maybe even cannot, converge and eventually overlap. In this sense, acquiring a better grasp of the processes of meaning-making and the concrete socio-historical settings within which our interlocutors fashion their subjectivities do not necessarily create empathic alignment with their positions because, to put it bluntly, we now understand better why they act the way they do. Rather, as Teitelbaum indirectly demonstrates, ethnographies must be able to differentiate the honour and integrity of the ethnographer's interlocutors and the ethico-political positions they maintain. Through this differentiation and through an honest embrace of the cleavage between the position the researchers advocate and those of their interlocutors, I suggest that we may engage in an honest and open conversation and begin comprehending the radical configurations of our society and politics.

Reflecting on Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's articulations (1986) around introjection/incorporation — two potential pathways of dealing with loss — Derrida (1986) stresses how the very preservation of the constitutive distance between self and other may indeed be a franker and rather ethical relationship. This commitment to preserve "the otherness of the other", rather than trying to dilute the gap between self and other, as Derrida points out, may guide us in how we approach and subsequently embrace the socio-political cleavages between our "new" interlocutors and our ethico-political ideals.

In her objection to Teitelbaum's public advocacy of the "nationalists", Nancy Scheper-Hughes also affirms this openness about the irreconcilability — at least in certain contexts, such as her study of organ-trafficking in Latin America — of the different socio-political orientations that may be brought together by the ethnographic craft. She claims that "it is both possible and ethical to engage in discussions and disagreements with [her] informants", which she uses to highlight the agency of her interlocutors, something that Teitelbaum also strives to do, albeit through different pathways and ethical modalities: "They have 'let me in'", Scheper-Hughes underlines to justify her open disagreements with her interlocutors, "because they enjoy the discussions, the debates, the challenges, and the differences, because they are not afraid of

disagreement, and because they recognize real rather than false or simulated emotions” (Scheper-Hughes 2019:249). In a similar vein, Stacey Vanderhurst underlines how

[...] friendship specifically provides space for a transparency of purpose and honesty of exchange that would recognize a researcher’s objections to a given political project. It ought to establish the bounds of solidarity, as well as its mandates. Without them, we confuse friendship with unity, a political form of “passing” that fetishizes informants’ stories by removing them from the consequences we understand them to have. It normalizes their ideas rather than explains them. (Vanderhurst 2019:231)

As both Scheper-Hughes and Vanderhurst stress, researchers must be aware of instances when the differences between them and their interlocutors are out in the open and must frankly engage with them without necessarily compromising their ethico-political commitments.

Now reflecting back on the discussion I had with Mustafa around the appointment of Turkish-Armenian Mahçupyan as an advisor to the then prime minister, a similar reckoning was involved: a mutual acknowledgment of difference, however irconcilable it seems. What I experienced after the debate in that small coffee house also reflected the way conventional ethnographic tools and ethical imperatives failed to provide me with the necessary skills for such encounters. I was full of doubt: was it wrong, given the conventions of ethnography (MacClancy 2002; Scheper-Hughes 1995), for me to argue against one of my key interlocutor’s political choices? Had I failed in my craft? In time, I have come to think of the encounter with Mustafa as an instance that took both my ethnographic capabilities and our friendship further, unlocking multiple dimensions that were unavailable to me prior to the debate. I now realize that is only by “opening up” to such vulnerabilities that one can move forward in one’s research.

Conclusion

Drawing on my fieldwork experiences with nationalist communities in contemporary Trabzon, I have explored how the anthropological craft in the 21st century is bound to recalibrate its methodological, analytical and ethical orientations if it is to tackle the ongoing reconfigurations of society and politics. My discussion started with rather practical problems arising out of such engagements with individuals who perpetuate nationalist and discriminatory discourses and legitimize social violence against disadvantaged groups in order to highlight how researchers are becoming increasingly entangled in the conflicts they study. I then moved on to rethink how such engagements unlock a number of analytical potentialities that otherwise remain invisible and force us to rethink how the ethical imperative to “understand” our interlocutors’ social worlds does not necessarily mean bridging the ethico-political divergences between the

researchers and their interlocutors. Rather, I suggest that acknowledging and working alongside this irreconcilable cleavage may actually help us produce useful knowledge and not undermine our commitments to social justice. As Vanderhurst (Vanderhurst 2019:431) argues, ethnographies “must have potential to cut through existing assumptions that have real impact on our worlds”. It is my hope that the analytical possibilities that are unlocked through dark ethnographies such as mine may be a minor step in this direction.

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