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New Perspectives in  
Gender Research

Working Paper Series  
2018, Volume 1

Güler İnce

**Biopolitics and Displaced  
Bodies**

With a Commentary by  
Sabine Hess



GÖTTINGER CENTRUM FÜR  
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GOETTINGEN CENTRE FOR  
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## Göttingen Centre for Gender Studies

Project Office

Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Centrum für Geschlechterforschung

Platz der Göttinger Sieben 7 • D - 37073 Göttingen

Germany

[genderedthoughts@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:genderedthoughts@uni-goettingen.de) | [www.gendered-thoughts.uni-goettingen.de](http://www.gendered-thoughts.uni-goettingen.de)





## **Biopolitics and Displaced Bodies**

Challenging Message and Representation in Refugee Art

*Güler İnce*

Mimar Sinan University; gulerince78@hotmail.com

### **Abstract**

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

### **Keywords**

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

### **Zusammenfassung**

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

### **Schlagworte**

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

## Introduction

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

### 1. “Corpus” and “bare life”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>2</sup> Displayed in September 2016 in Berlin.

<sup>3</sup> The interview with Halil Altındere was conducted by the author in September 2016.

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

### **3. Approaches that suspend the message**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Conclusion**

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

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

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

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

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## Commentary

*Prof. Sabine Hess*

University of Göttingen; shess@uni-goettingen.de

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

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

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

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

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