

The Uncanny Medium

Semiotic Opacity in the Wake of Genocide

by Kabir Tambar

In recent years, Turkey has witnessed the proliferation of new means for representing and mourning the Armenian genocide. This essay examines how the practice of criticizing historical atrocity, central to discourses of human rights, is itself institutionally regimented. Exploring the institutional impetus for critique, the essay offers a theoretical framework for understanding how oppositional groups challenge the parameters that designate the legitimate objects of critique. I focus attention on what I term an uncanny medium of critique, that is, a representational medium that makes the form of its publicity appear at once familiar and unsettling. The medium in question has been developed by the Saturday Mothers—a group that regularly gathers to publicize forcible disappearances that took place largely in Kurdish-majority provinces in the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, the organization has begun to publicly commemorate the deportation and killing of Armenians in 1915. The essay analyzes how the vigils evoke even as they unsettle ideological boundaries that are constitutive of social life in the contemporary nation-state—between public and private, the political and the domestic, and the past and the present. The Saturday Mothers mobilize the discourse of kinship and motherhood that has undergirded a militarized nationalism, but they do so for the sake of claiming familial responsibility for Armenians who have been historically defined as an ethnicized enemy. The group's practices allow us to place at the center of anthropological analysis moments of semiotic opacity, in which the medium that facilitates and undergirds social transactions becomes densely, even disruptively, apparent as a figure within that social field. With the concept of an uncanny medium, I suggest that opacity in mediation can be socially generative and put to political work.

Every week, a group called the Saturday Mothers/Peoples (*Cumartesi Anneleri/İnsanları*) gathers in Istanbul to remember the lives of individuals who were forcibly disappeared by Turkey's state security forces in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ Most of the disappearances took place in Kurdish-majority provinces of Turkey—provinces that, until 2002, were under the rule of a militarized state of emergency (*olağanüstü hal*). Many of the relatives of the disappeared and their supporters are Kurdish; other participants in the gatherings include Turks affiliated with leftist, feminist, or human rights circles. Holding photographs of the disappeared, participants both mourn the presumed deaths and unremittingly demand accountability for them.

Since 2010, the Mothers have devoted one of their gatherings every April to remembering the violence committed by the Ottoman state against Istanbul's Armenian community in 1915, when over 200 Armenian intellectuals, professionals, and community leaders were detained and disappeared. Participants in the Mothers' gathering remain faithful to the form of their vigils: they not only carry photographs of the Ar-

menians to the April gatherings but also describe themselves as kin to the disappeared, even at times claiming the latter as their own children, despite the generational divides and entrenched ethno-nationalist ideologies that separate the mourners from the mourned. How does the medium of the vigil itself enable unexpected intimacies across historical time, undermining political identifications fostered by the nation-state? How might this work of mourning provide an entry point into an anthropological theory of mediation as such?

The Mothers' commemorations of the violence of 1915 are but one of a number of public representations of Armenian life and death that have gradually proliferated in Turkey over the past 10–15 years. These representational efforts have taken place in the shadow of the Turkish state's repeated denials that the violence committed against Armenians in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire amounted to genocide. In some cases, these public articulations openly defy the state's official denial, as when Kurdish politicians have apologized for their

1. Throughout the essay I often use "Mothers" as a shortened version of the name of the group, largely to avoid cumbersome repetition of the full proper name. As will be clear from the ethnographic materials presented below, the group itself includes a wide array of actors that include not only mothers but also siblings, spouses, fathers, and children of the disappeared, as well as other supporters who are not connected to the disappeared through consanguineal kin relations.

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community's role in the deportation, killing, and genocide (*soykırım*, in Turkish) of the Armenian population. In other cases, the question of recognition is secondary to the task of reconstructing the past and possible future of Armenian existence within what is today considered Turkish territory, as in the case of efforts to renovate an Armenian church in Diyarbakır and in the calls of local Kurdish politicians for Armenians to return to the city. Other representational vehicles have included academic workshops at private universities, editorial commentaries by journalists, published memoirs, oral histories, art exhibitions, and commemorative events sponsored by human rights organizations.

These representational media are not coordinated by a single agency, nor are they necessarily pursuing a single aim, although the question of recognition is present across them. The media forms themselves derive from different histories, which shape the social and political work they can be tasked to perform. For instance, a photography exhibition held in Istanbul in 2013, entitled "Bearing Witness to the Lost History of an Armenian Family through the Lens of the Dildilian Brothers," presented professional photographs that were taken by the Dildilian family from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century and were later reassembled by their descendants. Many of the photographs were staged family portraits. While much could be analyzed, here, concerning the narrative framing of the exhibition, I wish to highlight only that the medium of a photography exhibition, especially one centered on family portraits, has become a staple of genocide commemoration in numerous contexts, including representations of Jewish life prior to the Nazi Holocaust (Hirsch 2012). At the opening of the exhibition, organizers and academics alike spoke at length about the genocide and the importance of its recognition within Turkey, but even prior to such discourses, the medium of the exhibition, connected to a familiar global representational regime, already pointed to other contexts of genocide commemoration.

When Kurdish politicians apologize for the Kurds' role in the genocide, they too are adopting a familiar, globally resonant medium of representation, albeit one whose history is distinct from the photography exhibition. Trouillot (2001) notes the emergence, beginning in the late 1980s, of a wave of collective apologies for events of historical violence—for instance, efforts by evangelical Protestants in 1996 to apologize for the Crusades, Tony Blair's apology for the Great Famine of Ireland, and Bill Clinton's apology for slavery in the Americas. We can now add to this list the apology delivered by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's then Prime Minister (current President), for state violence enacted in the Dersim region in the 1930s against Alevi Kurds (for an incisive critique of the apology, see Ayata and Hakyemez 2013; see also Tambar 2014:133–137). He also issued a statement of condolence (*taziye*) in 2014 for the Armenians killed in 1915, in which he nonetheless failed to recognize the events as genocide and repudiated efforts to make them cause for political activism today (BBC 2014). In drawing together these events, my purpose is not to imply that

the politics in each case are identical but, following Trouillot, to suggest that collective apologies constitute a relatively established post-Cold War practice. Turkish and Kurdish politicians who adopt this practice speak to not only domestic audiences but international ones as well. For the photography exhibition and the public apology, if in different ways, the representational medium presupposes a history of prior contexts of use, and it opens up channels of local and global address.

Through these visual and discursive media, numerous intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and organizations in Turkey have begun to mount a "narrative of counterdenial" (Göçek 2015:466).² In this essay, I offer an anthropological approach to the study of this nascent narrative, centering my ethnographic attention on the Mothers' vigils. Examining the work of the medium in constraining and shaping this narrative, I investigate the histories from which it derives and the forms of political relationality it makes imaginable.

Attending to these issues is especially relevant in a moment when the hegemonic language of global politics, especially apparent in the discourse of human rights, has selectively appropriated the critique of catastrophic violence but has done so in ways that often defer rather than support claims of distributive justice. Robert Meister (2011) argues that the dominant discourse of human rights in an era of ascendant neoliberalism positions itself as "after evil"—that is, after slavery, apartheid, and genocide. Meister submits that this discourse enables a critique of violence but one that locates that violence in the historical past. In this form, a critique of state violence can be operationalized by state authorities themselves, obfuscating how aspects of historical violence continue to structure the political present.³ This imaginary of critique does not of course exhaust the possibilities of criticism as such, but it does demand that we attend to the specificity of the form that it assumes. Analyzing the mediatory practices that render historical violence intelligible allows us to investigate the social and historical formation of criticism itself, asking how existing expressions of critique conform to or challenge institutional hierarchies.

The Mothers' assemblies, like the photography exhibition and the historical apology, partake of a distinctive representational regime, perhaps most famously emblemized by Mothers groups across Latin America. While these gatherings have been precariously established in Turkey—in fact, the Mothers stopped assembling altogether in 1999 due to police pressure, only resuming their gatherings 10 years later—they have nonetheless been globally visible, supported by organi-

2. For critiques of how this narrative has emerged among Turkish intellectuals and civil society groups, see Ayata (2015); Bayraktar (2015); Erbal (2012).

3. The point is not only that discourses of human rights, which ostensibly transcend national boundaries, remain dependent on nation-states for their realization and enforcement (cf. Asad 2003) but that the political imaginary of the state—in Turkey as elsewhere—has been rearticulated in terms of the historical temporality of this critique.

zations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Such organizations recognize the Saturday Mothers' gatherings as an instance of a globally circulating medium of protest.

In describing the Mothers' vigils as a representational medium, I am referring to the way that the gatherings coordinate in a single practice a number of distinct formal elements: styles of narrative and oratory, visual cues such as photographs of the disappeared, ways of inhabiting urban space, and performances of kinship. The choreographing of these elements creates a medium for public address that intervenes in the normative conditions of political speech. It does so, I argue, by both evoking and unsettling ideological boundaries that produce the dominant chronotope of politics in the nation-state: the spatial and gendered distinction of the political from the domestic and the temporal separation of the political present from a past marred by violence.

In this act of both presupposing and disrupting the statist political imaginary, the Mothers' vigils constitute what I call an uncanny medium, that is, a medium that appeals to recognizable tropes of social and political belonging but in ways that are estranging. The uncanny is an especially relevant category for thinking about the critical labor performed by commemorations of genocide. Efforts to represent violence against Armenians have confronted prohibitions, at once formally imposed on public discourse and tacitly structuring it. The near total massacre of Armenians in the late Ottoman Empire and the subsequent confiscation and redistribution of their properties acquired the status of a public secret in the Turkish Republic that emerged after the empire's collapse—something that is widely known but not openly discussed and where the prohibition on speech carries an aura.⁴ The restriction of speech in such settings is not only handed down externally in the form of the law, and it cannot therefore be opposed through counterlegislation or protests against policy alone. The silences it produces are generative of an affective ordering of public life. The challenge for critics of state violence is to construct representational media that can be grounded within the very public whose structuring principles they otherwise seek to disturb.

In their public gatherings, the Mothers confront a public secret concerning the state's use of disappearance as a tactic of repression and intimidation against oppositional political groups (Karaman 2016; cf. Slyomovics's [2005] account of Morocco).⁵ Their vigils provide an opportunity to think ex-

pansively about the relationship that criticism forges with public secrecy: criticism that is not only defiantly transgressive in the content of its speech but that makes the medium of its publicity—the stage on which it appears, the social actors who can be offered a position on it, and the roles they can be presumed to inhabit—appear in ways that are unsettling.

The Mothers' effort to constitute an uncanny medium, one that has been more recently repurposed to mourn the Armenian massacres, holds wide relevance for thinking about the possibilities for a critique of state violence more generally. If, as Meister argues, the human rights framework that often underscores that critique serves in fact to conceal violence it claims to expose, then how might the medium of critique itself be subjected to scrutiny? The Mothers' gatherings, in their uncanny recasting of the political, suggest a mode of enacting critique that reflexively reveals the limits of its own conditions of possibility.

In focusing on the role of the medium in these efforts at disclosing public secrets, my aim is also to make this material speak to core issues within anthropology concerned with social mediation more generally. The Saturday Mothers provide an instructive empirical site because the medium that enables a public footing for their speech functions by defamiliarizing the very conditions of political participation. The group's practices allow us to place at the center of anthropological analysis moments of semiotic opacity, in which the medium that facilitates and undergirds social transactions becomes densely, even disruptively, apparent as a figure within that social field. Anthropologists have often interpreted moments when a medium becomes disruptive as episodes of malfunctioning or breakdown—situations that call for repair. With the concept of an uncanny medium, I suggest instead that opacity in mediation can be socially generative and put to political work. This essay pursues two complementary aims: to analyze the critique of state violence as a practice contingent on its representational media and to develop the notion of an uncanny medium to reframe anthropological approaches to mediation.

Four Theses on Mediation

Describing a social gathering or event as a medium may seem counterintuitive. It is conventional to think of an event as itself mediated by something else, such as technologies and infrastructures. According to Boyer (2007), the term "media," as the collective set of institutions and instruments of mass communication, has a relatively recent history. It came to be as-

4. On the seizure and redistribution of Armenian properties, see Akçam and Kurt (2015); Üngör and Polatel (2011). For anthropological reflections on public secrecy and its affective investments, see Jones (2014); Manderson et al. (2015); Taussig (1999).

5. That disappearance is rendered both secret and public by state authorities is attested to in a recent report on enforced disappearance in Turkey:

In consideration of the fact that the majority of people who were forcibly disappeared were taken either during raids on their homes,

in full view of their family; or from public places such as streets, workplaces, or village squares, the most significant aspect of the strategy of denial emerges: the interrogation team is fully authorized to take anyone it wants in full view of everyone, and then to deny that they are holding them. . . . There is both a secret, and things that are kept unsaid, and a strange candidness, bordering on boasting. (Göral, Işık, and Kaya 2013:39–40)

sociated with newspapers and magazines, largely as vehicles of advertising, only in the early twentieth century. After the 1950s and especially after the 1970s, it acquired the connotations commonly assigned to it today, including the kinds of communicative technologies often termed “new media.” In that specific sense, participants in a rally might make use of media: networking with one another, recording themselves and others, speaking to news reporters, or broadcasting a message via radio, television, the internet, and so on.

Analyzing an event as a medium jars with this understanding of the term. It asks us to think of a medium not simply as an instrument that an already constituted group uses to achieve an end they previously identified but rather as constitutive of the processes by which actors come to understand their actions as collectively motivated, historically embedded, and morally valued. In short, it asks us to conceptualize a medium as constitutive of social process.⁶

To refer to a meeting of individuals as a medium implies that it is something more than a spontaneous coming together. It presupposes conventions of speech and gesture, of assembly and audience, and of social identification and differentiation. When coordinated as a relatively stable practice that is repeated over time, such conventions come to be recognizable as a social type, comparable to other like instances of their invocation and enactment. Understood to function as a medium, an act of gathering can be analyzed for the historical forms it references and for the conceptions of society and politics that it makes imaginable.

The vigils could plausibly be explored as a political spectacle (Taylor 1997), as an interactive speech genre (Bakhtin 1986; Briggs and Bauman 1992), or as part of a repertoire of contention (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). While aspects of each of these analytics will be relevant to what follows, I describe the Mothers’ meetings as a medium to frame a more specific tension centered on the ideological construal of mediation itself. The gatherings vacillate between two seemingly opposing poles: on the one hand, they foreground mothers mourning for their sons—an emotionality taken by many onlookers and participants in this setting as natural and politically unmediated; on the other hand, the vigils for the disappeared themselves constitute a globally recognizable form of protest against state violence. The notion that the gatherings operate as a medium, shaping and constraining the actions it enables, is at once disavowed and embraced. The formal organization of the medium seems to recede out of view, even as it erupts as the message itself.

6. Recent scholarship on religion and media reinforces this point. This research describes debates within various Muslim and Christian communities about the uses of new audiovisual technologies, demonstrating that disputes center not on instrumentality or efficiency per se but on the forms of ethical sociality and subjectivity these media foster (e.g., Eisenlohr 2009; Engelke 2010; Hirschkind 2006; Larkin 2008; Meyer 2010). For broader reflections on mediation as social process, see Boyer (2012); Gershon and Manning (2014); Mazzarella (2004).

The ambiguity about whether these meetings are even recognizable as a medium of political critique may at first glance render this site marginal to a study of media and mediation, but this ostensible marginality also allows us to decenter that field of scholarship from the technological objects with which it is so often associated. We can proceed to ask a set of more foundational questions concerned with ideological delimitation: how does a medium become publicly apparent as such? In what ways does the public recognizability of a medium itself disclose parameters of governance? Posing such questions allows us to investigate how a medium that enables criticism of the state might nonetheless function within the dominant dispensation of politics that it works to destabilize.

Anthropologists across a number of subfields have broached questions about when and how a medium becomes publicly visible but often in ways that sideline the ideological framing of mediation. A prevailing line of analysis explores moments when the medium in question breaks down, claiming that it loses the ability to be taken for granted when it ceases to work properly. Hence, people become aware of the mediating interfaces that bind humans and objects when the tool they are using fails to function as expected (Hodder 2012); they reconsider the socially mediated character of monetary value in moments of financial crisis (Maurer 2006); they reflect on the mediated conditions of their social networks when their infrastructural supports collapse (Elyachar 2010); or they reflexively reason about the form of their actions when everyday moral relations become untenable (Zigon 2007). While moments of breakdown are important, analytical framings that privilege such moments often work from two premises that I would like to challenge: first, that in its normal workings a medium is relatively imperceptible, and second, that the return to normalcy, as signaled by the silent functioning of the medium, is ultimately sought after.⁷

A medium may be invisible not because it is working as designed but because its functioning is systematically obfuscated. The most prominent ideologies of global governance today frequently mask the forms of media at their disposal: neoliberal ideologies of transparency in government disavow the sociopolitical contingencies of the technologies they champion (Mazzarella 2006); human rights regimes often promote images of suffering as purportedly transparent, unmediated expressions of humanity (Allen 2009); and discourses of civil society commonly express skepticism of politics as such, viewing it as ideologically and inauthentically mediated (Walton 2013).

It is against these demands for immediacy that a medium misaligned with the reigning ideology can emerge as “problematically visible” (Eisenlohr 2009:285). Some media, however, are built to be impertinent. Parody often works by adopting and rendering comically apparent the very medium that it mocks. Fake news programs and satirical political

7. See also Larkin (2013) for a critique of the trope of breakdown in anthropological studies of infrastructure.

parties “expose ideological principles that usually operate invisibly” within the mechanisms of party discourse or news production (Boyer 2013; Boyer and Yurchak 2010:203). In parody, the medium becomes visible not when it ceases to function but when it is redeployed to uncanny effect. The aim is not to repair the medium—to make it once more a transparent, smoothly functioning mechanism of political discourse. To the contrary, the aim is to keep its working principles apparent to continually challenge mass audiences and corporate media conglomerates alike.

The notion that a medium under certain conditions becomes visible or apparent can be reframed in more formal terms as the process by which social actors come to treat it as an indexical sign—which is to say, a sign that is spatiotemporally contiguous with the semiotic materials that it mediates.⁸ As an index, a medium not only provides a ground for social interaction but also emerges as a figure within that interaction. It functions within the same field of sociocultural life as the goods that the medium transports or the words it allows to be spoken.

When the medium in question is a vigil for the disappeared, we can track this figure-ground relationship by posing the following questions: how does the medium of public criticism impose its own indexical presence within public life, not only by facilitating a discourse that opposes state violence but also by allocating social roles for mourning and motherhood and for criticism and political engagement? In what way is the vigil, in its social ascriptions, congruent with or disruptive of institutionalized models of public interaction?

I want to develop from this discussion four theses on the concept of a medium. These four points offer a framework for analyzing the critique of state violence in an era when the political mediation of that criticism is commonly repudiated:

1. *The opacity of the medium.* A medium is never simply something that conveys other semiotic materials from one location to another; it is always potentially recognizable as an indexical sign in its own right, operating within the same social field of the signs it mediates. I use the phrase “the opacity of the medium” to ask how social actors come to view a given medium not as a transparent facilitator of social life but as presupposing a political history that productively constrains the social forms it can enable. We can ethnographically investigate how a medium emerges as a “matter of concern,” in Latour’s (2005) terms, where its histories of use, the social formations it prescribes, and the institutions that stabilize it are interrogated.
2. *Ideological conditions of opacity.* What requires careful study is not only the moment when a medium breaks down but the ideological conditions that shape how social actors come to construe a medium as opaque rather than transparent: as appropriate to context or as excessive and unstable; as constraining the ability to maneuver or as an

affordance for further action. The analytical task is to specify the conditions in which social actors come to view a medium’s historical forms and cues as sociopolitically significant.

3. *Uncanny mediation.* The problematic visibility of a medium—its opacity, in the terms I am developing here—is not necessarily an impediment to action. It can be a productive element of a medium’s functioning, and indeed it can be precisely what is at stake in the use of a certain medium. An uncanny medium, as I term it, is one in which users employ its problematic opacity to estrange audiences from the expected functioning of the medium.
4. *Processes of repurposing.* Especially relevant to a historically minded anthropological analysis are moments when social actors repurpose a medium. Formed under distinctive historical conditions, a medium’s repurposing in new contexts references back to the ideological associations of its prior contexts of use and then brings them to bear on the social setting in which it has become newly relevant. When an uncanny medium is repurposed, social actors activate tensions that were already internal to the medium’s functioning to make those tensions disturbingly visible in another context.

The representational medium developed by the Saturday Mothers that I describe below suggests two senses of the uncanny, each contributing to efforts at unsettling state-centered understandings of politics.⁹ In his classic essay on the uncanny, Freud ([1919] 1959) notes that *Unheimlich*—the unhomely—is not in fact the opposite of *Heimlich* (native, familiar, belonging to home). In experiences of the uncanny, the two often unexpectedly coincide (see also Navaro-Yashin 2012). For the purposes of a trenchant critique of the state, the Mothers’ assemblies employ an ideology of domesticity and motherhood that has been strongly supported by the state itself.

The medium discussed here also attests to an uncanniness that arises from the intimation that the violence of the past, thought to be overcome, lingers within the present, troubling prevailing understandings of political progress. The Mothers’ actions often resemble what Wilder (2015:15) describes as “the untimely,” when “people act as if they exist [in] or can address a historical epoch that is not their own.”¹⁰

This representational medium is not one that becomes troubling through malfunctioning. The medium itself is designed to be problematically visible. Moreover, it is precisely this discomfiting visibility that is subsequently put to work when the medium is repurposed for the sake of remembering the violence against Armenians. If I stress that the medium is uncanny, it is because it is not simply a venue for expressing a

9. Sime (2013) argues that the disappeared are suggestive of the uncanny because they seem to be suspended between life and death. My own concerns here are focused not on the disappeared as such but on the uncanny features of the medium through which they are commemorated.

10. See also Stewart (2017), who describes “uncanny histories” in which “the past is not in its expected place” (130).

8. For elaborations of this understanding of indexicality, see Parmentier (1994); Silverstein (1976).

political grievance. Its very form is meant to induce an estrangement in its audiences from the social and political norms of everyday life.

Histories of the Medium

There have been over 1,300 enforced disappearances in Turkey since the 1980 military coup d'état, and they took place overwhelmingly in the 1990s in the Kurdish-majority provinces of the country, which had been under a state of emergency (Göral, Işık, and Kaya 2013). Alongside armed conflict waged between the Turkish military and PKK guerrillas (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, the Kurdistan Workers' Party), state authorities employed multiple modalities of violence in its efforts at regulating Kurdish politics: detaining Kurdish politicians and supporters without trial; restricting their political campaigning; repeatedly banning pro-Kurdish parties; searching party offices; and seizing party properties. There were also at least 112 extrajudicial killings of Kurdish politicians and activists between 1990 and 2007 (Watts 2010:100).

Enforced disappearance in the region was one element in the broader apparatus of emergency rule. Targets of forcible disappearance included politicians, activists, and militants, as well as individuals who were not formally affiliated with political organizations. Alpkaya (1995) distinguishes three groups among the disappeared: leftist militants involved in armed struggle; Kurdish political leaders, journalists, trade unionists, and human rights activists; and ordinary Kurds living in regions under the state of emergency.

The Saturday Mothers first began to organize public vigils in Istanbul in the mid-1990s, at a time when the number of disappearances was escalating rapidly. Participants in the gatherings included both the relatives of the disappeared and a contingent of feminist and human rights activists. The activists in particular were already involved in protesting the harassment and violence faced by Kurdish civilians, for instance by launching the campaign *Arkadaşıma dokunma* (Don't touch my friend). The campaign had been modeled on similar forms of protest against racism in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany (Günaysu 2014b). These activists were also aware of the mothers-of-the-disappeared campaigns in Latin America, and when they started to organize against the enforced disappearances taking place in Turkey they drew on that model (Göker 2011). From the outset, some of the group's founding organizers were thinking about politics in terms of the medium in which it takes form and becomes transportable across contexts.

State security forces took a number of distinctive stances toward the Saturday Mothers' vigils during the 1990s. At certain moments, the group was permitted to assemble without physical harassment, but the state and state-supporting news outlets nonetheless sought to counter and delegitimize their public presence by celebrating a rival mothers organization that congregated at the graves of Turkish soldiers—the “mothers of the martyred.” At other moments, security forces inter-

vened violently in the gatherings for the disappeared, arresting and detaining participants. In 1999, the Saturday Mothers decided to stop their public vigils largely as a result of the violence of police interventions. By that point, 431 individuals had been arrested, some held in custody for up to 5 days, and 40 participants had been put on trial (Göker 2011).

The Mothers restarted their public campaigns in 2009 amid what many had hoped was a liberalizing moment in Turkish politics. The ruling government led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had begun to bring military officials to trial, introduced constitutional reforms in 2010 that lifted immunity from prosecution for the officers who had led the 1980 coup, and proclaimed a “democratic opening” meant to promote discussion of the political grievances of Alevi and Kurdish communities. Motivated in part by its opposition to the Kemalist establishment (including not only the Republican People's Party but also unelected branches of state such as the constitutional court and the military), AKP at the time supported and emboldened a public discourse critical of military rule and its history of coercive interventions (Bali 2012; White 2013).

It was in this environment that the Mothers found a new footing for their public vigils. As we will see below, Prime Minister Erdoğan himself publicly spoke with remorse about state violence in Kurdish-majority regions, albeit in ways that suited his party's political agenda. Participants in the Mothers' gatherings have oriented their demands for justice in ways that at once echo and disrupt the institutionally empowered discourse of critique.

Today it is common to hear speakers at the vigils, especially those who were active participants in the 1990s, reflect on the history of the gatherings themselves, commemorating the labor and the risks that have gone into establishing their medium of expression. At one event that I attended, many attendees spoke about Kiraz Şahin, a longtime participant in the vigils who had died earlier that week.¹¹ Those who spoke at the vigil emphasized the sense of kinship that they had collectively forged over time. Many speakers said that Şahin's children, as well as their own, grew up in the square where they assemble. One woman reflected, “We became a family [in this square] over 19 years.”¹² The sense of time passing, evoked by the image of raising their children and becoming a family together, is set against the backdrop of the gatherings themselves.

Participants also often describe the duration of time that they have had to wait for the rectification of the injustices they have suffered and the impunity that state authorities responsible for the disappearances continue to enjoy. The same woman who spoke about becoming a family together continued her statement by morally condemning the reluctance of governing powers to bring the perpetrators of the disap-

11. Şahin's husband, İsmail Şahin, was forcibly disappeared on January 18, 1996.

12. Audio recording on file with the author, Istanbul, February 28, 2015.

pearances to justice: “We speak to those without a conscience, we speak to those who talk about democracy, we speak to those who govern this country: you lack a conscience. In this country there is neither conscience nor law. There’s nothing. If [conscience or law] existed, then right now she [Kiraz Şahin] would be buried next to the gravestone of her husband.”¹³ In this statement, the continuing absence of that gravestone is testimony to an ongoing injustice. Coupled with the feeling of familial intimacy that the group has forged over time, the critique of state violence evokes a distinctive historical pathos.

It was only in 2010 that the Mothers first commemorated the violence against Armenians. They extended their critique of state violence, connecting their grievances against enforced disappearances of the 1980s and 1990s to a critique of the genocide of 1915. As I indicated at the outset of this essay, there has been a recent uptick in public discourse in Turkey about the violence faced by Armenians in the early twentieth century. The director of a human rights organization in Istanbul suggested to me that public discourse on the Armenian past and present in Turkey started to develop more rapidly after the assassination of the Istanbul-based Armenian intellectual Hrant Dink by a right-wing nationalist in 2007. Every year since that murder, massive crowds have rallied in Istanbul to remember Dink, chanting a slogan of identification not only with the intellectual but with his ethnic community: “We are all Hrant, we are all Armenian.”

Participants in the Mothers’ vigils have attended these commemorations, in addition to organizing their own remembrances of the violence of 1915. I will argue later in the essay that the medium of their vigils also shapes a mode of identifying with the Armenian population but different in kind from the slogan chanted at the Dink memorials. The vigils enable an identification mediated by notions of kinship and motherhood, linking the events of 1915 to the more recent disappearances.

It is not quite accurate to say that the Mothers, in their vigils, are bringing together two different issues—disappearance and genocide. Instead, the vigils institute an “analogical imperative,” in Visweswaran’s (2010:16) terms, that highlights underlying connections and renders commensurable two clusters of issues commonly held to be distinct. They draw attention to the fact that the Ottoman state in fact made use of the tactic of disappearance when it detained and then disappeared over 200 Armenian intellectuals, professionals, and politicians on April 24, 1915. The medium allows participants not only to see the disappearances of the 1980s and 1990s as preceded by the violence of genocide but also to view the extermination of the Armenian community in the late Ottoman Empire as an unresolved element of the political present.

This act of commensuration is only in part about applying the term “enforced disappearance” to the earlier event. To the extent that this conceptual extension takes place in the vigils themselves, it is worth looking more carefully at the medium

of public mourning—its forms of speech, its projected audiences, its ascribed kinship roles, and its historical temporalities. As it is made relevant to the task of recognizing genocide, the medium itself entails a substantial reimagining of sociohistorical relationships, binding together communities commonly deemed distinct and connecting events usually perceived to be separated in time.

An Alienating Medium

Before coming to the Mothers’ commemorations of 1915, I want to elaborate some of the characteristics of the medium in its more typical form of mourning the disappeared of the 1980s and 1990s. Efforts to publicly remember the disappeared face extraordinary challenges. Frequently, the bodies of the disappeared have not been found or identified. The Mothers in Turkey often demand the return of the bones of their children. Many of the mothers have reached old age, and some, such as Kiraz Şahin mentioned above, have themselves died. The urgency of the demand has heightened—to be able to bury their children before their own death. The commemorative events commonly produce the vexing condition of mourning without a body or a marked grave, what Kurds sometimes describe as a “bad death” (Aras 2014:139).¹⁴ Given the absence of official records of the deaths themselves, there is the additional challenge of constructing sociopolitical memory without an archive.

The relatives of the disappeared have tried to overcome these challenges, demanding that the state exhume mass graves and make the bodies available for a proper burial. The gatherings themselves, however, function not by eradicating the uncertainty that fissures their acts of remembrance—of what transpired, of where the bodies are located—but by struggling to make the uncertainty itself publicly visible. The issue is not simply whether and how certain lives are rendered ungrivable (Butler 2009) but how the impasses of mourning and memory are themselves staged.

The staging of these impasses is not unambiguously translated into representational forms that onlookers and even supporters recognize as political. Sevda, a human rights lawyer who had worked with the Mothers in Istanbul and often participated in their weekly gatherings, was a strong supporter of the group, but she also expressed frustration with some of the leading organizers: “They emphasize issues of conscience (*vicdan*), and that is important, but they avoid talking about politics. The people who were disappeared, those people whose photographs they hold up, were socialists and Kurdish activists.”¹⁵ Sevda insisted that the disappeared were detained and killed because of their politics, and she was disheartened that the Mothers do not make this apparent in their meetings.

14. For comparable discourses on “bad death” in another cultural context, see Seremetakis (1991). On the way that Kurdish political memory has more generally been shaped by disappearances of dead bodies and the absence of marked graves, see Özsoy (2013).

15. Interview with the author, Istanbul, June 12, 2014.

13. See n. 12 above.

She added that in the past she used to come to the gatherings as part of a leftist political party, but the organizers demanded that participants not present themselves as party affiliates. They did not want the gatherings to be associated with particular political platforms.

Sevda's complaint resonates with recent critical scholarship on contemporary global regimes of human rights, which has argued that from the late 1970s and early 1980s dominant institutional agencies positioned this discourse against the political polarizations of the late Cold War, claiming to stand apart from politics as such (Moyn 2010; Zigon 2013). The depoliticizing rhetoric in turn has often worked perniciously to adjudicate who is deserving of attention and resources as a victim of some abuse while delegitimizing the struggles of those who more directly challenge structural violence (Babül 2015; Ticktin 2011). Yet in the case of the Mothers, as Sevda's own sympathy with the group suggests, the use of certain apolitical tropes associated with human rights discourse is also connected to the demand that the state officials responsible for the disappearances—from local police officials and governors to prime ministers and presidents of the republic—be brought to justice.

The somewhat vexing question of whether or how to designate the Mothers' activities as political is only in part about the topics of discourse they foreground or discourage. It is also about how speech is performed through this medium. At their events, most participants stand silently, holding a photograph of a disappeared individual. The photographs that are used for this purpose tend to be the formal images found on the state identity cards given to all Turkish citizens. One attendee mentioned to me that these official photographs are among the few images that many families possess of their disappeared relatives, as most of them had lacked the luxury of owning a camera in the 1980s and 1990s. In the vigils, the elderly, especially mothers themselves, sit in front of the group, photographs in hand. They face passing crowds on the street and a line of journalists reporting on the event. Relatives or friends who knew the individual being commemorated that particular week take turns speaking.

One of the founding organizers of the group, Nimet Tanrıku (2003), indicates that they concertedly attempted to use an "unadorned" (*yalın*) language, whose moral and political significance could be understood by anyone in society, from a university professor to a factory worker. The emphasis on unadorned language was not only about the words used or the complexity of the discourse adopted. As a language ideology, it also marked a distinction from conventions of political protest. While speeches at the vigils are often emotionally charged and given to strong critique of state officials and politicians, participants do not employ speech genres more conventionally associated with the spectacle of mass politics. Erkan Kayılı (2004), an early participant of the meetings, has written that the group sometimes came into conflict with leftist organizations, who otherwise supported them, because the Mothers insisted that supporters refrain from shouting protest slogans

or carrying political banners. Tanrıku (2003) also notes that it was not easy for the organizers of these gatherings to control the mode of participation of protestors. She mentions that it was challenging to contain the anger of younger participants, who were outraged at the abuses of human rights. It was difficult, she writes, to get them to abide by the "quiet" (*sessiz*) style of protest. The Mothers were trying to construct a medium that was not assimilable to more familiar repertoires of political mobilization.

Faced with the organizers' resistance to the formal terrain of politics, an analyst aiming to locate these gatherings within that terrain risks being backed into a corner, either criticizing the group for depoliticizing the disappearances or simply validating their actions as political, by ignoring the group's own resistance to the concept. As an alternative, it is worth remaining ethnographically attentive to how the boundary between the nonpolitical and the political is drawn in practice (Candea 2011) and taking seriously efforts to unsettle the normative forms of politics (Yurchak 2008).

In the Mothers' gatherings, the interplay between the apolitical and the political is given its most uncanny guise in the figure of motherhood. The gendered nature of these assemblies has garnered considerable analysis elsewhere (Arat 1999; Baydar and İvegen 2006; Bozkurt and Kaya 2014; Göker 2011; Karaman 2016). Building on that work, I am especially interested in the tensions raised by the group's portrayal of motherhood. In Turkey, as in many industrialized capitalist states, motherhood is conventionally associated with domesticity and the institution of the family. Understood as private rather than public, the social role of motherhood is commonly posited as outside of politics proper, but as critical scholarship has suggested, this positioning has itself been part of a nationalist framing, in which the family serves as the site for nurturing future citizens and reproducing the national body (Altınay 2004; Sirman 2007). In the gatherings of the Saturday Mothers, the familial scene of mothers mourning for their children is not repudiated but put prominently on display. The nationalist framing of motherhood is one of the ideological conditions of possibility of the Mothers' gatherings in contemporary Turkey. However, the act of mourning is conjoined to polemics against the militarized forms of state authority that led to the disappearances. The ostensibly prepolitical emotionalism normatively associated with motherhood and domesticity becomes here the ground of a critique of the militarized state (see also Taylor 1997 on the politics of motherhood in Argentina).

Another way that this medium of commemoration troubles the reigning forms of politics is by dislocating statist conceptions of progress. At the time when I was conducting fieldwork for this essay between 2013 and 2015, the Turkish state was openly engaging in negotiations with the PKK. The PKK had agreed to a cease-fire and had been withdrawing their forces from Turkey. The Turkish media referred to these transformations as a "peace process" (*barış süreci*) or a "resolution process" (*çözüm süreci*). Prime Minister Erdoğan was

touting the importance of the negotiations. Attending the opening of a new airport in the eastern Kurdish-majority town of Şırnak, Erdoğan acknowledged that “inhuman tortures” were committed in that region of the country. “We are not looking to the sufferings of the past,” he continued, “but to a shared future. . . . As the peace process progresses, we will solve these problems not through a settling of accounts (*hesaplaşarak*) but through reconciliation (*helalleşerek*)” (Türkiye Gazetesi 2013).

The term *helalleşme* that Erdoğan invokes here operates in a rapidly evolving discursive field in contemporary Turkey. My own translation of it as “reconciliation” is provisional and does not fully capture its wider range of connotations. I asked a number of interlocutors in Turkey to help clarify its meaning, and I quickly learned that its application to political contexts is by no means settled. A Kurdish activist told me that it is difficult to find a direct English translation for *helalleşme* but nonetheless suggested “reconciliation.” He pointed out the fact that both the English and the Turkish terms derive from religious contexts.¹⁶ A Turkish woman who has been active in mass protests against the government, such as the Gezi Park protests, stressed instead that *helalleşme* implies forgiveness and making peace, as for instance at Muslim funerals when individuals are asked to forgive the deceased for past deeds.¹⁷ It can also indicate compromise and agreement (see Kaya 2015 on this point). A curator at an arts space in Istanbul who has organized exhibitions on state violence and historical apologies expressed reservations about using *helalleşme* to indicate the kind of action required to promote a just reconciliation today. “My problem is not with its religious associations,” she maintained, “but that we are not yet ready to speak of *helalleşme*. We first need to acknowledge what Turks did to Kurds.” She preferred to speak about “facing the past” (*geçmişle yüzleşme*).¹⁸ My efforts to ask various interlocutors about the meaning of *helalleşme* invariably failed to produce a single definition or suitable translation, but the discussions suggested that the field of debate within which the term circulates centers on its implied temporality: does the brokering of peace indicate that the conflict has ended, has momentarily subsided, or continues in new ways?¹⁹

Borneman (2011:61) indicates that a focus on temporality is integral to calls for reconciliation across many contexts of attempted ethnic cleansing, in which the groups involved are required to share “a present that is non-repetitive.” Reconciliation, Borneman maintains, involves a “sense of ending” that

breaks from existing conflictual relations and a “sense of beginning” that indicates new possibilities for affinity. I would add that the question of whether the past has truly ended—whether a situation can in fact be described as “postconflict”—is often the source of extraordinary contention (see also Bryant 2014).

The pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) was supportive of the peace process, but its representatives were frequently frustrated by the sense conveyed by the government that the cease-fire and withdrawal of the PKK were sufficient to claim that peace had been achieved. For the BDP, peace would require a more thoroughgoing transformation in the structure of political life—for instance, strengthening institutional support for Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights, decentralizing certain aspects of statecraft to local municipalities, and granting amnesty to political prisoners.

Many among the Saturday Mothers shared the concern that the government had prematurely declared the achievement of peace. Like the BDP, many in the group were supportive of the peace process but not of the presumed temporal relationships of ending and beginning implied in official discourse. One participant in the gatherings—the sister of a leftist activist who had been forcibly disappeared in 1995—told me, “if the state does not reconcile with us [the Saturday Mothers] (*bizimle helalleşmeden*), then there can be no lasting peace.” At a Saturday Mothers gathering that I attended in Diyarbakır in July 2013, a representative from the Human Rights Organization (İHD) took up Erdoğan’s call for reconciliation but redefined its prerequisites:

Reconciliation is crucially important, but what kind of reconciliation (*Helalleşmek son derece önemlidir, ama nasıl bir helalleşme*)? . . . In this country thousands of people have been killed . . . and we don’t know where they are, we are still searching for the disappeared. This was realized through the will and policies and decisions of the government and the state. . . . Mr. Prime Minister, is reconciliation possible without first finding the disappeared and bringing the perpetrators to trial? Is reconciliation possible while thousands of mass graves exist in this geography?²⁰

These statements in part echo the critical skepticism that the pro-Kurdish political party expressed of the government’s handling of the peace process. More importantly, for my purposes in this essay, the remarks invoke Erdoğan’s own discourse of *helalleşme* but with a temporal sensibility at odds with the Prime Minister’s optimistic anticipation of progressive peace.

The claim in these statements is not that the violence of the 1980s and 1990s has continued unabated but that it haunts the present: many of the disappeared remain missing, and mass graves continue to inhabit the landscape. The temporal sensibility at work in this haunting is not unique to the Saturday Mothers in Turkey. Avery Gordon describes a similar phe-

16. Interview with the author, Istanbul, July 31, 2013.

17. Interview with the author, Istanbul, August 1, 2013.

18. Interview with the author, Istanbul, January 22, 2016.

19. A more comprehensive account of the discourses of peace, resolution, and reconciliation in Turkey would also need to consider the state’s practice of paying compensation for harms incurred to Kurdish civilians in the conflict with the PKK. As Biner (2013) argues, these payments allow state authorities to claim the status of a sovereign—against counterclaims by the PKK—capable of monopolizing the function of protecting and providing for its citizens.

20. Field notes on file with the author, Diyarbakır, July 27, 2013.

nomenon in Argentina. Gordon notes that by the mid-1980s, with the return of civilian government in Argentina, there was a strong political impetus to forget and move on. While many of those who had been disappeared could by then be presumed dead, some among the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina insisted on having them returned alive. The slogan “bring them back alive” (*aparación con vida*) meant that they opposed a premature reconciliation sponsored by the government, and it entailed a demand that the conditions that led to the disappearances be brought to an end. As Gordon (1997:115) eloquently explains, “*Aparación con vida* meant that the haunting ground remained and that the reckoning with the ghosts had yet to take place.”

The Mothers in Turkey do not demand that the disappeared be returned alive, and in fact they frequently call for the return of the bones of the dead. However, what is apparent in both settings—what appears to inhere in this representational medium—is the refusal to accept the sense of ending implied by claims of reconciliation and the insistence that the violence of the past continues to disquiet the present.

Repurposing the Medium

A medium of commemoration, the Mothers’ gatherings are also a vehicle of commensuration. I have suggested thus far not only that their assemblies point to the disappearances that they are describing but that the gatherings themselves are visible as a globally recognizable indexical sign, comparable to mothers-of-the-disappeared organizations found in many parts of the world. While the medium is relatively established and recognizable, it is not historically static. The Mothers in Turkey have, since 2010, begun to repurpose their gatherings in late April every year to remember the events of 1915, or what many participants refer to as a crime against humanity (*insanlık suçu*).

In the Mothers’ commemorations of the Armenian genocide, the group draws together episodes of historical violence often held to be distinct—the massacres of Armenians in the late Ottoman Empire and the enforced disappearances of the 1980s and 1990s that mostly transpired in regions under emergency rule. Participants do not simply claim identity between these two events of violence, as if seamlessly equating the deportations and killings of the early twentieth century with the more recent disappearances. The scale and effect of these episodes of violence are recognizably distinct. The form of public secrecy that shrouds these events is also distinctive, given that the Kurds who disproportionately suffered from the enforced disappearances remain a sizable population within Turkey, unlike the Armenians whose presence was largely eliminated from the country.

The effort to commensurate these events is nonetheless worth examining carefully. The Mothers’ actions suggest historical links between forms of state violence not commonly viewed within one analytical frame. Ayata (2015) argues that many civil society organizations and intellectuals in Turkey, even those that are ostensibly critical of state violence, tend to

treat violence against Armenians as a problem of the past and the Kurdish conflict as a problem of the present. This temporal disconnection often tacitly orients political action. For instance, when a mass grave was accidentally uncovered in Diyarbakır in 2012, a number of pro-Kurdish political and civil society organizations sought to politicize the issue, presuming that the deceased were Kurds killed by state security forces in the 1990s. After preliminary forensic analysis suggested that the bones were over 100 years old, the pro-Kurdish organizations quietly abstained from pursuing the issue further (Çaylı 2015). Çaylı adds that rumors in Diyarbakır soon spread that the bodies belonged to Armenians killed by Kurdish armed forces (the Hamidiye regiments) deployed by the Ottoman sultan from 1894 to 1896.

The Mothers’ gatherings work against this bifurcation of Armenian and Kurdish issues. They render commensurable that which has been conventionally cast as temporally fissured. To achieve this end, the group mobilizes the opacity of the medium itself, in terms of both its untimely figuration of politics and its uncanny portrayal of motherhood.

In these gatherings, there are multiple temporalities that enable this commensuration in distinctive ways. Participants commonly position the events of 1915 as a precedent for the disappearances of the 1980s and 1990s. They mention the fact that on April 24, 1915, over 200 Armenian intellectuals were detained in Istanbul, dispatched to central Anatolia, and ultimately deported and killed. In 2010, Leman Yurtsever, from the Istanbul branch of İHD, stated at the gathering that 139 of these Armenian individuals were never heard from again after their detention, adding that disappearance under detention has been a state policy applied to different identities (Etkin Haber Ajansı 2010). Similarly, in 2015 the İHD representative Sebla Arcan argued that the Night and Fog directive promulgated by German forces in 1941—as a strategy of state repression of political dissent that has had global echoes—was preceded by the disappearances of Armenians at the end of the Ottoman Empire.²¹ In these statements, the speakers were appealing to a sense of linear history, empty and homogeneous, in which the relationship between events is figured chronologically.

This linear history was also echoed in the 2015 meeting by a relative of the disappeared, who stated that Kurds and socialists today face problems similar to those faced by Armenians in the past, adding that Kurds themselves were complicit in that earlier moment of violence. He concluded that if “they had confronted [the realities of state violence] back then, we would not have this problem [of enforced disappearances] today.”²² The distinction drawn between past and present corresponds to grammatical categories of person: “they” failed to confront the state back then, and “we” inherit the problem today.

The chronological figuration of past and present found in these accounts was not the only temporal form available to

21. Audio recording of the 2015 event on file with the author, Istanbul, April 25, 2015.

22. See n. 21 above.

speakers. We can begin to discern an alternative temporality at work in the comments of Muzaffer Yedigöl, brother of one of the disappeared, also at the 2015 gathering. Yedigöl challenged the temporally coordinated distinction between third and first person. Referring to Turkey as a “graveless (*mezarsız*) country,” he continued, “we are responsible for reaching this point, we are responsible because we stayed quiet during the Armenian massacre.”²³

The “we” in this statement does not permit a clean separation of the present from the violence of the past. Who, then, is the referent of this first person plural, who stayed quiet in 1915 and who remains responsible today? Yedigöl might be referring to the role that Kurds played in the mass violence against Armenians, thereby indicating that those living under oppression today were once perpetrators of mass violence.²⁴ This interpretation is supported by the fact that many of the individuals assembled by this representational medium, who might identify as “we” in this setting, have been Kurds whose relatives were the targets of enforced disappearance. However, it was certainly not Kurds alone who committed the violence of 1915 or who stayed quiet in its aftermath. Accounting for the scale and coordination of the violence and the magnitude of the silence that followed, the “we” might implicate at its broadest anyone that the Turkish state recognized as among its own national citizenry. Yedigöl concluded, “In the geography of the graveless, we too will cease to exist.” In this darkly imagined future, the “we”—ambiguously figured as Kurds or as the polity as such—will be undone by the conditions of its own formation.

The uncanny rendering of the first person plural was perhaps most acutely effected by the commentary of Serpil Taşkaya in April 2013. Taşkaya, whose father was forcibly disappeared in 1993, began by noting the importance in the present day of remembering the violence of the past: “For the sake of a free, just, equal, and peaceful future, we need to remember the darkness of the past, together with political, historical, and social truths, and convey these to the present. . . . We cannot construct a free future without interrogating the causes, structures, and mentality that created these crimes [against humanity].” She continued that, in addition to being relatives of those disappeared in the 1980s and 1990s, “we are also the mothers and siblings of our graveless Armenian children” (*mezarsız Ermeni evlatlarımızın da annesiyiz, kardeşiyiz*; Etkin Haber Ajansı 2013).

As in other comments I have discussed, Taşkaya’s remarks began by representing 1915, as on a timeline, as a key event in the past, whose historical causes must be fully comprehended. However, the later remark about claiming the Armenian disappeared as their own children confounded a chronological sensibility. Taşkaya’s assertion of kinship only further amplifies the ambiguities of the “we” in Yedigöl’s remarks. The

statement was commemorative but also anachronistic, asserting responsibility, as mother to child, for Armenian intellectuals who died a century prior to her own declaration. Laying moral claim to the disappeared of 1915, Taşkaya refused to allow the violence against Armenians to be effaced from the present and relegated to the past. Her claim permits us to interpret those graveless deaths as symptoms, not simply of a grievous tragedy of history but of the political imaginary inherited by the republican nation-state.

The Mothers’ gatherings for the Armenian disappeared bring to bear on the commemoration of genocide the unsettling facets of their own medium, in particular those characteristics centering on gendered kinship and on the sense of the untimely. The remembrance of the genocidal past is cast, in Taşkaya’s statements, in the form of a mother’s mourning. The ostensibly apolitical bonds of a mother’s relationship to her child serve as the social and affective ground of the claim that the state committed a crime against humanity. This assertion of familial intimacy allows Taşkaya to embrace as kin those that Ottoman authorities targeted as enemies of the state. A progressivist sense of the present, broken from the violence of the past and leading toward a future of prosperity, is upended in these narratives. The events of the early twentieth century, putatively part of the historical past, are shown to haunt the present and harbor the signs of a foreboding future.

Conclusion

The Turkish case exemplifies the notion that the critique of violence today is often appropriated by dominant institutional authorities, often in ways that defer claims of justice in the name of reconciliation. Hence the litany of collective apologies, statements of remorse, and calls for forgiveness issued by state authorities. These discourses are no doubt ideologically motivated: a critical imaginary that presents itself as after evil (in Meister’s phrase)—that is, after the violence of earlier political struggles—can be maintained only by disregarding how these apologies and calls for reconciliation in Turkey have coexisted over the past decade with the continued efforts by the state to criminalize Kurdish politics as terrorism. Efforts by the AKP-led government to launch a peace process in 2013 were preceded by several waves of mass detentions, arrests, and trials, beginning in 2009, in which thousands of labor activists, lawyers, artists, academics, and politicians were accused of being affiliated with the KCK (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, Group of Communities in Kurdistan).²⁵ The peace process itself crumbled

25. Gunter (2011:164–165) describes the KCK as an “umbrella organization” that brings the PKK together with a number of other Kurdish groups in Syria, Iran, and Iraq. The KCK was established as part of a broader reorientation of the Kurdish political movement in the mid-2000s away from claims to independent statehood and toward advocating for forms of regional autonomy that, in Akkaya and Jongerden’s (2012) words, would entail “an alternative to the nation-state.” See also

23. See n. 21 above.

24. For an analysis of the Armenian genocide in Kurdish collective memory, see Çelik and Dinç (2015); on literary representations of the genocide in Kurdish novels, see Çelik and Öpengin (2016).

in 2015 with the resumption of military conflict, including the establishment of round-the-clock curfews lasting for weeks and months at a time in a number of Kurdish-majority neighborhoods and towns, leaving civilian populations vulnerable to military violence and without access to medical care or steady supplies of food and water.²⁶ The critique of violence, as it is invoked in dominant discourses of reconciliation and human rights, operates in an economy of governance that also includes the violent exercise of state power.

A closer analysis of the links between these political moments would have to attend to contextual factors that are outside the scope of this essay—including the strained negotiations the government attempted with the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan; changing geopolitical relations between Turkey and the European Union; and the rapid transformations of Kurdish political claims across Syria, Iraq, and Turkey over the past 15 years. What I wish to argue for the purposes of this essay is that the ideological motivation that guides the critique of violence is not restricted to the interests pursued by state and other political actors. It also entails the consolidation of particular mediating practices and the political and historical imaginaries such practices delimit. A major stake for groups such as the Saturday Mothers is not only to critique historical violence but to challenge the institutional impetus for critique, calling into question the parameters that designate its legitimate objects, its presupposed temporalities, and the social identifications it makes available.

This essay has sought to develop a framework for analyzing the contingent mediation of discourses that, in condemning historical atrocity, purport to be politically unmediated and universal. Anthropologically, the point is not to search for a more genuine critique that stakes its claim wholly apart from the hegemonic languages of neoliberalism and human rights. Any such analysis would run the risk of simply abstracting critique from its social conditions of production and circulation. Moreover, attempts to disrupt the reigning discourses on critique are not always in a position to stand as pure opposition. They might continue to claim that they stand on apolitical grounds but do so in ways that are uncanny, drawing even greater attention to the medium that is otherwise disavowed. An uncanny medium of critique is positioned within institutionally consolidated social spaces but in ways that, through an

estranged representation of naturalized discourses of gender and history, point to their ideological conditions of formation.

It is helpful to think with an uncanny medium in a moment when anthropologists are increasingly interested in understanding how alternatives to existing arrangements of social and political order emerge within dominant configurations. Political anthropologists have elaborated the notion of a prefigurative politics to understand movements such as Occupy Wall Street in New York and other encampments that emerged elsewhere, which present alternatives to the existing order in their very modes of social, economic, and political practice (e.g., Appel 2014; Juris 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012; see also Ross 2015 for a comparable account of the Paris Commune). This body of work demonstrates that these alternatives are not simply blueprints for a world that will follow the defeat of the current institutional order but are living, working experiments that arise within already existing political and economic spaces. For their part, the Mothers are not enacting a commune-style prefigurative politics. Their vigils refer back to a different model of protest, more commonly found in contexts of military rule. The Mothers' gatherings nonetheless remain instructive for understanding how an "alter-politics," in Hage's terms, can emerge amid stark inequalities of power, often as the mere glimmer of an alternative sociality "that might exist only in symptomatic form" (Hage 2012:305).

The notion of an uncanny medium allows us to understand how an alternative can articulate itself within the institutional world it is calling into question. The concept highlights the complicity that an immanent challenge needs to entertain and wager, especially for groups that, due to a lack of institutional authority, can assert themselves only as a self-estranging manifestation of the sociopolitical world they seek to challenge. I have argued that, as an uncanny medium, the Mothers' vigils evoke even as they unsettle ideological boundaries that are constitutive of social life in the contemporary nation-state—between public and private, the political and the domestic, and the past and the present. They mobilize the discourse of kinship and motherhood that has undergirded a militarized nationalism, but they do so for the sake of claiming familial responsibility for Armenians who have been historically defined as an ethnicized enemy.

An uncanny medium is especially relevant for thinking about the politics of human rights, given the way such a medium both reflects and recasts the imaginary of critique that human rights discourses embolden. As noted above, discourses on reconciliation and forgiveness often position themselves as coming after political struggles and the violence they unleash have been exhausted. The Mothers' vigils, by contrast, locate themselves within the space and time of that exhaustion, as responsive to the ongoing and unresolved nature of those struggles.²⁷ They redescribe the violence that discourses of reconciliation would render past, exposing how that violence

Gambetti (2010) for the argument that the Kurdish movement's project of democratic autonomy represents a genuine alternative to the neoliberal state but one that the Turkish left has largely failed to recognize or support. The Turkish state's operations against the KCK led to the arrest of a wide array of pro-Kurdish activists in Turkey, some of whom were not in fact formally affiliated with the KCK itself (Abu-Rish 2011).

26. For a report on the curfews covering the period between August 16, 2015, and March 18, 2016, see Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (2016). The report states that during this time period the state had declared 63 curfews in seven cities of southeastern Turkey, estimating that at least 310 civilians were killed and hundreds of thousands were forced to abandon their homes.

27. On the critical sensibilities motivated by and experienced as exhaustion, see Muir (2016).

continues to orient political horizons in the present (see also Tambar 2016).

If human rights discourses often disavow, in the name of a transcendent moral good, the social and political forms that mediate their expression, an uncanny medium destabilizes, without relinquishing, this claim of immediacy. The mourning mother is sometimes said to speak without adornment and to present her emotion without mediation. It is nonetheless clear that the group has concertedly repurposed its vigils to construct a stage for memorializing the Armenians killed in 1915. The medium has been put to work to shift the valence of kinship relations this remembrance can be understood to entail, re-presenting what is usually understood as an ethnic and generational divide as one of familial intimacy. Foregrounding the problematic character of their own public presence, the mothers in mourning recalibrate expectations about who the relevant actors to the dispute are and what their social and ethical responsibilities to one another can be.

At once transparent and opaque, the uncanny medium generates an alienated rendition of the ideological formation with which it nonetheless remains complicit. It forwards a vision of social responsibility that cannot be coherently elaborated within the imaginary of the nation-state, on which it nevertheless rests. Straining the limits of that imaginary, the medium points toward an alternative sociality that is already emerging within the unresolved struggles of the age.

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Comments

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This is an innovative article that uses a social movement in Turkey as a window into the ways in which a medium—in this case, an act of public mourning and protest—may be constitutive of social forms. More generally, Kabir Tambar is interested in the mechanisms and media by which we may challenge public secrecy and stretch the limits of what is publicly acceptable to say. Tambar shows the ways in which the medium, through referencing conventional signs, gestures, and

historical references, may also turn those to other uses, making them uncanny and hence potentially productive. His particular focus is Turkey's Saturday's Mothers, a well-known group that has used the "natural" bond of motherhood to insist on state accountability for the disappearance of their children in weekly demonstrations that were explicitly nonviolent and nonpolitical. However, Tambar observes that the uncanny act of mothers demanding accountability from the "father state" has also been transformed in recent years into a more explicitly political act through the inclusion of the Armenian genocide as an event that references the continuity of state violence over more than a century. At the same time, he wants to provide us with a way to critique critique, a way to reveal the limits of critique to challenge public secrecy and denial.

The author argues that Turkey's Saturday's Mothers use the conventional tropes of mourning and motherhood in an uncanny way to draw attention to how both are subverted and distorted by state violence. The vigil becomes the medium through which this happens, the author argues, giving a problematic visibility to events that would otherwise be silenced. The very uncanniness of the medium, in this account, allows it to be repurposed for addressing other historically analogous cases of state abuse. The account, however, moves from what we might call the ethnographic middle ground, that is, the social and political contextualization of the Mothers, to theorization of the medium while skipping the nitty-gritty of the Mothers' effect and affect. Since one of Tambar's key terms is "the uncanny medium," we must ask how we are to know that the vigil has the effect Tambar claims if we cannot see for whom an uncanny affect might be produced. Without knowing this, the reader is asked to accept that the medium produces an affect of the uncanny without understanding for whom or how it does this.

One of the reasons we cannot know this is that Tambar never fully engages with the vigil as medium, despite the obvious links between mourning, remembering, and forgetting. In other words, we never understand the productive role played by death and mourning in the effects of these protests precisely because Tambar never fully engages with the vigil as an ethnographic subject. Although the article briefly mentions the roots of the vigil, there is little emphasis placed, for instance, on the way that the Saturday's Mothers began not as a group of mothers but rather as a group of human rights activists—both men and women—that the media transformed into "mothers." Certainly, as Tambar notes, the vigils came to engage with other transnational forms of protest, but the media's use of those models could actually give us a clue to their reception that is not pursued here.

Another way in which we might have seen the effects and affects of the protests would have been a further exploration of the repurposing of death rituals and symbols in the vigil. As one of the protest's founders recounts (Günaysu 2014a), the movement began as a reaction to the death of a young man who was being detained and whose parents were at the forefront of the first protests. At the first protests, the father and

mother's "bodies were like a monument," a phrase that gives us insight into the symbolic work being done by the motionless and resolute figures who silently hold up photographs of their loved ones in the center of a busy shopping street. It may be that this association with gravestones is given meaning by the way that in the past decades it has become quite common for tombstones in Turkey to have a photograph of the deceased. By saying nothing, the mothers (and often fathers) appear to confront public silence with the silent presence of a monument—something that in its mute "thereness" cannot be confronted with discourse.

The discussion of *helalleşme*, which Tambar provisionally translates as reconciliation, similarly passes very quickly over its associations with burial. At a funeral, the imam asks those gathered, "*Hakkınızı helal ediyor musunuz?*" which may be roughly translated as, "Do you surrender your right or claim on the dead?" Those present are expected to reply that they do, indicating that anything the deceased may have done should be buried with her. Traditionally, the dead should not be buried without everyone in attendance replying in the positive, though that practice has changed in recent years. The way that this idea intersects with state violence became clear at the 2015 funeral of Kenan Evren, the general who led the 1980 military coup and whom many hold responsible for the violence of the following decade. When the imam asked this question, left-wing protestors replied with slogans, while the family of right-wing activists who had disappeared screamed, "*Hakkımı helal etmiyorum*," the equivalent of saying that one does not forgive.

Helalleşme, then, is related to death, to burial, and to the idea of burying past wrongs. However, unlike the question asked at a funeral, *helalleşme* is a reciprocal word, implying that two parties have done wrong to each other, as well as mutual forgiving of those wrongs. The implication of Erdoğan's use of this formulation is that it is appropriate in the context of the excesses of both the PKK and state repression of it, although Tambar suggests that at least some of his interlocutors preferred the more common *üzleşme*, "confronting or coming to terms (with the past)." This is the word that many former political prisoners and others have used for the past couple of decades to describe their own demands from the state—a term that also seems the only appropriate one for coming to terms with the Armenian genocide.

The fact that these terms have even become a part of public discourse and discussion, however, already points to a significant shift in the terms of what is acceptable to say in Turkey. Presumably, this shift is part of what Tambar wishes to explore, though he passes over it only briefly in the introduction. For instance, we never learn about the significance of the site of the vigils, at a central junction in Istanbul's main pedestrian shopping avenue, in a neighborhood that is both a site of leftist organization and the most visible spot for foreigners and the media. The vigils present the opportunity for a potentially rich ethnography of the liberal transformation of leftist politics in Turkey during the late 1990s, particularly the transformation

of communist cell leaders into human rights defenders. We might also have learned more about the general changes in public discourse around the Armenian genocide that have enabled events such as the photography exhibition Tambar describes at the beginning of the article and produced a ripeness for the sorts of analogous thinking he discusses. However, rather than giving us a glimpse into the ways that the vigils may have responded to changing public discourse or may have engaged dialogically with those changes, instead we have only a form of address without any understanding of its reception or the changing limits of public discourse to which it responds.

To return, then, to the issue of effect and affect: Tambar here misses the opportunity for a fruitful engagement with literature on historical reconciliation by not engaging with the twin issues of address and public, as well as with measures of the medium's efficaciousness. After all, a medium might be defined in its simplest form as a channel of communication. Are the mothers not creating such a channel of communication only to the extent that they are addressing a particular public and through that address also creating that public? Is it not in the act of identifying and creating a public that also says that the violence of the military is unacceptable that they are having an effect? Tambar stresses that the uncanniness of the medium "is meant to induce an estrangement in its audiences from the social and political norms of everyday life." Whether or not it succeeds in this, however, is an ethnographic question to which we do not find answers in this article.

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In this admirable study, Kabir Tambar departs from the domain of media theory to reflect on the more expansive problematic of social mediation. More important, the essay asks us to consider how media of social transaction appear as both familiar and problematic. The Saturday Mothers, whose vigils insist on calling up past horrors in a demand for contemporary recognition, produce a medium in the very act of coming together. This is a medium that appears to draw attention to itself as such because of a curious combination of fitting with the broader political imagery of kinship and disjuncture insofar as the medium exposes the public secret of state violence. By focusing on a political formation that disavows regnant notions of politics, the essay enables an analysis of the space of interplay between tacit and explicitly articulated forms of social mediation. The question of how ideology would appear to mediate the medium, as it were, is one that lingers over the course of the essay.

Tambar borrows the concept of the uncanny to explain how the play of mimesis works to problematize aspects of the familiar while still inhabiting the space of home, and I think this

is the single greatest contribution of the essay toward an analysis of political media. At various points, the essay points to the quality of estrangement that emerges in public engagement with the protests. But what Tambar is analyzing here is not a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, or theatrical “estrangement effect,” meant to produce an overall objectifying sense of distance between the scene of protest and the national audience before whom the protesters stand. Quite the opposite. The Saturday Mothers’ capacity to claim a degree of commensuration between state repression of Kurds and the Armenian genocide is enabled precisely through the trope of kinship that has been partially wrested from the militarized nationalism of state-centered discourse.

The very structure of legitimacy that provides a resolution to the public/private divide through the equivalence between family and nation sets the stage for a new decoupling. In his words, “When an uncanny medium is repurposed, social actors activate tensions that were already internal to the medium’s functioning to make those tensions disturbingly visible in another context.” Estrangement, here, is a break with both standardized national chronotopes that would figure violence against Kurds and Armenians as two irreconcilable pasts and a more general state monopoly on authorized public displays of filiation. Kinship is the lynchpin. To the degree that one feels with the mother of the disappeared, one can no longer be quite at home in the structure of feeling underpinning the nation-state’s claims. Put in Freudian terms, something withheld from sight was revealed, thus producing a sense of unease within the home itself. But the very technologies of making public repressed pasts belong to a standardized transnational format of protest that disavows politics as such. It is here that the question of the medium and its historicity is foregrounded. What ought to have been secret has now come to light, and it is exactly the broader discourse on visibility and critical publicity, within which our collective understanding political media frequently unfolds, that we can now reexamine.

A set of questions raised by this essay, problems that speak well beyond it to the broader “anthropology of mediation” (Boyer 2012; Kunreuther 2014), have to do with the argument that when the medium that undergirds social transaction becomes disruptive it becomes opaque. Opacity here corresponds in some ways to the claim that the medium of the vigil has become disturbingly visible. But what is at stake in the luminous metaphors of transparency and opacity that have grounded so much of our work on social mediation? Is the figure of transparency simply one that refers to the smooth operation of social transactions? If this were the case, then the argument about the social generativity of moments of non-transparent fit would not quite carry the weight it does in this essay insofar as this is a sociological truism of sorts. Something more is happening. The process of misrecognition allowing for the smooth functioning of “that which goes without saying,” to borrow a phrase frequently used by Bourdieu, strikes me as different from explicit discursive claims to the triumph of “immediation,” such as those analyzed in Mazzarella’s (2006) essay

on the role of technological fantasy in neoliberal regimes of governmentality, but both might be said to rest on the value of transparency. Tambar invokes “the ideological conditions that shape how social actors come to construe a medium as opaque rather than transparent: as appropriate to context or as excessive and unstable.” But what are the conditions shaping a discourse that assimilates opacity to excess and transparency to normality, and is this a question of ideology as such?

It should be clear that I am in sympathy with Tambar’s synthetic approach to questions of mediation that have too often been artificially split into more formal semiotics and more dialectically oriented critiques of ideology. But I also think this essay contributes much to another methodological question regarding the very split subjectivity at the core of the ethnographic endeavor: how to render worlds of social action in such a manner that allows for more creative entry into problems that oftentimes appear as a series of shadowboxing matches with figures of Enlightenment thought? For example, Tambar brings the question of relations between the historicity of a medium and its functioning in the social present into sharper focus toward the end of the essay, and the ideological discourse on light captures only a small part of this perhaps more important move. Unadorned language demanding in different *helalleşme* (reconciliation) in these protests rips Erdoğan’s own discourse away from the progressivist narrative by calling up the voices of the dead. The principled refusal on the part of the Saturday Mothers to accept that the violence is over is what allows them to extend collective responsibility to the broader issue of state violence. This is where the politics operates. If the power of protest comes from this revelation of public secrets, it also pushes the interpreter to attend to the glass onion-like structure of social life in such a manner that we cannot presume the narrative of transparency ahead of entering into the very field of publicity giving the protest value.

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Kabir Tambar’s sophisticated analysis sheds light on the creative dimensions of the “failure” of a medium. It thereby looks at the old question “what is a medium?” in a new way. Media are not a definite category of objects, technologies, or persons but rather in-betweens of very different kinds that nevertheless share one key characteristic. This is the oscillation between phenomenological disappearance and perceptibility in the act of mediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999). The opacity of a medium points to failures in the process of mediation as the medium foregrounds itself, sidelining or suppressing what it is supposed to convey. In such situations, the medium’s obstinate materiality forcefully (re)appears, overshadowing what it is supposed to mediate

rather than receding into the background in the act of functioning smoothly. Tambar's ethnography shows that this does not necessarily result in failure as would be the case with a malfunctioning computer screen. The recasting and refunctionalization of a medium in unexpected ways need not be equivalent to a breakdown in communication but can instead generate new forms of expression and politics.

Describing public performances of commemoration of the dead as a medium, Tambar analyzes the conventional formats and expected ideological linkages that many Turks associate with the Saturday Mothers publicly commemorating disappeared and presumably dead relatives. He suggests that such conventional formats operate as media in their normal, transparent mode of functioning. Tambar suggests that when the established ways in which mothers publicly mourn for their dead are disturbed such performances become uncanny and productive of the new. This is the case when they violate the ideological boundaries of nationalist discourse and notions of family by assigning to the dead unexpected identities. In my view, Tambar's analysis thereby points to a broader condition of mediality in which the seeming disappearance of a medium, here a complex array of visual media, ideological discourse, and performing actors, and the disturbing of a medium's expected functioning making it salient again are part of a broader process of oscillation between these two poles that is characteristic of various kinds of media.

In this context, it is useful to pay attention to the semiotic dimensions of media, which are very evident in Tambar's analysis, as it foregrounds narrative, public oratory, and visual media such as photographs. Tambar writes that the public commemorations are indexical signs, as they point to already existing nationally and globally recognizable forms of political protest and performance. In my view, making a further distinction might help to elucidate how what Tambar calls the opacity of a medium can be generative instead of merely destructive of a process of mediation. This is the distinction between presupposed and creative indexicality (Silverstein 1976). Indexicality is a term drawing attention to the various ways in which signs co-occur. When the formats of commemorative performance described by Tambar are deployed in expected, quasi-normative ways, such as by assigning grieving mothers and their dead relatives identities that conform to the conventions of nationalist discourse and the notions of kinship and family herein, we are dealing with presupposed indexicality. This is the case insofar as in a given context quasi-normative co-occurrences of a variety of signs such as particular photographs, indicators of the ethnicity of mothers and dead victims, and the kind of discursive genres used in public performance exist. Tambar highlights the ways in which activists break with such situational expectations by introducing unexpected linkages and co-occurrences of signs, such as by having the Saturday Mothers commemorating Armenian victims as dead family members. To use Silverstein's terminology, the activists' commemorative performances are now built on creative indexicality, as performances depart from normative, presupposed

contexts, projecting new parameters of interaction instead. However, viewing them as a medium as Tambar does, could it be that such performances are uncanny for most among their Turkish audiences but may still be expected for others? What are disruptions of generic conventions for many could possibly be less problematic for others, especially when what used to be disruptions quickly become new conventions. Seen as a medium, such performances may thus be simultaneously vanishing and problematically perceptible depending on perspective (cf. Eisenlohr 2011). The medial status of such public performances of commemoration would then be an aggregate state in flux that can rapidly change depending on situational context. Whether a performance operates as a vanishing or reappearing medium in the sense outlined above is therefore unlikely to be traceable to fixed qualities of particular elements of the performance alone.

The question is whether the workings of creative indexicality really result in semiotic opacity. Opacity might be a fitting description of the effects of a malfunctioning medium rudely suppressing what it is supposed to mediate, foregrounding its own materiality instead. But is the Saturday Mothers' creative recasting of established formats of public political protest really opaque? In Bakhtinian terms, such recasting is double-voiced instead of opaque, and Tambar himself helpfully draws on the parallel between his examples and parody, one of the chief illustrations of such double-voicedness (Bakhtin 1981:303–305, 324). The breaking of established contextual norms of expectations of what signs should co-occur through introducing such a quality of double-voicedness creates new, intelligible versions of an established format. Such new versions are nevertheless likely to be subject to future typification and conventionalization, underlining the shifting dynamics of what counts as presupposed or new. Tambar's discussion therefore eloquently illustrates how media can be generative, not because of a media technological *a priori* à la Kittler but because of the affordances provided by their semiotic dimensions.

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Metaphors of Mediation

From its beginnings, anthropology has proceeded from the premise of radical, thoroughgoing mediation. Of course, how to proceed from that premise has been a matter of debate for just as long, and one could write a history of the discipline by tracing varied attempts to conceptualize the mediation of human life. A recurrent motif of that history would be the problem of how to bring together, under a single analytic gaze, mediation by abstract categories (e.g., classificatory schema, doxic assumptions, normative judgments) and by material

objects and practices (e.g., gifts, rituals, words).²⁸ Returning to that problem over and over again, theorists have made recourse to a succession of metaphors. Culture was the earliest and most enduring of these metaphors turned theorizations, but many others have followed, such as structure and, more recently, network, ontology, and infrastructure. These metaphors have been generative because they conjure rich, textured images of mediation. However, it is that qualitative richness that has also made them vulnerable to continual remetaphorization, as the limits of each come into view. (Structure eventually seemed too solid and unyielding, network too mechanistic. Perhaps, in time, ontology will come to seem too conceptual and idealist and infrastructure too brutally physical.)

Tambar's provocative essay reanimates this disciplinary concern by reconceptualizing mediation in a less metaphoric fashion. Mobilizing theories of addressivity and semiotic ideology, Tambar returns us to foundational questions: what can serve as a medium? Under which circumstances does mediation appear as such? And how might practices of mediation transform their own conditions of possibility?

Pursuing these questions, Tambar asks the reader to think of protest as a medium. This analytical pivot allows him to show that the regular public gatherings of the Istanbul Saturday Mothers/Peoples are not only a communicative channel for the relaying of a political message. Rather, the gatherings are comprised of a set of formal elements that, in their sociohistorical specificity, become the explicit object of attention and dispute for protesters and onlookers alike. In other words, the protest medium is bound up with and constitutive of the political message.

It is commonplace to presume that media are normally, and normatively, invisible. Nonetheless, as Tambar points out, some media "are built to be impertinent," and these protests are but one example. In drawing attention to their own formal qualities, the protests render visible and open to manipulation the spatial, temporal, and social categories that underpin protest as medium (most notably, gendered categories of the public and the private and ethnicized categories of historically distinct victims of state violence). In this sense, the protests are unsettling, even uncanny, as they repurpose a familiar form in the service of unfamiliar ends. The politics that emerges from this uncanny repurposing is similarly unsettling, to such an extent that people question whether politics is the appropriate category for their analysis.

Tambar formalizes and generalizes the above approach in four "theses on the concept of a medium." Here, he makes recourse to a metaphor of his own (albeit one that is minimal in its qualitative reach): the opacity of the medium, as opposed to its commonly assumed transparency. Opacity here refers to the capacity of any medium to become an object of

scrutiny, intervention, and transformation. Crucially, Tambar argues, that capacity inheres not within a given medium as such but in the ideological conditions that shape actors' engagements with it.

This robust and portable theoretical apparatus has important implications for several contemporary debates within anthropology. I will mention three.

First, this apparatus moves investigations of state violence in a new and promising direction. Analyses of state violence often focus on the ways its critics either take up constraining categories of liberal politics or alternatively forge a path grounded in some space supposedly outside of liberalism. This essay shows the benefit of attending to the practical life of ideological categories in their concrete instantiations, for it is by manipulating the formal qualities of concrete media that affordances emerge to trouble and potentially transform those categories. In this sense, one question Tambar's analysis raises is whether critical engagements with state violence, in posing undecidable dilemmas for liberal forms of justice, are an especially fertile site for such social and categorical transformations.

Second, it offers a set of tools for interrogating how the political is established as a dimension of social life. Tambar proposes that we treat this as an open-ended ethnographic question and that we focus on the ways people struggle over the sites, media, and logics that might constitute politics in any given context. The result, again, is to attend to dynamics that fall from view when we presume to know what counts as politics. Here, we might continue Tambar's analysis and inquire whether we might think of politics as a name for struggles over the sorts of social and categorical transformations I mentioned above.

Third and most generally, Tambar reclaims "media" to refer to much more than technological instruments of mass communication. His approach returns mediation to the center of anthropological inquiry by insisting that we understand all social encounters as mediated by conventions, ideologies, and the material relations they index. Moreover, it posits that anything can in principle serve as the medium for other social processes and that any medium can in principle become an object of attention, with the potential to serve as a means of transforming its own social and ideological underpinnings. The ethnographic question is what circumstances activate these potentials. While Tambar's analysis focuses on ideological conditions of opacity, I wonder whether there are not specifiable social and material conditions of possibility as well.

In all three respects, Tambar invites us to interrogate categories that we, even as analysts attentive to the historical and social life of categories, may be predisposed toward taking as settled. Mobilizing conceptual tools developed within linguistic anthropology, he defamiliarizes "liberalism," "politics," and "media" and identifies hitherto overlooked moments of underdetermined possibility. His analysis, in other words, frames any practice as both mediated and mediating, one link in an open-ended string of semiosis. In so doing, Tambar provides us with a more robust, more methodologically pre-

28. Two early articulations of this problem are Franz Boas' (1889) conceptualization of perceptual categories and Emile Durkheim's ([1912] 1995) analysis of the totem and the corroboree.

cise, and less imagistically particular iteration of one of the foundational premises of the discipline.

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19 X 16

Tambar's timely article addresses two of the most crucial issues—one explicitly, the other implicitly—now being raised in contemporary political theory. I will begin with his explicit concern, that is, the question of how “alternatives to existing arrangements of social and political order emerge within dominant configurations.” In contrast to the kinds of prefigurative politics that Tambar here references—a form of politics that has proven to be more spectacular and carnivalesque than effective and sustainable—the Mothers' vigils, enacting what Simon Critchley following Derrida calls a *clôtural* logic, seek a disruption of the political status quo through their ironic mobilization of uncanny mediums. That is, they mobilize those very discourses of kinship and motherhood that have traditionally founded the Turkish militarized nationalist state for the purposes of undermining a key historical and political narrative of that state. What is missing from Tambar's account, however, is the risk of such a political tactic.

By risk I mean the always available possibility that power co-opts the political language and tactics utilized by activists, such as these Saturday Mothers, who attempt disruption in this uncanny manner. Tambar seems aware of such a risk, as he makes clear in his critique of human rights language and the related tactic of the political apology. What, one might ask, however, would foreclose the possibility of the Turkish state simply accepting the terms of the Mothers' critique, issuing another apology, perhaps giving in on a few demands, and calling it a day? Would this constitute a political victory for the Mothers? And if so, would it be a satisfying political victory? Furthermore, and more pertinent to the theoretical thrust of the article, precisely what kind of alternative would have emerged in this case? These questions point toward the risk involved in such a form of politics of the uncanny medium. For what if it is not the case that repetition, as Butler has tried to convince us is so, gives way to difference? What if instead we experience only a differential repetition of the same?

This is at least one reason why the recent call for thinking alternatives is not—or perhaps better put, cannot be—limited to alternative outcomes. Rather, the thinking of alternatives seems to necessitate a prior rethinking of the very concepts by which we conceive the outcome. What such a rethinking calls for, then, is not simply critique but rather a critical hermeneutics that ungrounds in the process of opening onto alternative, imaginative, and creative reconceptualization. Tambar begins this process with his notion of the uncanny medium—certainly an important contribution to political anthropology—but seems to

run short of showing us a true alternative to, for example, irony. So a question that would have to be posed is: how precisely does the concept of the uncanny medium differ from irony, and what kind of alternative outcome could it give way to so as to avoid yet another political apology?

The second—and implicitly addressed—concern of contemporary political theory Tambar attends to is that of political motivation. Here is where I would contest Tambar's characterization of the limitation of conceptually prioritizing so-called breakdowns. For on my reading it seems that the real potential of the uncanny medium as a political tactic is its disruptive capacity to initiate breakdowns—or what Tambar calls recalibrations—not so much in the politicians being addressed but in anyone else who, as the result of this breakdown/recalibration, becomes politically motivated to act. In this time of seeking alternatives of political theorization, conceptualization, activity, and aims, the question of how and why it is one comes to act politically is a priority. Thus, for example, as I have argued elsewhere, whether we consider the political activity of the antidrug war movement, Black Lives Matter, climate-change activists, or migration, the inability to dwell and the desire to build new worlds in which dwelling is once again possible seems to resonate more with the articulated motivation of political actors than exhausted concepts such as identity and recognition (Zigon 2014).

But how to motivate those whose worlds have not broken down? That is, how to recruit political actors to a movement with which their very being is not—or does not seem to be—immediately intertwined? Initiating a breakdown—or again, a recalibration as Tambar puts it—seems essential. Politics is not a rationally driven affair. Political goals are not reached through logic, and allies are not attained by a good convincing argument. Politics begins with uncertainty—of who one is, where one belongs, what it all means, and where it's all going—and that uncertainty is felt long before it is thought. Tambar, unfortunately, does not follow this line of thinking in the article, but he must recognize it to be the case. For the experience of the uncanny gives way not only to dissonance but, ultimately and more importantly for political purposes, to anxiety. As we see all around the globe today, anxiety is motivating political activity. The question remains, though: which political movements will effectively appeal to this anxiety and turn it toward their political aim? Ultimately, the import of Tambar's article is that he is beginning to think through this entire motivational apparatus even if, it seems to me, he could still push the limits of his own (re)conceptualization.

Reply

In this essay, I have drawn together an analysis of the historical form of liberalism today (as manifested in postconflict human rights discourses) with a theoretical argument about the an-

thropology of mediation. Studies of postconflict liberalism, concerned with practices of reconciliation and human rights regimes, are not commonly theorized as problems of mediation, and yet my working presumption is that both history and theory are profitably opened up in this encounter. The responses to my essay are generously and critically attuned to this dynamic, and each pulls the essay in productive new directions: toward a more frontal engagement with contemporary currents in political theory, against the grain of contemporary media studies, in line with a more robust engagement with linguistic anthropology, and further positioning the ethnography within the local context. In each of these respects, I thank the commentators for helping to draw out some of the implications that the essay opens up and for pointing toward fruitful avenues for future research.

The Concept of Opacity

It should be clear from the essay that I found it helpful to think about liberalism through concepts developed in the study of linguistic and technological media, but the essay also suggests that new forms of liberalism should push us to rethink certain foundational theoretical questions about social mediation. Cody compellingly rephrases this ambition, asking what is at stake in the “luminous” metaphors that media theory in general, and my essay in particular, employs. If my essay asks, what are the conditions under which a social medium becomes apparent and disruptive within the field that it mediates, Cody raises the question one step further: what are the conditions that assimilate “opacity to excess and transparency to normality”?

The question sharpens into relief what the essay itself only begins to suggest. Opacity, in the way I use the term here, need not be equivalent to excess; it could imply nothing more than a temporary interference. What, then, might be the conditions that lead to the particular equation of opacity to excess that Cody is highlighting? It is worth stressing the current predicaments of liberal human rights regimes, which commonly disavow the media forms on which they nonetheless rest. The moral investment in transparency makes the opacity of such media all the more disruptive.

We can approach the issue from a more historical perspective by turning to Muir’s important suggestion that we should think not only of ideological conditions of opacity but also of social and material conditions. The comment suggests to me the importance of investigating how human rights discourses came to be institutionalized in this context. The essay itself describes one salient form of this institutionalization, concerned with the prevailing modes of protest speech. Human rights activists struggled to disarticulate their own forms of language and spectacle from existing conventions of leftist protest. But the point could be elaborated further by describing the significance of human rights discourses as a vehicle for Kurdish opposition in the 1990s, discourses that existed alongside the more confrontational struggles for sovereignty and autonomy through political parties and guerrilla organization. Indeed, many current Kurdish political leaders

started out their professional careers as lawyers working for the Human Rights Organization in Turkey (İHD).

How, then, can we connect this social history back to the question of opacity in mediation? Indeed, are the Mothers’ vigils best understood as introducing this sort of opacity? Posing this latter question, Eisenlohr recommends returning instead to Bakhtin’s notion of double-voicedness. I am sympathetic with this recourse to Bakhtin, and the concept would fit well with certain parts of the analysis. One instance of double-voicedness is the Mothers’ own use of categories employed by (then) Prime Minister Erdoğan (*helalleşme* and *hesaplaşma*) but for oppositional ends. We might view these uses as ironic, in the way Zigon discusses. It is crucial to recognize, however, that this motivated double-voicedness itself takes place through the medium of the vigil, and some account of the tensions inherent in this mediation is necessary to understand the political work of the Mothers’ gatherings.

While there is no doubt that the use of human rights activism, discourse, and organization provided a form of international intelligibility and legitimacy for Kurdish causes, which guerrilla struggles often failed to garner in liberal circles, there is a risk in these endeavors. They require adopting forms of visibility, performance styles, and media formats that are normalizing in their own right. Liberal regimes of human rights tend to valorize such media forms and formats only to the degree that they can be cast as politically unmediated. For their part, state authorities have seized on these normalizing effects, whether in valorizing the mourning of the mothers of soldiers or in adopting the genre of apology and the discourses on reconciliation as part of their own projects of governance.

If both liberal and nationalist discourses have valorized a mother’s mourning as transparent or unadorned, the political work performed by the Saturday Mothers’ vigils is bound to the issue of how the medium itself becomes an uncanny and untimely presence in the practice of mourning it enables. An act of mourning for the disappeared can be performed as both natural and transgressive, at once apolitical and sharply critical of the state.

The Problem of Efficacy

Some commentators raise the question of whether the vigils have been successful. The short answer to the question is that the vigils have not succeeded in instigating a major transformation in national public discourses about enforced disappearances and the condition of gravelessness that I discuss in the essay—the Mothers themselves continue to lament this fact in their gatherings. Those responsible for the disappearances have not been punished for their crimes, and the crimes themselves have not been adequately acknowledged by state authorities. That said, the vigils are ongoing, and they are being creatively elaborated in new ways, as with the commemorations of the Armenians who were forcibly disappeared in 1915. It would be premature to deem them a failure.

When faced with the question of efficacy, I would ask what the question itself presupposes about the history of a political

action that has not yet ended. Theorists of historiography have formulated a related problem that is helpful here: what are the discursive parameters that allowed contemporaries to determine that a given series of activities, conducted over time, constituted a political event with beginning and end points and whose ramifications historians can subsequently assess (Koselleck 2004; Sewell 2005; Trouillot 1995)? Anthropologists working with political movements in the present might rephrase the issue: how can we remain sensitive to the possibility of a politics whose contours as an event may not yet have been secured, and whose significance as such is put at risk by the protocols that dictate what counts as politics?

Bryant faults the essay for not describing in enough detail how the vigils have been received and therefore for not providing sufficient evidence for assessing their success. In developing this argument, she maintains that “a medium might be defined in its simplest form as a channel of communication,” and this formulation would seem to call for an account of how external observers of the group have responded to the communicative act. In the essay itself, I am explicitly arguing against this understanding of mediation. I stress that in thinking of the vigils as a medium, we should not limit our focus to its communicative features on the model of broadcast media. The Mothers, after all, are challenging the very conditions of communication. Indeed, the pressing question that the essay seeks to ethnographically explore is how an oppositional group struggles to constitute its platform in a public space that has systematically excluded it.

Bryant seeks greater evidence that the vigils are communicating an uncanny experience to audiences, but this critique rests on both a limited understanding of reception and a misunderstanding of the conceptual purchase of the uncanny in my analysis. The trouble with focusing on how audiences respond to the vigils, with the working assumption that the medium is simply a communicative channel, is that it assumes that the position of speaker and hearer are relatively stable, when it is precisely those roles that the Mothers are attempting to remake. The Mothers’ efforts to implicate regnant imaginaries of motherhood in the history of state violence are aimed at refiguring what it means to be a legible and speaking subject.

In her call for greater attention to audience uptake, Bryant does not notice that the vigils are themselves acts of reception, as participants take up and transform state discourses on gender, political history, and violence. The concept of the uncanny is meant to help us understand how the Mothers’ mode of responding to state discourses is both familiarizing and estranging. I marshal ethnographic materials to show how the very form of the vigil—in its speech genres, its emotional and aesthetic registers, and its recognizable social indexes—abides by but also refashions ideologies of kinship and politics that underpin dominant modes of public communication. The essay explores the risks and possibilities that inhere in that process.

An ethnographic account of reception in this context might be better understood in terms of the historical conditions of communication—how those conditions have shifted over time and how the Mothers’ interventions are aimed at transforming

them in the present. The essay itself describes how the context of the vigils’ reception shifted from the 1990s to the late 2000s. The vigils restarted in 2009 in the context of a growing discourse on liberalization in Turkey, and this discourse created both opportunities and limits for political critique. In some of the ethnographic centerpieces of the essay, we see the Mothers echoing but also challenging the state’s discourses on peace and reconciliation or initiating their own commemorations of the Armenian genocide. Public audiences receptive to a peace process with the PKK or willing to countenance public memorials of the genocide were far less prominent during the 1990s, in the first phase of the Mothers’ gatherings.

As part of this analysis, the essay argues that the vigils are untimely: they attempt to intervene in the temporal conditions of their reception in Turkish public life. Consider the fact that in the face of the touted liberalization of political discourse, the Mothers have frequently bemoaned the intransigence and continued unwillingness of political officials and the mainstream public to take their claims seriously. During the time in which much of this fieldwork was conducted—during the peace process of 2013–2015—the Mothers presented their vigils as a continuing reminder of the failure of the Turkish public to acknowledge the violence of the past, and they repeatedly informed their audiences that elected officials have failed to bring to justice the state authorities responsible for the disappearances. If the Mothers benefited from discourses of liberalization, which helped to create new audiences for their practices, they have also felt it necessary to challenge the very conditions of reception that these discourses have established.

Zigon also poses a question about efficacy, but his concern is more theoretico-political: what alternative politics does an uncanny medium produce? I agree that this is a crucial question, but I think we should be conscientiously circumspect in detailing what an alternative outcome might entail. The group itself has not sought to provide a well-defined vision of the future of the polity, apart from their specific demands for accountability. We might nonetheless recognize how their activities precipitate a politics to come, even if that politics cannot be detailed in advance. Zigon seems to be thinking along similar lines when he calls for an analysis attuned to activities that “unground in the process of opening onto alternative, imaginative, and creative reconceptualization.” One of the ways that the Mothers are attempting to unground conventional understandings of kinship (whether in terms of motherhood or ethnic descent) is by commemorating Armenian deaths from the early twentieth century. In forging new connections between Kurdish and Armenian struggles, the vigils are creating a form of historical reconciliation that is not coordinated by the national government and that therefore will not easily be enacted in public policy. These new modes of solidarity are part of an emergent politics whose possible consequences we should not attempt to delineate too quickly. Rather than try to force this politics to state what it has already accomplished or where it is inexorably going, our task might be better understood as helping to chart its trajectory in ways that

remain attentive to the conjunctures in which it operates and the openings it inaugurates.

Zigon maintains that these efforts to unground can be understood as initiating a breakdown, one that can motivate people to act politically in part by producing uncertainty and anxiety. I too am interested in how political actors unsettle conventional expectations, but I am concerned that it may be analytically restrictive to assume that this action necessarily proceeds through breakdowns that produce anxiety. We should remember that the Mothers are attempting to rethink and elaborate a notion of kinship. In posing fundamental challenges to regnant ideologies of Turkish motherhood and belonging, this sense of kinship may produce anxiety for some, but it also entails a wider affective range. These practices of kinship also seek to cultivate new expressions of friendship and care, creating new possibilities for claiming responsibility for Armenian deaths and for opening new channels of solidarity.

The Anthropology of Critique

Muir asks whether the critique of state violence is a privileged site for understanding how the political is delimited from the nonpolitical and how that delimitation is challenged. She goes on to suggest that we might understand politics in a reflexive sense, as a struggle over “the sites, media, and logics that might constitute politics in any given context.” The formulation is especially important as a way of understanding the critique of public secrecy. Given that state officials (in Turkey as elsewhere) have begun apologizing for the history of state violence but are doing so in ways that perpetuate public secrecy around disappearances, the question that deserves further study is how public secrecy itself might be subjected to critique.

The question is worthy of further exploration not simply because a critique of public secrecy transgresses a taboo on speech. Such a formulation is insufficient if it promises a space of criticism external to the public sphere that secrecy helps to uphold. Critique might need to be rethought not only as a means of struggle but as its very object. Who is authorized to speak as a critic and through which linguistic and emotional registers? What assumptions about domesticity and kinship and about belonging and polity are bundled into the very form of public criticism? How might actual practices of political critique begin to reflect on and redefine these basic conditions of their own enactment? If anthropologists have long studied violence and understood their scholarship as contributing to a critique of violence, it may be time to consider a new direction for political anthropology, in which we take critique itself as an object of inquiry.

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