Representing and consuming "the East" in cultural markets

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Abstract

"The East" is an exceptional territory identified with Kurdish ethnicity within the geographical boundaries of the Turkish nation. This paper focuses on a critical historical moment, circa 2000-2004, when the promise of peace in this region was coupled with the explosive growth of urban consumer markets, to bring into public circulation a host of commercialized images of "the East" and "Eastern people." It examines how "the East" became codified in popular television melodrama. It also tracks how "Eastern tourism" became incorporated into middle-class leisure practices. By juxtaposing television narratives and tourist narratives, it argues that the commodification in cultural markets both affirms its "exceptionalism" and challenges its taken-for-granted parameters.

Keywords: *Exceptional territories, cultural markets, television melodramas, tourist narratives, popular grammar*

Introduction

"The East" in the title of this essay refers to an exceptional territory, a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved problem in that space, which continues to plague the health and well-being of the Turkish nation. It is a semi-real, semi-imaginary geography where an entire series of different developments in society and a set of related discourses intersect. Travelling in the direction of "the East" means moving backwards in time, towards a distant past fraught with ethnic cleansing and sectarian violence, which have refused to go away in the present. Its symbolic geography

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marks the "outside" of the nation. Yet this East is such an "indelible part of the nation's body" (to translate directly from Turkish) that it must be defended at any cost against threats to tear it away from the whole, as recently demonstrated by the ravages of the fifteen-year-long war of attrition between armed Kurdish dissidents and the Turkish military.

Despite or perhaps because it was never officially recognized as a civil war, the specter of violence in "the East" continues to haunt Turkey.[1] The official rhetoric of "anarchy" and "the fight against terrorism" has failed to name and make sense of a war that has claimed more than 30,000 lives. The capture and imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan (the founder and leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK) in 1999 was supposed to provide some sort of closure. Instead, his symbolic demotion from mythic evil ("head terrorist") to shabby prisoner has served to highlight the devastation wrought by the monumental use of military might. The tragedy of the more than 2.5 million young men immediately involved in the fighting—and nearly 15 million people when including their families—haunts the present. The trauma of mass deportations, empty villages and cities flooded with poor refugees from the countryside continues to cast its shadow over civic life. Nothing has been closed.[2]

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1   If it were possible to "date" the moment when the ongoing conflict between Kurdish dissidents and the Turkish military escalated into a full-fledged war, it would be sometime in the latter half of the 1980s. It unfolded against the background of an aggressive push to dismantle the old import-substitution regime. As liberalization moved into high gear, with a heady mixture of global brands streaming into metropolitan commercial space and newly-launched satellite-channels positively exploding with images of plentitude, the Turkish military stepped up its operations to "dry out the roots of anarchy" and "crush the backbone of separatist terror" in the southeastern provinces. The restricted flow of information from the militarized zones was coupled with the all-encompassing provisions of an Anti-Terror Law implemented in 1991, in effect comprehensive media censorship. Thus official news from the militarized zones remained confined to "successful anti-terrorist operations." As these "successful operations" continued relentlessly, tragic images of mothers crying over the caskets of their deceased sons began to flash across television screens on a daily basis. In the bus terminals and train stations of large cities and small towns, farewell rituals for young soldiers departing for the war zone became ominously familiar. Middle-class families desperately sought to avoid conscription, by keeping draft-age sons in school, or sending them abroad—with diminishing success. To be sure, new constellations of developer-led malls and multiplex clusters, five-star hotels, gated neighborhoods and luxury apartments continued to proliferate across the landscape of large metropolises, but now the bottom layer of casual laborers on construction sites was overwhelmingly composed of young Kurdish men, escaping from the terror of war. The flood of refugee families arriving from the war zones to settle in the peripheral neighborhoods of large cities began to feed into existing ethnic tensions. By the end of the 1990s, the experiential world of nearly all urban strata had become an extension of the ongoing war in "the East." (For a detailed account of various censorship measures as well as the scorched-earth tactics used by the military, see Mark Muller, "Nationalism and the Rule of Law in Turkey: The Elimination of Kurdish Representation During the 1990s," in *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s*, ed. Robert Olson [Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1996]).

2   This is not to mention the ongoing violence. At the moment of this writing (August 2011), photographs of young soldiers killed in "the East" and images of their devastated families are once again leading news on television and in newspapers.

Exceptional territories and symbolic geographies of violence

"The paradox of armed conflicts within the territorial boundaries of nation states," argues Achille Mbembe, "stems from the impossibility of maintaining the difference between "internal" and "external" political realms."[3] Since distinctions between combatants and non-combatants, between enemies and criminals, cannot be sustained among "the people," it is not possible to conclude peace with them. The "illusion of peace" can only be achieved by demarcating exceptional zones or territories where legal and institutional rules are suspended, and a permanent state of siege prevails. "Peace" takes on the form of spatially designated enclaves of "hostilities without end," epitomized by barracks and police stations. This has historically been the case in the ethno-politics of Turkish nationalism. The quasi-binding of Kurdish identity with physical, geographical territory has rendered the region an exception to the normative rule of law (*olağanüstü hal*). The preeminent task of state authorities to establish "security" in the region has "normalized" a permanent state of "insecurity."[4]

The constitution of the "the East" as an exceptional territory is embedded in a lengthy history of violence that reaches back to Ottoman history. It is tied to the historical production of the geographical territory along the Eastern borders of Turkey as remote spaces, resistant to the diffusion of the rational-bureaucratic state. It cannot be divorced from the rhetoric of the Turkish state, which has framed, explained and justified ethnic violence through the exceptionalism of the East as remote, backward, and resistant.

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3   Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 24-25.
4   Rather than engage with the broader theoretical literature on "states of exception," I have chosen to refer to Mbembe's work because of its immediate relevance for my own analysis. Ibid. Although the notion has originated with Carl Schmitt's *Dictatorship* (1921), it has recently been revived and popularized in Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception* (2005), as well as in his earlier *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). In Schmitt's paradigm, the term "state of exception" describes a situation where the sovereignty of the executive becomes absolute and unreferenced, requiring neither "legality" nor "legitimacy." See Carl Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). In its current usage in social science literature, the notion of "exceptionalism" has become a key term in describing a particular set of spatial-institutional practices, namely the creation of zones that actively attempt to "capture" and territorialize a diffuse adversary, such as the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, detainee camps for "terrorists" (such as Guantanamo), or refugee camps and border zones of illegal migration. See, for instance, Roxanne Lynn Doty, "States of Exception on the Mexico-U.S. Border: Security, "Decisions," and Civilian Border Patrols," *International Political Sociology* 1, no. 2 (2007). At the same time, this literature has come under criticism for establishing spurious connections between divergent politico-geographical phenomena. According to its critics, the notion of "state of exception" threatens to close off discussion about the historical dynamics and complexity of specific cases by subsuming them under an evocative, but facile, explanation. A comprehensive discussion of these critical debates remains beyond the scope of this article. I have cited Mbembe, because his analysis is situated in the context of civil wars in Africa. He also at the same time raises provocative questions about the notions of "colonial territories" and "exceptional territories."

The imprints of violence in the region can be traced back to the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Armenians between 1915 and 1918, with distant memories of forced deportations (death marches) across the borders to present-day Syria and Iraq.[5] It continues with a succession of Kurdish "rebellions" during the early decades of the Republic, each crushed more violently than the preceding one.[6] Since then, the "backwardness of the East," continuously produced and reproduced in juxtaposition to the "developed" West, has become a way of understanding and explaining decades of stark rural poverty, impoverishment and out-migration of Kurdish populations. Stereotypes of feudalistic blight among the Kurdish populations who inhabit the region have always been formulated as a problem of "backwardness," rather than exclusion. Thus the notion of "the East" has become a generic construct, inscribed in dualistic opposition to the dominant order at multiple layers—geographically remote, backward, unchanging, pre-capitalist, tribal, simultaneously untamed and rebellious. Alternative versions of the past—told in terms of enforced Turkification policies, deportations, and the mass re-settlement of populations—have been "unthinkable."[7]

Articulations of the official and the popular in commercial markets

In the current era of global mobility, however, geographical "territory" is no longer as central to the exercising of political and cultural power as it once was. This has been amply demonstrated by the very success with which the Kurdish movement has been able to export its historical claims and demands into the transnational arena. Kurdish ethno-poli-

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5   For a critical discussion on the various interpretations of these death marches in nationalist histo-
    riography, see Ayşe Gül Altınay and Yektan Türkyılmaz, "Unravelling Layers of Gendered Silencing:
    Converted Armenian Survivors of the 1915 Catastrophe," in *Untold Histories of the Middle East*, eds.
    Amy Singer, Christoph Neumann, and Selçuk Akşin Somel (London: Routledge, 2011).

6   Kirişci and Winrow have counted 16 Kurdish "rebellions" in Anatolia between 1925 and 1938. See
    Kemal Kirişci and Gareth Winrow, *Kürt Sorunu: Kökeni ve Gelişimi* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları,
    2007), 105. The vocabulary of "unrest," which was used to describe Kurdish resistance during the
    1930s, became intertwined with discourses of "underdevelopment" and "economic backwardness"
    during the decades after World War II, and after the 1980s with "failures of integration." For a broader
    discussion on these changes, as well as the continuities that underpin them, see Mesut Yeğen, "Turk-
    ish Nationalism and the Kurdish Question," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 1 (2007). On the recent
    rise of anti-Kurdish discourses in the public arena, see Cenk Saraçoğlu, "Exclusive Recognition: The
    New Dimensions of the Question of Ethnicity and Nationalism in Turkey," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*
    34, no. 6 (2009).

7   As Trouillot has pointed out in his seminal book *Silencing the Past*, the workings of power reveal them-
    selves, not by keeping quiet or denying the occurrence of horrific events in the past, but by narrating
    them as parts of a script, which makes alternative truth claims irrelevant or trivial. Thus "one cannot
    conceive within the range of possible alternatives, that which perverts all answers because it defies
    the terms under which the questions were phrased." Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power
    and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 82.

tics in Turkey has become increasingly dominated by a highly educated and transnational elite, which clearly distinguishes it from earlier forms of activism and resistance. The possibility of utilizing "supra-territorial" networks of power which now permeate the international arena—that is, power wielded via political, technological, financial and ideational resources—has lent international visibility and legitimacy to the heretofore fragmented Kurdish struggle for self-determination.[8] At the same time, the winds of neo-liberalism in the transnational arena (for all its shortcomings) have undermined the hegemony of statist discourses in the public arena, enabling Turkish intellectuals, journalists, and activists to speak more openly about the authoritarianism of the Turkification project. As the parameters of permissible discourse about Kurds and the Turkish state continue to shift, debates about the crisis levels of distress in the region—in terms of domestic violence, homicides and suicides—have become salient themes in the public arena. Numerous NGOs, foreign and domestic, have been mobilized in the effort to "normalize" civil life in the region. And a new generation of academic research has begun to focus on communities of Kurdish refugees on the margins of large cities.[9]

Most important for my own concerns in this paper however, has been the growing visibility of "the East" and "Eastern people" in cultural markets.[10] Commercial television, marketing, popular cinema and music industries have become major agents in this process, mutually feeding into and off of one another to produce a dizzying array of narratives and images of the "East" for public consumption. My purpose in this paper will be to explore the meaning and implications of this process, by focusing on so-called Eastern melodramas on television and on stories of tourists who have joined packaged tours to "the East." Much of what I will offer in the following pages will consist of a grounded discussion based

8   See, for instance, Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen, *Transnational Politics: Turks and Kurds in Germany* (London: Routledge, 2003).

9   Recent examples published in English include: Cihan Ahmetbeyzade, "Negotiating Silences in the So-Called Low-Intensity War: The Making of the Kurdish Diaspora in Istanbul," *Signs* 33, no. 1 (2007); Ayşe Betül Çelik, "'I Miss My Village': Forced Kurdish Migrants in İstanbul and Their Representation in Associations," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 32 (2005); Heidi Wedel, "Kurdish Migrant Women in Istanbul: Community and Resources for Local Political Participation of a Marginalized Social Group," in *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, ed. Shahrzad Mojab (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001); Deniz Yükseker, "Yurtlarından ve Yaşamlarından Koparılmış İnsanlar: Bir Sosyal Dışlanma Süreci Olarak Türkiye'de Kürtlerin Yerlerinden Edilmesi," in *Türkiye'de Büyük Kentlerde Gecekondu ve Çöküntü Mahallelerinde Yaşanan Yoksulluk ve Sosyal Dışlanma*, eds. Fikret Adaman and Çağlar Keyder (2006).

10 Throughout this paper, I use these terms as direct translations from everyday Turkish. In daily language, "the East" (*Doğu*) is often distinguished from "the Orient" (*Şark*). The term "Eastern people" (*Doğu insanı*) is also used self-referentially (*Biz Doğuluyuz*) to designate Kurdish and/or Alevi identity.

on television narratives and tourist narratives of "the East." So before proceeding further, it may be best to briefly sketch the analytical line of thinking/questioning I want to pursue.

My point of departure is a familiar generalization. Over the past two decades the phenomenal expansion of media culture has eroded the capacity of national states to control their cultural borders. National cultures have become increasingly difficult to reproduce, because a complex set of forces, which we have come to name globalism, have undermined narratives of national unity and community. This broad generalization is valid for Turkey as well. Since the 1990s, the capacity of the Turkish state to monopolize cultural production through state institutions—the school, the university, the army—has been progressively undermined. Increasingly, it is the lexicon of consumerism with its imaginary of abundance and "free choice" which has come to the foreground. This does not mean of course, one has displaced the other. What might called the "ideology of state" (based on a common good defined by the state) and the "ideology of consumerism" (based upon plentitude and "free" choice) are not mutually exclusive, but are articulated in a variety of forms and levels. In the context of this paper, I will not delve into the theoretical debates which inform these broad generalizations. Instead, I will simply proceed by assuming that in contemporary Turkey, discourses of the state and the rhetoric of neo-liberal markets have become intertwined in ways which remain to be explored on the ground.

What I want to question are the imaginaries of "the East" currently produced in commercialized markets. What happens when "the East" is commodified in cultural markets? Or, more accurately perhaps, how is an "exceptional territory," so recently marked by such intense violence, packaged for consumption for mainstream audiences? How are its symbolic boundaries marked in commercial productions designed for mainstream audiences? What are the differences between the stories of tourists and television stories? And why, especially now in the immediate aftermath of a civil war, has "the East" become so consumable in cultural markets?

I will begin by delving into the world of television melodramas (circa 2002-2004) to discuss the popularity of what has become known as Eastern serials. I trace how familiar tropes of "the East" are mobilized and recast in the self-contained codes of these serials. Then I turn to how these serials have acquired "talk-value" across different media circuits—such as mainstream dailies, tabloids, and weblogs—to generate public chatter on sexual politics. Lastly, I discuss how middle-class families narrate their experiences on "Eastern tours." My aim in bringing to-

gether these different domains of experience/practice is to explore how the symbolic geography of the East, and by extension Kurdishness, is invoked in multiple and contradictory ways to acquire solidity in mundane life. At the end, I will turn to the question how the ambivalences and anxieties of Turkishness are bound with these contradictions.

Television narratives: The fascinations of "Eastern" melodramas

In the world of infotainment broadcasting in present-day Turkey, a host of television series and serials compete for audience ratings each evening immediately after prime-time news. Along with game shows, telemagazine programs and "sports-chat," they constitute the most popular form of light entertainment. All the leading channels begin the season by launching new serials amidst great publicity blitz, with previews of plots and the starring cast advertised well ahead of time in newspapers, the tabloid press, and the broadcasting channel itself. The majority of these are situation comedies based on the foibles of family life—misunderstandings between parents and children, resentment among in-laws, fall-outs with neighbors—all of which take place in middle-class interior settings. If and when lower-class family life settings are used, humor becomes more exaggerated, characters begin to speak with accents, and parody takes over. The audiences are expected to be highly entertained and slightly edified. Since producers keep a close eye on ratings, any successful programming novelty introduced by one channel is rapidly reproduced by others. Competition does not increase the range and variety of programming; rather, at any given moment, formats across leading channels are remarkably similar.

The hit of the 2001 season, at a moment in time when television screens were dominated by sit-coms, proved to be an epic melodrama by the name of *Asmalı Konak*. In rapid succession, two competing (but similar) productions, *Zerda* and *Berivan*, appeared. Their popularity continued to soar as family audiences tuned in to watch events unfold— family feuds, corrupt business deals, betrayals, hatred, clandestine love affairs—in nearly 100 episodes delivered in twice-weekly installments.[11]

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11 To provide some background information, Turkish audiences became familiar with Latin American telenovelas and glamorous Hollywood soap operas in the 1980s, when TRT, the state broadcasting agency, began to import them. When commercial broadcasting took off in the early 1990s, popular Turkish films rapidly moved into prime-time slots. Soon thereafter, a host of domestic sit-coms, as well as game and quiz shows modeled after bestsellers in transnational markets invaded the television screens. From the vantage point of commercial broadcasters, these programs have the advantage of recycling characters and studio settings in self-contained episodes, thus reducing production costs. The raving audience response to the "Eastern serials" in the first half of the 2000s ushered in a whole new era of major investments in lavish productions. What has dramatically increased the po-

It has often been pointed out that the "melodramatic imagination" offers a counterpoint to the sense of meaningless in contemporary material life. There seems little doubt that the immediate audience appeal of these serials, with their larger-than-life emotions and sufferings, resides in the stark contrast they provide to the trivialities of mundane middle-class life continuously reproduced in Turkish sit-coms. These television melodramas exploited all the essential ingredients of what is now a transnational genre: tensions among multiple generations living in the same wealthy household, notable families locked in feuds over distant events in the past, extravagant moral dilemmas, and tragic catastrophes.[12] What differentiated them from their Latin American or Hollywood counterparts was not their story-telling conventions, but that they took place in "the world of the East." Thus, the kinds of intrigues and ethical dilemmas associated with "foreign" serials were transposed onto the familiar-yet-distant geography of "the East." Part of their fascination for Turkish audiences, I would suggest, resided in the paradox of the "familiar" and the "foreign" invoked by the so-called "Eastern serials" (*Doğu dizileri*).[13]

It would be tedious to dwell on the main plotlines and sub-plots of individual Eastern serials. Suffice it to say that they are all based on the saga of a notable land-owning family, following the twists and turns in the lives of extended family members, and featuring a gallery of characters incorporated into various evolving story lines.[14] Instead, I will turn to the formulaic tropes commonly used to encode "the East."

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tential market for epic serials was the phenomenal success of *Gümüş* among Arab audiences in 2008. Based on the saga of a wealthy business family in İstanbul, *Gümüş* was moderately successful among Turkish viewers when it was originally broadcast in 2005. On the subsequent popularity of *Gümüş* (*Noor* in Arabic) in various Arab countries, see: "The Noor Phenomenon: From the Hearts and Minds of Saudi Women," in *Human Research Program - Project 01: Noor* (KA Research Company, 2009).

12 For a series of informative articles on the specificities of television melodrama, see Marcial Landy, ed. *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).

13 I speak in the past tense, because the last of the major serials actually shot on location in "the East," *Berivan*, went off the air in 2004/5. Despite shifting fashions in the television serial markets, however, "the East" continues to figure in the sub-plots of nearly epic melodramas. Thus, for instance, sagas of wealthy İstanbul families often include mafia connections in the East, or ancient blood feuds buried in family history that catch up with younger generations in the urban setting. The formulaic tropes of Eastern serials continue to be reproduced on television as well as in popular film.

14 Needless to add, for loyal fans who regularly followed *Asmalı Konak*, *Zerda*, or *Berivan*, each was unique and in no way comparable with one another. "Addicts" tend to be offended when "their serial" is compared with others and offer very detailed reasons why the term "Eastern serials" is a misnomer invented by journalists.

The "harshness" of the landscape

While much of the action in Eastern serials takes place indoors, viewers are constantly reminded of the ruggedness of the landscape that lies beyond. The harshness and barrenness of the landscape are used both to remind the viewer that is the story takes place in "the East" and to accentuate the intensity of emotions that the characters experience. When characters stare out the window towards distant mountains, for instance, or when a car (sometimes a convoy of cars) speeds along a highway across the desolate, barren landscape, we know as viewers that this is a moment of high drama. While the action taking place indoors is based on the assumption that this is a city—indeed, a specific city such as Mardin, Urfa, or Ürgüp—there are very few city scenes as such. When necessary, conversations on the street are shot close-up, so that shops and other people on the street are not on camera.

The significance of the landscape as a marker of "the East" in television serials immediately invites parallels with the boundless, timeless landscapes discussed by Hamid Naficy in his analysis of exilic Kurdish cinema.[15] He has emphasized how tropes of an imagined homeland are invoked in mesmerizing images of landscape in order to accentuate feelings of yearning, nostalgia, and harmony. But the barren mountain ranges and landscapes depicted in Eastern serials are neither aesthetic, nor nostalgic. A closer parallel may be the recurring the trope of the "empty land" in Zionist narratives of Palestine. As Rebecca Stein has emphasized, "emptiness"—imagined as uncultivated and sparsely populated land—is used as a significant marker in all colonial narratives: "Emptiness ... is the sign of a place outside time and history, waiting, indeed beckoning, for Western intervention and development."[16] She has argued that the trope of "the empty" resonates with past and present efforts by the Israeli state "to produce emptiness where there was none, both the material dispossession of Palestinians, and the more symbolic efforts to remove their traces from the landscape."[17] So one way of reading the "empty" landscapes in Eastern serials is, along the lines Stein has suggested, enunciating colonial stereotypes of "backwardness" or the outposts of civilization.[18]

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15 See Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

16 Rebecca L. Stein, "First Contact and Other Israeli Fictions: Tourism, Globalization and the Middle East Peace Process," *Public Culture* 14, no. 3 (2002): 531.

17 See ibid., 530. See also her "Israeli Leisure, 'Palestinian Terror,' and the Question of Palestine (Again)," *Theory & Event* 6, no. 3 (2003).

18 In the context of television melodramas, there are always more mundane considerations as well. The "emptiness" of the landscape helps avoid any direct references to the poverty of peasant life on the

But in the dramatic clichés and verbal codes of the serials themselves, the land is described as "harsh" and "unforgiving," and associated with the "unyielding moral codes" of "Eastern people." Hence, the ruggedness/harshness of the land is repeatedly verbalized, not to underscore the inner strength of individuals who are capable of surviving in it (as the typical hero of the Western), but to emphasize the necessity of communal codes based on tribal loyalty and the perils of violating them. The moral codes of "Eastern people" are as merciless and ruthless as the natural landscape itself (compare *doğanın sertliği, acımasızlığı* with *törelerin katılığı, acımasızlığı*).

The tribal manor house (the ancestral home)

The ancestral home of a powerful tribal leader (*konak*) is both the physical setting and the organizing center of bristling tensions among extended family members. The manor house is a multi-family dwelling set around a large courtyard, commensurate with the wealth and political influence of a large landowner. As such, it has numerous dependents—rural tenants, overseers, armed guards—who come and go in the courtyard, but rarely enter the house itself. These are invariably rustic-looking characters, wearing black pantaloons with saggy crotches and red-and-white-checkered scarves on their head or shoulders, visually marking them as "Kurdish." The accompanying soundtrack deliberately avoids Kurdish tunes in favor of guitar music, thus conjuring up inter-textual references to Mexican haciendas in Hollywood Westerns. But the "tribal leader" as the male lead is the exact opposite of the archetypical villainous Mexican landlord who abuses the poor peasants on his land. Not only is he young, handsome and—having inherited the authority, responsibilities and title of *ağa* (tribal leader) from his deceased father—powerful, but also well-educated. He is involved in a variety of "business affairs," while simultaneously shouldering the responsibilities of a benevolent landlord. His "modern" business activities take him away on trips; his "traditional" obligations to the tribal community bring him back to the manor house.

Ruling over the extended household is the figure of the elderly widowed matriarch, the symbol and embodiment of tribal loyalties and "traditional" moral codes. She rarely, if ever, goes into the outside world, but rather asserts her power through her son. She always wears "traditional" dress and dominates the younger women of the extended family. Inside the enclosed spaces of the manor house, younger women look unabash-

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land, a distinct advantage in serials that focus on the sufferings of wealthy land-owning families.

Sıla, an Eastern serial broadcast in 38 episodes during 2007. Courtesy of Most Productions.

edly Oriental and exotic, rather than "folkloric." When leaving the house, they are shown as departing in expensive cars, using cell phones, being expensively dressed as well-to-do urbanites. Viewers are constantly reminded that younger generations live in a split world of divided loyalties, wavering between tribal loyalties and moral codes, and the "outside" world of modernity.
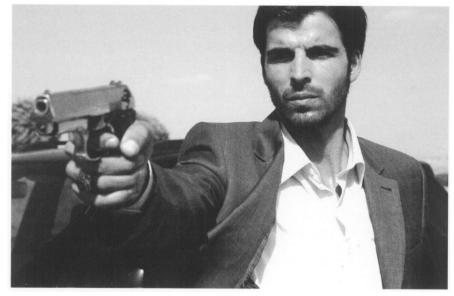
"Uncompromising" tribal codes and the violence of retribution

What is verbalized as "our moral codes" (*bizim törelerimiz*) is based on the gender and age hierarchies of a patriarchal order. These are repeatedly challenged in a mélange of plots and sub-plots, but reaffirmed in the overall narrative flow. They define a communal "us" that threatens to disintegrate unless its moral codes are vigilantly upheld and protected. The imaginary "world of the East" is devoid of ethno-racial tensions— such as the dilemmas of inter-ethnic love affairs and mixed marriages— but exclusively framed in terms of loyalty to "tribal" codes of morality.[19]

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19 In her analysis of three different television dramas in Sri Lanka, Neluka Silva has emphasized how ethnic conflicts between the Sinhales and Tamils are elaborated through tensions of "mixed" marriage. In Eastern serials, such tensions of intermarriage never come up. See Neluka Sliva, "Politics of Intermarriage in Sri Lanka in an Era of Conflict," in *Feminists under Fire: Exchanges across War Zones*, eds. Wenona Giles, et al. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003).

What generates intense emotions and explosive confrontations is an ever-present split between the lure of an "outside world" signifying independence, and an existential realm of "communal loyalties" that demand self-sacrifice.

The outside world as a threat to communal harmony is of course a broader feature of television melodrama in general. Moreover, the boundaries between the "outside" and the "inside" are invariably gender-specific, as are the magnitude and types of perils involved in transgressing them. In the imaginary world of Eastern serials, for women, venturing beyond the physical boundaries of the manor house is fraught with risk, and on the rare occasions when they do leave its confines, they are liable to endanger the "honor codes" of the entire tribe. But the masculine realm of the outside—involving encounters among men only—is equally dangerous, which makes it mandatory for everyone to carry guns at all times. All "business assignations" among men have the potential of being transformed into action-scenes where "guns begin to speak." More often than not, guns are drawn, but actual violence is averted at the last moment. Or there are cliff-hangers, where the viewers are left in suspense of immanent violence to come in the next episode. Attempting to illustrate this by delving into the specificities of individual serials and their evolving plotlines would be tedious. Suffice it to say that, instead of commercial

Sıla, an Eastern serial broadcast in 38 episodes during 2007. Courtesy of Most Productions.

intrigues or dealings over "big money" (often used in prime-time serials to attract male viewers), the men in Eastern serials are either plotting, or engaged in exacting retribution or revenge in a way that involves guns.

Within the self-referential codes of melodrama, the formulaic tropes I have described above do not invite sophisticated readings or alternative interpretations. Like all television melodrama, Eastern serials are "closed texts," offering fans the pleasure of following the tribulations of their favorite characters, without questioning the broader ideological frame within which they are cast. Instead of questioning the seduction that these serials offer to their immediate audiences, I will now turn to how they became the subject of discussion in the public arena.

Public chatter on Eastern serials

The overwhelming dominance of commercial television in Turkey means that popular programs generate an enormous amount of public chatter.[20] Columnists in major daily newspapers write commentaries on the latest serial installments. Sunday supplements offer discussions of the reasons behind their popularity, juxtaposing viewpoints offered by academics and public intellectuals with those of "average viewers." Weekly magazines publish information on the behind-the-scenes-world of production and the biographies of the leading actors and actresses. The tabloid press thrives on sneak photos of these actors and actresses, and gossip about their off-screen lives. In addition, the illustrated plot-summaries of all serials are published on the web and discussed in blogs.

For television producers and sponsors, the proliferation of such public chatter provides a vast array of promotional opportunities. For viewers, it extends the horizon against which their favorite serials and series can be read, beyond the self-contained codes of television melodrama, towards everyday press commentary on individual episodes, articles on how they are produced, or photographic essays on their leading stars. But foremost, as public chatter extends into the realm of quotidian life, non-viewers become "consumers" of television series and serials they have never watched.

What amplified public chatter about Eastern serials was obviously not a simple matter of promotional hype or mechanical diffusion across media

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20 I use the notion of "public chatter" to avoid the usual assumptions of "reasoned debate" that underpin the classical concept of public sphere. Public chatter centers on personalities and events rather than abstract issues and proliferates across different publics, without reaching a "resolution." It simply shifts focus, depending on the ebb and flow of events. I have elsewhere tried to develop the notion further. See Ayşe Öncü, "Reflections on a Media Scandal: The Battle of Moralities in Contemporary Turkish Politics" (paper presented at the Fifth Porticus Global Seminar in Media and Politics, University of Hyderabad, India, August 14-18, 2011).

markets, but rather the timing of their first appearance in the early 2000s. They entered public circulation at a moment of political uncertainty and ambivalence, to become a common point of reference in a stream of commentary that spread simultaneously across mainstream dailies, tabloids, television celebrity programs, life-style magazines, and the internet. Since each of these constitutes distinct media circuits that cater to different audiences/readers, commentary varied widely across them.

Nearly all daily newspaper columnists had something to say about Eastern serials. Not surprisingly, they commonly avoided questions of Kurdish ethnicity, choosing to speculate on the appeal of Eastern serials to the "average viewer" instead. The diversity of explanations they offered ranged from the appeal of traditional gender roles for the "masses," to the fantasies of wealth and power promoted by these serials. By way of illustration, below are three items selected from the progressive daily newspaper *Radikal* during the same month.[21] From a news item:

> According to Ferhan Bıçakçı, from Denge Psychological Consultancy and Pedagogy Center, "Youth who aspire to the *Ağa* model elaborated in TV serials, have begun to establish *Ağalık* groups in schools." Bıçakçı said: "Over the past two three years, I have observed the emergence of groupings in schools. For a period, there were Miroğlu children, now there are little Seymen Ağas."[22]

From a commentary:

> ... masculinity is legitimized in TV serials and masculinity is upheld ... Berivan and Zerda have now replaced portrayals of women who can stand on their own feet, who are equal... As the violence in the TV serials influences society, men who do not reveal their feelings and dominate women are applauded.[23]

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21 I have quoted passages which were relatively easy to translate. Many of the journalistic catch-phrases invented to describe Eastern serials seem impossible to translate into English, although they make immediate sense in Turkish. To cite a specific example, a well-known journalist and television personality, Can Dündar, came up with the phrase "*risotto yiyen maço*" (a macho who eats risotto) to refer to the leading male characters in Eastern serials. Can Dündar in *Milliyet*. In her cross-referential piece, Nuray Mert followed with a host of others, including "*risotto yiyen Ürgüplü*" (risotto-eating resident from Ürgüp), "*jipli ağalar*" (aghas with jeeps), "*neo-maço tipler*" (neo-macho types), and "*dönüşmüş Ağalar*" (transformed aghast). Nuray Mert in *Postexpress*. The ways in which such labels conjure up a particular kind of masculinity and associate it with "the East" deserves more discussion than I can offer in the context of this paper.

22 "Okulları Küçük Ağalar Bastı!," *Radikal*, December 2, 2002, http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=58450.

23 Hatice Yaşar, "TV'de Dövesiye Sevdalar," *Radikal*, November 3, 2002, http://www.radikal.com.tr/

From a regularly featured column:

> Especially since the exodus from the East and Southeastern Anatolia, the emergent settlements in large cities have developed cultural formations of their own. Even when settled in large cities, these people live their own culture. And this is a feudal tribal culture. When this is the situation, televisions pour this culture on us. Whichever serial you look at, you observe that either the plot centers on tribal culture, or at least a number of characters who embrace this culture feature in them.[24]

Overall, much of the commentary in the mainstream press has either criticized the harmful influences of Eastern serials on children, women, or youth (as the case may be); it also has dwelt on the lack of taste and education of "the people" (*halk*) who watch them.

In the world of tabloid journalism, in contrast, the Kurdish origin of the leading stars acquired sensation value, as their biographies were assembled and registered as "extraordinary" chronicles of fame and success. The most imminently marketable proved to be the story of Özcan Deniz (the male star of *Asmalı Konak*), since it seemed to simultaneously condense and highlight an urban myth—the legend of a poor Kurdish youth who arrives from the provinces to acquire fame and fortune as a singer in the world of entertainment. Thus his life-story acquired symbolic significance, resonating with "common knowledge" about the "Kurdish" background of other celebrities in the entertainment world (such as Yılmaz Erdoğan or İbrahim Tatlıses), to capture the public imagination. His before-and-after photographs, initially as an uncouth young boy (in black and white), then progressively being transformed (in color images) into a smooth and stylish young man of wealth, at the age of 30, were cycled and recycled in Sunday supplements of major dailies, a range of life-style magazines, as well as gossip columns. Since his starring role as the "*modern ağa*" on television, combined with the mythical story of his individual success (no doubt packaged by an astute publicity agent), has transformed Özcan Deniz into an instant celebrity, it has become commonplace for celebrities from the world of music or cinema to talk about their Kurdish backgrounds.

Last but not least, public chatter surrounding Eastern serials extended from mainstream media into alternative media circuits, including

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haber.php?haberno=55267.

24 Hasan Bülent Kahraman, "Ekrandaki Gösterge," *Radikal*, December 5, 2002, http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=58727.

ÖZCAN DENİZ NEYDİ NE OLDU
9 yıllık evrimin fotoromanı

Değişmiyorum, gelişiyorum' diyen Özcan Deniz, son dokuz yıl içinde saçından giysilerine kadar inanılmaz bir değişim yaşadı...

Yıllarca giyiminden kuşamına kadar Anadolu'nun bağrından kopup gelmiş gençler grubunun temsilcisi oldu Özcan Deniz... 'Asmalı Konak' filminin çekimleri için gittiği Amerika'dan ise bambaşka bir portreyle döndü. Deniz, siyah bere ve siyah tişörtle sahneye çıktı... Ardından 'Neredesin Firuze' filmine başlayan, kamera önünde de kılıktan kılığa giren Deniz'in geçirdiği evrim tek kelimeyle şaşırtıcı... Yüreğine müzik ateşinin düştüğü yıllarda elbette ki, imajın, evrimin, değişimin asla bilincinde değildi Özcan Deniz... Ancak zirve yolundaki başarı, yıllardır izlemeye alıştığımız o klasik çizgisini giderek değiştirdi... Değişmediğini, geliştiğini söyleyen ünlü sanatçı, geçirdiği evrimi ise şöyle özetliyor: 'Eski değerleri şimdiki modern değerlerle harmanlayan global bir gelişim bu.' Hayata bir çocuklu yoksul bir ailenin oğlu olarak atılmak hiç de kolay olmadı Özcan Deniz için... Sonra müzik ateşinin yaktığı yüreğini sanata adayıp, şansını önce Almanya'da denedi... İlk kaset, ikincisi ve derken 'Hadi Hadi Meleğim' (1994) albümüyle herkes tanıdı onu... Sonrasında da 1994'ten itibaren saçından kıyafetlerine kadar yavaş yavaş değişen bir Özcan Deniz vardı karşımızda... İşte, ünlü sanatçının bu son dokuz yıl içinde yaşadığı değişimin fotoğraflarını sunuyoruz...

■ Özer AHISKA

Life story and before/after photographs of Özcan Deniz (leading actor of TV serial *Asmalı Konak*). Published in weekly life-style magazine *hs*, no. 35 (August 27-September 1) 2003, 51. Courtesy of Doğan Yayıncılık.

feminist websites and blogs frequented by Kurdish/Turkish university students. Below is an excerpt from the ongoing commentary on *Özgür Politika*, which once again focuses on Özcan Deniz:

> You know Şakiro. Dengbej Şakiro. His voice, his songs and words resonate beyond the boundaries of the refugee world. When you listen to his naked voice, wherever you are, whichever soil you may be upon, or whatever you may be doing, you feel as though you are in Ağrı … Yes, this was Şakiro.
>
> And now there is Özcan Deniz. The nephew of Şakiro. Or, according to some, his grandson. A man who is capable of whitening his skin like Michael Jackson, who has the potential of denying all his ancestry. … Using his Kurdish affiliations as "maço" and his popularity as a "well-dressed and well-spoken man," Özcan Deniz now features as a singer in tele-show programs. Özcan Deniz has learned

to exploit his cultural heritage like İzzet Altınmeşe. Because Şakiro's nephew has re-arranged Şivan Perwer's song "Çavê Ciwana Leyla" as "Çavuş Kızı Leyla." As they say, "there is a worm in every tree" ... But how meaningful is it to watch a worm grow bigger?[25]

It is tempting to give further illustrative excerpts from the *Özgür Politika* website, or from such alternative publications as *Evrensel Kültür* and *Özgür Gündem*, to show how they cross-reference mainstream commentary. I think my point is obvious however.

It is important to realize that the audience ratings of Eastern serials and the proliferation of public chatter about them, although interlinked, were not the same. Eastern serials acquired "talk-value" beyond their immediate audiences, as they generate a fund of common knowledge about the people and events portrayed. Simply put, it was not necessary to be a regular viewer of these serials to acquire a host of information about their characters and plots. Such information was actively mobilized and selectively amplified, as it circulated across diverse sectors of the public, to identify and talk about a range of problems: dominant codes of masculinity, domestic violence, honor killings, new forms of conspicuous wealth, and conspicuous consumption. But to the extent that these problems were personified in the figure of the *"modern ağa"*—so familiar from Eastern serials—they became a way of marking the shifting boundaries of the East.

Tourist narratives: "Seeing" the multi-cultural heritage of the East

An entire spectrum of consumer practices and leisure activities which define a middle-class way of life in metropolitan centers in Turkey can be mapped onto the question of "What are you doing during the *bayram?*" There are two such major *bayrams* (official four-day religious holidays) during the calendar year, which can be combined with weekends. Over the past ten years, the possibility of going abroad during the *bayram* has become an aspiration, if not an actual option, for a growing segment of the urban middle classes. An approaching *bayram* is accompanied by endless small-talk in the quotidian existence of middle-class life about the advantages of "going away someplace" versus "staying at home" and the relative prices of various packaged tours advertised in daily newspapers.[26] Major touring agencies begin to advertise their prices two or

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25 http://ozgurpolitika.org/2002/06/06/18/allkos.html. This link has since been closed down due to state censorship.

26 Such conversations about tours and the fund of cultural knowledge upon which they build are an important marker of distinction between the middle classes and lower strata. Metropolitan munici-

three months ahead of an approaching *bayram*, announcing a variety of "affordable" options, roughly in the range of USD 150-200 (for three days and four nights of sightseeing and evening entertainment in Sophia, Athens, or Budapest, for instance) to USD 300-500 (for a whirlwind tour of Paris and London in six days and seven nights).

The first advertisements for "Eastern Tours" (*Doğu turları*) began to appear in daily newspapers in the early 2000s, coinciding with the growing popularity of Eastern serials. The initial demand for such tours was directly linked to the popularity of serials and films shot on such locations as Mardin, Ürgüp, Urfa, or Antep. To quote a travel agent:

> Japanese tourists come to see Cappadocia, then leave immediately. Why, I don't know. Travelers from Europe, especially the French and the Scandinavians, are in search of adventure. They want to see every single historical site on the way, the more difficult to reach, the more adventurous. Turks like to sample the food wherever they go ... They also like to see the localities they have become familiar with on television. There is *Asmalı Konak* in Ürgüp, of course, but Mardin is also important, because of *Berivan*. They also shop in local markets for interesting everyday objects manufactured for local use. These are too bulky for foreign tourists to carry. Souvenirs need to be specially manufactured, small and lightweight. The East is very backward in this respect ...[27]

At the moment of this writing, Eastern tours have become a distinctive market niche. Classified as "cultural tours" (*kültür turları*) by travel agencies, they include grand tours of 10 to 12 days, as well as long weekend trips of 3 to 4 days.[28] In the quotidian life of the middle classes, the question "have you been to the East?" now generates small-talk about what is worth seeing (*görmeye değer*) in individual cities such as Mardin

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palities organize a host of *bayram* festivities and consumer spectacles for urban residents who cannot afford to travel. It also marks the boundaries between an upper class of "globetrotters" who travel frequently and the clientele of package tours whose aspirations center on "seeing Europe."

27   Personal interview, December 10, 2004.

28   According to the Turkish Association of Travel Agents (Türkiye Seyahat Acentaları Birliği, TÜRSAB), the domestic market for "foreign tours" fluctuates around 5-6 million travelers annually, depending on the ups and downs of the Turkish economy. The market for Eastern tours is much more difficult to estimate. A series of reports prepared by TÜRSAB emphasize the great tourism potential of the East and the need for more airports, more frequent flights and better-quality hotels. Annual statistics published by the Ministry of Tourism, however, suggest that the existing hotels in such cities as Mardin or Urfa are less than 30 percent full. Tour operators explain the discrepancy by emphasizing that grand tours of 10 to 12 days are feasible only during long *bayram* breaks. Moreover, the tourism season is confined to spring and fall when the weather is relatively mild. Despite growing demand over the past decade, Eastern tours remain a relatively small niche, when considering the overall domestic market for package tours as a whole.

or Urfa, along with an exchange of information on the best hotels and touring agencies.

For those who have joined Eastern tours, what is narrated as "really interesting to see" closely follows what is described in the promotional pamphlets of agencies as "memorable." It is also shaped by the tightly regulated tempo of the touring ritual itself. Similar to packaged tours to "foreign" countries, such tours begin with arrival at a destination, briskly move from one important landmark to another, and are interspersed with periods in which information is transmitted, photographs taken, and local markets visited. The group-oriented nature of this ritual, typified by passage from one tourist attraction to another, with hotels and restaurants located along a predefined path, overwhelmingly dominates the stories told by people who have joined Eastern tours.

The following excerpts from an interview with a husband-and-wife couple from İzmir who went on a tour in 2003 are worth quoting at length, because they illustrate a much broader pattern:

Nilgün (female, 36 yrs. old, lawyer):
> We flew from İzmir to Diyarbakır. Here we spent the day walking around and stayed overnight. A prearranged bus took us to Hasankeyf, then by way of Midyat we passed on to Mardin. Then we went on to Urfa. After seeing the Atatürk dam, Kahta and the Nemrut ruins, the next day we went to Gaziantep. We flew back from here. The total program took five days, but this was not enough for us. For instance, we could not see much of Gaziantep.

Yücel, (male, 38yrs. old, lawyer):
> The Southeast is of interest anyway, a very different culture for us living in the Aegean. After Greek culture, we were curious about the Seljuk, Ottoman, Süryani cultures and their differences, and we saw them. We expected Diyarbakır, especially the center, to be much more renovated [*imar edilmiş*], but it did not turn out that way, there is much chaos in old and new construction as well as human relations. Still, it is still virgin [*bakir*] and open to development, and has the potential to respond positively to positive things. There is a hotel which was converted from an old *kervansaray*, we had something to eat there and it was a beautiful place. Not much else to spend time on or see. But afterwards, Hasankeyf was very different and beautiful, it is a world heritage site …

Nilgün:
> I was somewhat disappointed in Mardin, because it is different from

the picture we get in photographs, the scenery is not what we expect-
ed. They have built new and ugly buildings among the old houses,
and it has been spoiled. At night it looks beautiful, because the city is
full of bright lights, but when walking during the day, the appearance
of the streets is bad [*sokak manzaraları kötü*].

Yücel:

We could not see much of Urfa. The bazaar resembles the covered
bazaar in İstanbul, but more primitive [*daha bakir*] ... Here we joined
a *Sıra Gecesi*. It was a tourist arrangement on the lower floor of an old
konak. We joined as a group of forty. You sit on the floor [*yer sofrası*],
eat *çiğ köfte*, drink *rakı*, alongside with musicians singing local songs
[*fasıl heyeti türküler söylüyor*].

Gaziantep is a very developed city, but we could only stay four or
five hours there. It is very different from the other cities, it does not
have an authentic [*otantik*] and mystical [*mistik*] atmosphere. That
atmosphere is mostly in Mardin.

The couple I have quoted above prompted each other to recollect their
trip and enjoyed remembering/narrating "everything" in full detail, for
an entire hour. The fact that their joint narrative is so tightly regulated
by the touring experience itself—both in terms of the sequencing of
events and the level of detail accorded to each—is a common pattern
that emerges in all stories of "Eastern tours."[29] Very few narrators ven-
ture outside the "mobile enclave" of organized tourism, a phenomenon
which has been extensively discussed in the context of "foreign" tourism.
The distancing of the "touring" experience from the inhabited world of
"the East" does not mean being impervious to poverty or destitution.
On the contrary, nearly all interviewees expressed their feelings of shock
and consternation with statements such as "the people are so poor," "I did
not such expect such poverty," or "the street children are heartbreaking."
Some say that they felt compelled to make donations then and there,
others on their return. But when prompted to say what they found most

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29 My original intension in focusing on the clientele of Eastern tours was based on the assumption that
    I could identify multiple narrative types, akin to Edensor's tourist narratives of the Taj Mahal. See Tim
    Edensor, *Tourists at the Taj* (London: Routledge, 1998). But after persisting for more than 15 interviews,
    I gave up the entire enterprise because the narratives proved to be so predictably similar. When I
    tried to probe about the violent history of the region, most respondents offered lengthy discussions
    on their political standing on the Kurdish issue as a national problem, without however questioning
    tourist narratives of multi-ethic harmony and peaceful co-existence in the past. Questions about what
    had happened to the original owners of restored old houses (now restaurants or hotels) or why all the
    ancient synagogues or churches (now tourist monuments) are empty and crumbling, were "unthink-
    able."

compelling about the whole experience of "the East," the answers are in-variably a variation or combination of the themes that are elaborated in the promotional literature. Below I quote from several interviews illus-trating this point:

Nedim (46, journalist; joined a tour from Istanbul with his wife, but had traveled to individual cities before):

> There is not a region or a city I have not seen in Turkey. The most important aspect of the East is that it remains unspoiled. The East is mostly untouched yet, it has not been spoiled. This is what attracts tourism. This summer, for instance, we went on a ten-day trip to Art-vin, Ardahan, Çıldır Gölü, Kars, Iğdır, Doğu Beyazıt, Erzurum. The "East" is really as it was on the first day [*ilk günkü gibi*]. This is what I like.

Hande (40, owner of a public relations agency in İzmir):

> …Because this is a region where the Christians, the Muslims, the Süryani, the Kaldani, the Orthodox have lived together. For instance, in Mardin, one house is Muslim, next door is a Süryani house, and they share a common room. Or in Hasankeyf, there is an old church, half of it was used as a church, the other half was a mosque. They have lived together from ancient times. When you go there, you are happy to be living in a country which has such a cultural mosaic, re-ally proud.

The "cultural mosaic of the East" and its "unspoiled landscape" are the two main themes extolled by tour guides and fostered by advertising bro-chures. Within the routines and regulated practices of the touring experi-ence, the contradictions and gaps between the celebrated "cultural mosaic" and the historical legacy of the ethnic cleansings which have ravaged the East do not seem to emerge or merit reflection. In the parlance of tourism, the history of the East is rewritten as an "unspoiled landscape" which is worth seeing because it is part of "*our* multi-cultural heritage."

On the paradoxes of cultural markets

In the preceding pages I have dwelt upon two different fields of repre-sentation and cultural practices wherein "the East" is (re)produced in the popular register. Beginning with a number of television melodramas, I have discussed how they have deployed all the familiar tropes of "the East," while simultaneously recasting them in rich settings and offering viewers an attractive gallery of heroes and heroines with which to iden-tify. I have emphasized how these melodramas have acquired "talk-value"

in the public realm and become the subject of cross-referential chatter on sexual politics, ranging from codes of masculinity to domestic violence. Lastly, I have focused on the stories of tourists who joined packaged tours to "discover" their multi-cultural heritage in "the East." While each of these offers a different lens through which the East becomes visible, I have brought them together to argue that they are a part of the same popular grammar in present-day Turkey. This is a popular grammar which simultaneously operates in different registers.

At the most general level, it is worth reiterating that "the East" has now become an imminently marketable commodity. This means that it is framed and represented as a consumable *difference*. Mutually feeding off each other and into each other, commercial television, advertising, popular journalism and cinema have become major agents in this process. What cuts across the different fields of cultural production upon which I have dwelt and what brings them together is how they build upon preponderant definitions and images within the dominant culture, to represent "the East" as a bounded, recognizable entity. Thus the continuous valorization of "the East"—and by extension Kurdishness—in cultural markets both invokes and also reproduces pre-existing hierarchies. As Arlene Davila has put it concisely, "the constitution of individuals as consumers, and populations as market segments is produced in conversation and often in complicity with dominant hierarchies of race, culture and nationality that circulate in the spaces—be they local, national, or global—in which these processes take place."[30] Thus the prevalent grammar of discovery in tourist markets (reminiscent of imperial travelogues) shores up the boundaries of "the East" as a discrete geography, precisely at a moment when its physical borders have become porous by "peace." Television melodramas demarcate between "home" and a highly legible, easily recognizable "Eastern" culture, preserving the fiction of its boundaries. There seems little question that "the East" is represented as an Orientalized Other in cultural markets.

At a different level, it seems important to recognize that anything resembling "real" memory tends to vanish in the relentless recycling of "the East" for instant consumption and immediate leisure. Traumatic events of the recent past, the prevailing ethnic tensions and violence generated by the massive influx of Kurdish refugees to large cities, or daily newsbites on continuing violence in "the East" seem to recede into the

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30 Arlene Davila, "Culture in the Ad World: Producing the Latin Look," in *Media Worlds*, eds. Faye D Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 277. Davila makes this point in her discussion on the emergent Latino market in the United States.

background, next to the virtual reality of consumerist extravaganza. In this sense, the very profusion of imaginary "Easts" which circulate across media markets can be analyzed as "screen memories," or simply as blocking any real insight into what has happened in the recent past, or what is happening now. If "silencing," in Trouilloit's sense of the term, is an active process, then we are all engaged in the commercial/political ritual of silencing the horrors of a recent past that continues to haunt the present, precisely because the active participants in the violence—its perpetuators, survivors, and victims, along with their families—are living and "carry history upon themselves."[31] Thus, there seems little question that media spectacles that transform the war-torn geography of "the East" into an inviting topography of entertainment and leisure provide relief from traumatic memories.[32]

On the surface, the recycling of "the East" for profit in commodity markets and instant entertainment as a placebo for traumatic memories are perfectly sufficient explanations. Together, they seem to exhaust everything that needs to be said. The profit motives of mass marketeers are obviously pertinent, especially since "the East" is selling better than ever. This "East" is intelligible, even banal, because it is constituted as an Oriental Other. And there is no question that entertainment keeps the horrors of immediate violence at bay.

At the same time, however, it is too easy to blame the irresolvable dilemmas of the present on the machinations of the culture industries or the proliferation of media spectacles. It leaves out too much. Something else must be at stake in the obsession with "the East" in the first place, something that makes us (as consumers) respond so favorably to the cultural markets. This something, I want to emphasize, has to do with how prevailing ambiguities and anxieties about Turkish identity and culture become intertwined with the surfeit of "Easts" circulating in commercial markets, to reinforce one another. The key to this process, I would argue, resides in what I have described as the realm of "public chatter."

Here I want to emphasize how commercialized representations of "the East" are perpetually undone as they enter the realm of public chat-

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31 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 149.
32 An immediate conceptual caveat may be necessary at this point. I am not convinced by standard arguments which posit that contemporary media culture—by fostering re-presentation, repetition, replication, and the culture of the copy—generates amnesia. This view was first articulated by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and taken up and reformulated by Lyotard and others in the 1980s. I have carefully worded the paragraph above, to distance myself from the standard Adornian argument that commodification equals forgetting. For an excellent critique of the so-called late capitalist amnesia thesis, see Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000).

ter, selectively amplified as they circulate across diverse publics. This means that an enormous range of visual images, news, stories about "the East" become a part of musings and chat about the effects of media on children, "biased" reporting on domestic violence, or the aggressive masculinities encountered in daily life. I have named this process "public chatter" because it has all the characteristics we associate with everyday conversation—personalized, concrete, centering on emotions and moral dilemmas—but it is also "public" in the sense of a cross-citational field of many people speaking. Public chatter is driven by mediated happenings (real or fictional) which tumble upon one another, inviting musings about what may have happened, what may be about to happen, or what may be the result if events were to take a certain turn. But it does not develop towards a conclusion of some sort, in the sense as it is implied in the ideal of a public sphere where "reasoned debate" resolves common issues. In the absence of closure, "we" as consumers are plunged into a sea of doubt and uncertainty, which is what underpins the obsession with the "East" to begin with.

Of course, public chatter is never a politically neutral process. Through public chatter, "the East" acquires enormous interpretive flexibility as it circulates across different publics, valorized in musings about an enormous range of issues, from problems of crime and security in large cities, over assassination plots, to problems of unemployment. Since such musings never reach any resolution, the question becomes: Who is responsible? And as chatter focuses on the immediate culprits, instigators, allies, and sympathizers, the question of "the East" invariably crops up. In short, "the East" is everywhere and nowhere, displaced from its territorial moorings, to become a normalized way of affirming the meanings and boundaries of Turkishness, and a popular grammar for talking about race in everyday life.

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