Troubled Terrain:

Lines of Allegiance and Political Belonging in Northern Kurdistan

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Introduction

"We are very different from each other. We want to reach out to the women one by one. KAHAD works more through projects. Their work focuses more on men, while we have a more holistic approach: we focus on state pressure (*devlet baskısı*) and the feudal structure (*feodal yapı*). After all, these are the source of the male culture (*erkek kültürü*) we have here. Therefore, we also think it's necessary to educate the men. They work more on the legal front, while we want to change the mentality (*zihniyet*). We need social change."

This is how Bêrîvan, a young women's rights activist working at Van's municipal women's organization, explained to me how her own organization's work differed from that of the Women's Rights Association (*Kadın Hakları Derneği*, KAHAD)[i], another women's rights initiative in town. It was August 2011 and, having arrived in the town that was going to be my field site for the coming 18 months, I had set out to survey the local women's organizations. What I found were activists who seemed deeply invested in defending what separated rather than what united them.

After Amed/Diyarbakır, Wan/Van is often considered Turkey's second Kurdish metropole. Located in the mountainous area further North, only about 100 kilometres from the Iranian border, Van is a bustling middle-sized town with a strong Kurdish identity. Its population grew rapidly as a result of forced village evacuations in the 1990s and early 2000s, and currently hovers at around 400,000. The settlement of Kurdish forced migrants has turned the town into a centre of Kurdish politics and activism, and it boasts a whole range of civil society organizations. My research eventually came to focus on female singer-poets

(*dengbêjs*) as a way of comprehending the gendered ways in which histories of political violence are voiced in Northern Kurdistan. Yet my broad interest in questions of gender and sexuality meant that throughout my time in the field I closely engaged with a variety of women's organizations, not least because their work has had a tremendous influence on how women in the region think about and make use of their voices.

Reconsidering the conversation with Bêrîvan on this hot August day in retrospect, I believe that it illustrates the immense polarization that dominates politics and society in Northern Kurdistan as well as the discursive and social labour that is continuously invested in its reproduction. Bêrîvan's comments worked to delineate a sharp boundary between her own organization and KAHAD as a constitutive other. In this way, her comments were both reflective and productive of a fault line that, I argue, fundamentally structures political, social and personal life in contemporary Northern Kurdistan. This fault line simultaneously constitutes and separates two major political formations that claim hegemony in the region – namely the Kurdish movement, on the one hand, and the Turkish state, on the other – while rendering political and social activity on the margins of these formations highly precarious.

In this chapter, I want to reflect on how this dividing line shapes the texture of social life in Northern Kurdistan and on the kinds of challenges it poses for field researchers in the region as a result. My analysis draws on an anthropological approach to boundaries as socially constructed markers of division that are central for the making of identities and for the constitution of social and political communities (Barth 1969, Das and Poole 2004). Borders understood in this sense are not just negative elements of stoppage and inhibition that enforce a division between two self-contained entities, but quite to the contrary contribute to producing the very entities they purport to separate. As such, boundaries are a site of conflict and contestation: they are never entirely stable but subject to continuous renegotiation. Boundaries therefore need to be continuously performed and instantiated in order to be maintained. We might usefully think of such performance as a form of social

labor whose effect is the production of those subjects and collectives that a particular border is taken to separate (Bartlett 2007).

Bêrîvan's comments, I suggest, represent such a form of social labor. They establish a sense of political identity and belonging both for Bêrîvan herself and for her organization through distinction from others. As such, her comments are also expressions of loyalty to a particular political ideology and the institutions sustaining it. According to anthropologist Caroline Humphrey (2017), expressing loyalty entails giving priority to one type of attachment over possible others. In what follows I explore some of the consequences of a social situation in which individuals are constantly expected to make explicit their loyalties and choose one object of allegiance over another. Researchers are not excluded from these demands and will likely sense the pulls of allegiance when they navigate their field. Paying attention to such patterns is therefore imperative as much for dealing with the practicalities of fieldwork as for grasping how political subjects are shaped in contexts of protracted conflict and enduring violence.

Troubled terrain

Northern Kurdistan today constitutes a politically highly polarized place. Decades of armed conflict accompanied by assimilationist government and violent displacement have unsettled, transformed and deeply divided Kurdish society. With the political field dominated by two hegemonic formations – the PKK-affine Kurdish movement, on the one hand, and the Turkish state with its associated institutions, on the other hand – a friend-foe logic has come to pervade social interactions, which posits a neat dichotomous division in a conflict that, as any other, thrives on the existence of grey zones and ambiguities. It is a logic that seeks to shore up loyalties and asks for unquestioned allegiance, always ready to accuse of treason those who fail to bow to the demands of exclusive attachment.

Turkish state policy has driven this logic deep into the intimate fabric of Kurdish society. One means in which this has occurred is through the so-called village guard system. By systematically recruiting Kurdish civilians into state service in order to fight Kurdish insurgents who often issued from the same social fabric, the village guard system has contributed to the formation of a deeply divided social and physical topography. Villagers who have taken up village guard roles have been decried as "collaborators" by the PKK and become the target of violent retaliation, while in the eyes of the state villagers' refusal to take on guardianship has been perceived as an admission of support for the PKK insurgency and resulted in the targeted destruction of homes or entire villages (Belge 2011, Özar, Uçarlar, and Aytar 2013). As Evren Balta (2004, 3) has observed, one consequence of the village guard system that goes far beyond individual guards and their families has been "the complete destruction of 'neutral space'" in the region. The war has turned politics into a divisive weapon, which – like the blade of a sharp knife – is capable of tearing right through the intimate fabric of kinship and village relations, of friendship and collegiality.

What does this polarization mean for the ways in which political subjects and communities are shaped in the region and how does this, in turn, impact field research? I want to turn to my own research experience to shed light onto these questions. My research, carried out in 2011-2012, fell into a period that was characterized by a notable relaxation of the grip exerted by violent conflict on everyday life, leading to a certain disintegration of the dichotomous structure shaping the region. As much as this disintegration opened new spaces of social and political engagement, it also provoked a forceful defense of well-established boundaries that had come to be challenged. Turning to the resulting "boundary work" in what follows, my aim is to shed light onto a hegemonic order from the spaces of its margins. It is at these margins, I contend, that hegemony continuously (re)makes itself by vigorously policing loyalty and allegiance (cf. Thiranagama and Kelly 2010).

Considering my fieldwork experience from the vantage point of today it becomes clear that this was a period in which, even if confrontational politics occupied a firm place on the agenda, hope for a resolution of the conflict made a precarious appearance on the horizon. Two years prior to my arrival in the field, in 2009, the Turkish government had declared its "Kurdish initiative" (*Kürt açılımı*), a series of legal reforms that were to ameliorate some of the long-standing grievances regarding Kurdish political and cultural rights. Although the initiative was immensely controversial, it nevertheless encouraged a certain, timid optimism that a more democratic future was awaiting Turkey's Kurdish population. Such optimism was repeatedly curbed by clamp-downs on Kurdish political parties and activists, as well as continuing clashes between the PKK and Turkish military forces.

Still, a sense of hope that long-standing efforts of Kurdish campaigning would eventually bear fruit pervaded my field research (as premature as it might appear in retrospect). It formed the affective atmosphere in which my research took place, profoundly shaping the ways in which people interacted with their environment, with each other and, ultimately, with me. I use atmosphere here in the sense proposed by Kathleen Stewart (2011, 8), who writes of atmospheres "as a proliferative condition [that] not only allows, but spawns the production of different life worlds, experiences, conditions, dreams, imaginaries and moments of hyperactivity, down time, interruption, flow, friction, eruption, and still lifes." As an atmosphere in this sense, hope – timid and full of suspicion but, nonetheless, hopeful – spawned an immense effervescence of activity at the time of my field work. Sustained by (equally timid) legal reforms and a shift in political discourse, it made people dream about a less violent future and nurture ambitions of tranquil growth and upward mobility; it engendered construction booms and provided a taste of middle-class habits and comportments; it triggered a desire to reflect upon and testify to a violent past that, finally, seemed to have passed; it gave rise to a flourishing cultural scene and a host of civil society initiatives.

The political and military relaxation also impacted Kurdish party politics, which saw a loosening of the PKK's hegemony and a budding of new initiatives. While the pro-Kurdish and PKK-affine BDP's popularity reached new heights, several rival pro-Kurdish parties sought to make their inroads into the field engendering, as journalist Fehim Taştekin (2013) put it, a "diversification of politics in Kurdistan" that "raise[d] the prospect of breaking the PKK monopoly" on Kurdish politics. Such developments were paralleled by an expansion of civil society beyond the realm of organizations ideologically associated with and often financed by the Kurdish movement. International donor money aimed at development and human rights projects, which began to flow into the region via EU agencies and other European institutions, made financial means available to organizations associated neither with Turkish administrative structures nor the PKK-BDP bloc.

My fieldwork fell into this setting of atmospheric hopefulness, diluting boundaries and associational proliferation. More than supplying the "context" for my work, this conjuncture shaped its very outline, determining the interests I was able to develop, the questions I would be able to ask and the relations I was able to establish. That I ended up working closely with two women's associations that had emerged in this newly opened up space and that both sought to benefit – in one case successfully, in the other less so – from international funding opportunities hence reflected both a more general "context" and decisively shaped my interest in local struggles over political hegemony, in the status of women's rights activism and Kurdish women's ambition to public voice and representation. In deciding to work with these two organizations, my concern was less to take these as a base for producing generalizable research findings, than to produce detailed and "thick" knowledge of particular individuals, places and relationships that would shine light onto my research interests (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, Geertz 1973, Keesing and Strathern 1998).

Boundary work

When I first arrived in Van, KAHAD – the association that Bêrîvan had been so careful to distinguish her own organization from – was one of the first organizations I was pointed to by an acquaintance with whom I had established contact thanks to common friends in Istanbul. KAHAD's range of activities included providing counseling services to female victims of gender-based violence, lobbying local government offices on women's rights issues, and carrying out women's rights education programs. Highly critical of the government's conservative politics on gender and sexuality, the organization followed a largely liberal-secular women's rights agenda. It catered to women of all political convictions and ethnicities, including Iranian and Afghani female refugees based in the city and supported Van's small LGBTQ community. KAHAD was well connected to influential Turkish feminist organizations in Ankara and Istanbul, and maintained a number of international connections with European women's organizations.

Such connections, and the access they provided to knowledge and other resources were instrumental in making the organization particularly successful in securing European donor money. They certainly also played a role for KAHAD members' readiness to take me into their midst. The women working at KAHAD had assisted foreign researchers before me and would do so after (though I was probably the one who stayed longest). This meant that "being a researcher" was less of a foreign social category than it might have been in other contexts and certainly eased my integration. Moreover, several of the women active at the association were themselves former or current university students with interests in feminist thought and social theory, who would routinely reflect on their activist work and social surroundings through a theoretical repertoire that I was familiar with. In hindsight, I believe that such shared intellectual socialization played an important role for my relatively quick entry into KAHAD's social world.

Although left-leaning, pro-women's-rights and, perhaps most importantly, pro-Kurdish – all ideological markers which one might think would qualify KAHAD to be considered a partner or collaborator in the eyes of the BDP-led municipality – the organization was regarded with much suspicion by the latter, as the remarks I cited at the beginning of this chapter make clear. These remarks show that there existed important ideological differences between the two organizations regarding, amongst others, the significance attributed to legal reform and women's rights regimes for ameliorating the lives of women in the region.

In other regards, however, the two organizations were less distinct from each other than Bêrîvan's remarks might suggest. Despite their critique of the project-based women's rights and gender mainstreaming work undertaken by their more liberal feminist colleagues, BDP-aligned women's organizations were equally keen to enter international funding circuits and Van's municipal women's organization was no exception in this regard. Over the course of my fieldwork, the organization submitted several applications to EU-funded project schemes supporting women's rights activism and gender mainstreaming. Municipal women's organizations had established contacts with municipalities in Western Europe whom they were lobbying to enter collaborative funding bids. Alongside a rhetoric of revolutionary change, BDP-associated women's organizations also embraced more liberal women's rights discourses with remarkably frequency, for example in leaflets, during private conversations, or at public events. The day-to-day activities of Van's municipal women's organization, moreover, were not entirely different from what I observed at KAHAD: both regularly organized workshops and seminars for local women to inform them about their legal rights, provided individual counselling, and supported women in navigating state bureaucracy.

This is not to deny the ideological and practical differences between the organizations. Yet these differences were by no means clear-cut and the pervasive lure of international funding opportunities articulated through liberal rights discourse only threatened

to further dilute them. Precisely for this reason, I contend, marking and reinforcing a line of distinction became all the more important. We may consequently interpret Bêrîvan's comments as a performative enactment of an ideological boundary between the municipal organization and KAHAD through which an existing but increasingly ill-defined distinction was reified and rigidified. While, on its own, the interchange I had with Bêrîvan that day may seem inconsequential, it stands as an example for the numerous social interactions through which "boundary work" was performed on a day-to-day level. Apart from explicit speech acts like the one I quoted in the introduction, it occurred via decisions who to socialize with or which cafes to visit. It shaped the networks of friendship and collegiality making up local society. It was at stake in interactions with strangers, when people would seek to elucidate, through carefully circumscribed questions, on which side of the great political divide a person was positioned.

The challenge for field researchers lies, I believe, in learning how to recognize when and through what codes such boundary work occurs. Reflecting on her fieldwork with Sudanese migrants in London, Anne Bartlett (2007, 225-226) recounts how she became suspect to the community she was working with by striking up friendship with men from an opposed political faction. Only once she had violated the "invisible line" that separated these factions did she become aware of their existence, as she was suddenly denied access to a refugee center she had previously been working at. Based on this experience, Bartlett suggests viewing boundaries as a heuristic device, which – as sites where political tension becomes manifest – allow grasping the complexity of the political terrain.

Yet it is not only through violating them that boundaries become evident. The careful observation of muted hints, a familiarity with discursive codes and aesthetic symbols, and the knowledge of norms of interaction all allow ethnographers to detect lines of difference and distinction that generally remain implicit. Taking my conversation with Bêrîvan as an example, only familiarity with the Kurdish movement's discourse allows me now, in

retrospect, to recognize terms like "feudal structure," "male culture" or "mentality" as distinct markers of a specific ideological position. Similarly, only familiarity with Van's social topography allows me to recognize that the decision of Bêrîvan's organization to work within certain neighborhoods in Van and not others may be read as a statement of allegiance to a particular social and political constituency. Or, to mobilize another example, only a keen eye for the minute details of interior design – for that particular logo imprinted on a clock, that particular calendar sponsored by a specific party or NGO – will be able to detect the subtle performances of loyalty in everyday life that so often occur beyond the realm of explicit discourse. At stake is thus to develop what Cerwonka and Malkki (2007, 162-163) term the "anthropological sensibility": a disposition that draws creatively upon a wide repertory of methods in order to critically approach social facts that would otherwise remain invisible.

Researchers will need to develop these skills not only if they are to "read" their field site properly but also in order to negotiate their own position within it. In a context as polarized as Northern Kurdistan, a researcher's position with regards to hegemonic political formations will inevitably come under scrutiny and may crucially determine access to specific individuals, networks and organizations. For example, my close association with KAHAD meant that the suspicion many harbored towards the organization on the side of the municipality soon began to rub off onto myself. Members of the latter, for example, would sometimes ask me if I was really hanging out with "those women" from KAHAD – indicating they had heard from others this was the case – and when I replied in the affirmative, they would only nod as if I had just confirmed their suspicion. On the other hand, being a foreigner allowed me to partially distance myself from such suspicions and maintain access to people working with municipal and other BDP-associated organizations (cf. Baser and Toivanen 2017). This is not to advocate distance or detachment – for example by emphasizing foreigner status – as a means of ensuring neutrality and hence broad access

during field research (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, 32-33). Ethnographic knowledge production deliberately seeks proximity with interlocutors as a way of producing in-depth insight, recognizing that there can be no such thing as absolute neutrality. This condition is only heightened in a context as polarized as Northern Kurdistan, where researchers will inevitably sense how charged political and social fault lines are as they navigate their fields.

Access, moreover, is not an unqualified condition that one either does or does not have. It is the quality of access that matters, the proximity or depth of relation one is able to build up with one's interlocutors. Thus, even though I was always able to contact people close to the municipality and make inquiries whenever I needed to, these relations were never marked by the same degree of trust and intimacy as those I had developed with other interlocutors, the women at KAHAD amongst them. Consequently, the type of knowledge I was able to gather from these different relations was of an entirely different kind. My point here is less to judge which type of knowledge is more desirable – that will vary for each research project – than to underline how one's positionality in the field impacts what kind of "data" one is able to collect and the knowledge one is ultimately able to produce.

Understanding my positionality in the field, including different forms of access and varied relations of trust and intimacy, as directly mediated by the ways in which the locally hegemonic Kurdish movement sustained and regulated its dominance allowed me to view what may appear primarily like methodological problems as a heuristic tool for understanding the shape and course of social and political fault lines in my field site. For such heuristics, embodied and affective knowledge should not be underestimated. The sense of rejection when excluded from a specific conversation, the embarrassment when realizing one has asked the wrong question, the feeling of being kept at a distance by an interlocutor one would like to develop a close relation to: all these are visceral and emotional clues pointing to the tensions that become evident at political fault lines and they were experiences I repeatedly made as I navigated relations with interlocutors embedded in the range of

institutions pertaining to the PKK-BDP bloc. They point to the fact that, as Allaine Cerwonka (2007, 153) notes, "it is often at the level of the body that we register the contradictions of fieldwork and the awkwardness of being a person out of category." The body is in that sense both a heuristic tool and a site of ethical negotiation, particularly in contexts marred by violence and conflict (cf. Nordstrom and Robben 1995). From this perspective, what is often referred to quite abstractly as "positionality," needs to be understood as a question of quite literally taking up a position: an embodied and affective stance from which knowledge is produced. In Northern Kurdistan, doing so occurs under enormous pressure. At the same time, this renders positionality an ever more valuable form of visceral insight through which to better understand how political belonging is shaped in this particular context.

Hegemony from the Margins

Political belonging can be precarious for those positioned at the margins of hegemonic political formations. Negotiating my relation with the municipality and other associated actors as someone who was seen to be associated with KAHAD gave me precious (though comparatively inconsequential) insight into such precarity through bodily and affective registers like feelings of rejection, exclusion, and embarrassment. Despite its fraught relation to the locally hegemonic municipality, KAHAD nevertheless had the advantage of being able to draw on important local kinship networks and was both nationally and internationally well connected. This was not the case for the Women Artists Association, another organization I worked closely with. The Association offered a platform for Kurdish female singers and musicians facing difficulties in a society where women's involvement in public musical performance is often considered morally questionable or shameful (*şerm*). It was founded only several months prior to my arrival in Van by a group of female singer-poets who had previously been active at the local Mesopotamia Cultural Centre (*Navenda Çanda*

Mezopotamyayê, NÇM), which was ideologically linked to and financed by the BDP-municipality. The women were greatly disappointed with how they had been treated at the NÇM, where, so they reported, male artists and staff did not take them seriously as singers and did not accord them space at public performances. Disappointed by these experiences, the women decided to set up their own, all female association.

They found encouragement for doing so in widely circulating ideas about non-governmental organizations as key access points for vast sums of money and other resources. The women who embarked on funding the association were mostly middle-aged to elderly, of modest backgrounds, and many had never attended school. In this context, the idea of funding an association that would not only allow them to engage in the musical and poetic work they felt passionate about but might also give them access to resources that were otherwise scarce was certainly appealing.

When it was first founded, the association had enjoyed some financial support by the BDP-run municipality, but this never turned into the kind of regular funding with which the municipality supported its own associations. The women singers also soon found that acquiring the funding that seemed so plenty in the realm of civil society was not as easy as it had appeared, particularly in a situation where, lacking literacy skills and bureaucratic know-how, they entirely relied on the goodwill of others to help with identifying bids, writing applications and submitting them. As a result, the association found itself scrambling each month to pay the rent and charges for its office space in the city center, relying on donations from more well-to-do acquaintances, friends and relatives to make ends meet. Matters were not made easier by the fact that relations with the BDP and municipality quickly worsened. This meant that renting venues for performances the women were planning became a real challenge, and that the endeavor to sell tickets for concerts ran into a wall of indifference from audiences that normally pride themselves for supporting Kurdish culture.

Municipal officers also exerted continuous pressure on members of the association to give up their endeavor and return into the fold of the NÇM and several women took up the offer. Perihan, head of the Artists Association and one of my closest interlocutors, was heart-broken over these developments. She had been a committed supporter of the Kurdish movement from its very inceptions – enduring immense suffering, including torture, for her support – and now suddenly found herself at odds with it. She could not comprehend why her commitment to work with Kurdish women singers, something that she regarded as an important contribution to preserve and revitalize Kurdish culture, could not be embraced by the pro-Kurdish municipality. And indeed, rather than disagreement over the type of work the Artists Association was engaged in, it seemed that the main issue motivating the municipality's attempts to curb the association was its institutional independence.

Hegemony, this makes clear, asserts itself most fiercely at the margins, where the negotiation of allegiance and belonging becomes particularly urgent. Above, I argued that researchers in Northern Kurdistan are well advised to develop an acute sensitivity for the major fault lines and divisions that structure their field in order to negotiate positionality and manage access. What the example of Perihan and her association adds to this insight is the importance for researchers to not only take into account the immense polarization that marks their research context, but also the ways in which their interlocutors themselves navigate this fraught terrain. While such navigation has certainly become the focus of analysis in its own right as indicative of the social relations ethnographers seek to understand (e.g. Thiranagama and Kelly 2010), what it implies methodologically has been somewhat less explored.

Perihan and the women organized through her association were amongst the most important interlocutors for the research project I undertook at the time. The way in which they negotiated the expectations of loyalty on behalf of the municipality and sought to gain access to its various resources therefore had important consequences for my own research. The socially and financially precarious situation of the association meant that a great deal of

its members' activities centered around how to improve relations with the municipality and how to access the financial flows they had heard were so abundantly available at civil society organizations. Engaging in "participatory observation" in this context consequently made me witness more heated debate about local politics and musings about the workings of international funding schemes than performance of customary knowledge or recitation of oral history. The association's precarious position in the field of local politics also had great impact on my own positionality vis-à-vis its members. The women at the association very quickly recruited me – an internationally connected, multi-lingual young woman with at least minimal technological knowhow – into their various attempts at improving their situation. In me they invested their hopes of accessing the money they had heard was so amply circulating through civil society organizations. In my they also saw opportunities for tapping into the (inter)national fame as singers and musicians they felt they deserved.

As a result, it did not take long before I was busy immersing myself into the intricacies of international funding schemes, drafting applications and working out budget plans. I set up contacts with documentary filmmakers and photographers, and organized a week of concerts in Istanbul. I also initiated an EU-funded project that took some of the association members on a musical exchange to Armenia and culminated in a performance at a large Istanbul concert hall. I was hence far from only an ethnographer while in the field: I found myself hovering between the roles of project coordinator, musical manager, fixer and researcher. In many ways, I was delighted to be able to give something back to people from whom I learned so much and to do so in tangible and concrete ways. On the other hand, these engagements also created expectations, not all of which I was able to live up to. I did not manage to orchestrate the great international artistic break-through, neither did I tap into those mystical flows of money.

Rather than thinking of these experiences as a lamentable divergence from an idealtype of disinterested and impartial research, I would argue for an approach that valorizes

them as important insights into how a situation of intense polarization structures our interlocutors' possibilities of action as much as their dreams, aspirations and horizons of imagination. Impartiality, for one, is not only unattainable, but upholding it as an ideal reproduces problematic binarisms such as objective vs. subjective, rational vs. emotional, mind vs. body (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, 171-174, Willis 1980). Ethnographic research means participating in the social contexts in which we are working and therefore becoming implicated in the lives of our interlocutors. Instead of disavowing such involvement, we need to ponder the ethical implications that such implication entails. Ethnographic fieldwork inevitably blurs the lines between informantship and friendship, between instrumentality and emotional investment.

Many of my "informants" became close friends over the course of my fieldwork, and these ties of friendship formed the backbone of my research, because they allowed for trust, intimacy and, ultimately, "thick description" (Geertz 1973). I was happy to help with scrambling together resources for the Women Singers Association not only because this was my research project but also, quite simply, because these were my friends. And still, I would have my notebook continuously within reach, ready to treat as "data" what I observed. This intermeshing of personal investment with the instrumentalities of field research poses ethical quandaries. It requires from researchers an ethical "common sense," alongside more formal mechanisms like informed consent or, at a later stage, the rigid anonymization of interlocutors' identities. There are no clear-cut answers to where ethnographic research ought to stop or what sort of "data" should remain outside its reach. Ultimately, as Liisa Malkki (2007, 95) notes, "the question is what one does with research material, and why one wants to know."

This also entails recognizing that our interlocutors are people like any other, who engage with us based on their own motivations and interests, rather than treating them as disinterested, "authentic" informants. In this particular case, recognizing that I was equally

instrumental to the people I worked with as they were to me, as well as pondering what exactly constituted my instrumentality proved insightful for understanding the specific impasses and dilemmas my interlocutors faced. My centrality for accessing a particular set of resources sheds light on the ways in which a context of protracted conflict, scarce resources and tightly policed political divisions impacted on the trajectories of action and imagination of the women I worked with. It also highlights how such a context raises or at the very least accentuates the ethical stakes of implicating oneself as a researcher into the lives of the people one works with. Ultimately, I was the one who had the liberty to leave and extricate myself from local networks and relationships upon the end of my fieldwork. As much as I got to momentarily experience the sense of precarity that reigned at the margins of hegemonic political formations, this precarity was to remain my interlocutors' life world. We are therefore well advised to tread our steps carefully.

Conclusion

Let me be clear that my aim in this chapter has not been to pass judgement on either side of the dispute between municipal organizations on the one hand and KAHAD or the Women Artists Association on the other hand. Just as with any dispute, there are many stories that could be told about this one, and the one I have told here is not the only nor necessarily the correct one. Yet, I maintain that the story I have decided to tell holds significance for what it says about the making of political subjectivity in a situation of protracted conflict and intense polarization and, consequently, for how ethnographic research may be conducted in such a context.

My focus has been on the social work of distinction that occurs at the margins of hegemonic formations. It is at these margins – the borderlands, as it were, of poles of allegiance – that political hegemony is established and maintained. In Northern Kurdistan, a

17

decade-long history of warfare and state violence has deeply polarized society, such that norms and expectations of allegiance permeate private lives as much as public discourse. As a result, the demands of loyalty make themselves constantly felt. Researchers, I have argued, are not excluded from these dynamics. The polarized nature of Northern Kurdish society is not only an issue they need to learn how to navigate for themselves, but the way in which their interlocutors, too, navigate existing divisions fundamentally influences their positionality in the field, the kind of material they will be able to gather and the knowledge they will be able to produce.

Focusing on the contested borderlands of political hegemony brings into view the boundary work that is crucial to the delineating of political communities and the shaping of political subjects. From this perspective, we may approach fieldwork as the artful task of tracing boundaries and lines of allegiance, following their meandering course, sensing their energetic pulse or subdued implicitness, and navigating the spaces they delineate, open up or foreclose.

Notes

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[i] All names of individuals and organizations in this chapter are pseudonyms.

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