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Golden Ages: an Ethnography of Matter, Violence and Value

My project engages with questions of matter, violence and value through an ethnographic case of urban regeneration in provincial Turkey that involved a state programme of dispossession through debt and ended in the residents' hunt for gold and treasures believed to have been buried by Armenians during the 1915 genocide. My analysis addresses 1) the economic and material dimensions of histories of political violence; 2) the contingent ways that displacement and dispossession call up (possible, deferred, foreclosed) futures and (fetishized, absolute, denied) pasts through mechanisms of economic valuation and accumulation (debt, speculation, commodification of the past); and 3) the double register of biopolitical governance and its temporally discordant shadow, i.e. the phantasmatic life of treasures weaving together dynamics of desire and violence. I locate this project within broader contemporary concerns, both societal and academic, with economic and biopolitical governance in an era of austerity and debt, while I wish to draw attention to the temporal depths these policies are immersed in. Yet my concern with the historicities underlying the present moment is not aimed at reasserting a temporal logic of genealogical constitution. Rather, I wish to investigate how the historicities of matter and value at work in my ethnographic material have destabilising temporal effects. My theoretical goal is hence to explore the new materialist literature for its potential to open our thinking about matter to the future, yet also to probe its limits by arguing that the historicities of matter matter.

Recommended Reading

- Bieberstein, Alice von. "Treasure/Fetish/Gift: Hunting for 'Armenian Gold' in Post-Genocide Turkish Kurdistan." *Subjectivity* 10, 1 (2017), forthcoming. online: <http://rdcu.be/qrNV>
- "Surviving Hrant Dink: Carnal Mourning Under the Specter of Senselessness." *Social Analysis* 61, 1 (2017): 55-68.
- "Not a German Past to be Reckoned with: Negotiating Migrant Subjectivities Between Vergangenheitsbewältigung and the Nationalization of History." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (JRAI)* 22, 4 (2016): 902-919.

Goldene Zeiten: Eine Ethnografie des Materials, der Gewalt und des Werts

My talk will be divided into two parts. Based on my research of the last few years, I will start by giving you one story about Moush, a small town and provincial capital in the far east of Turkey. This story focuses on the city's historical quarter, which until 2013 featured a collection of dozens of centuries-old houses. In co-operation with the state's social housing authority, the municipality declared this quarter the site of an urban renewal project, foreseeing the construction of about twelve, seven-storey housing blocks. Not only were the residents dispossessed and forcibly evicted from their homes, the contracts they were forced to sign burdened them with an additional debt of thousands of Turkish lira based on a calculated difference in value between their historical homes and the apartments to be built. Almost a hundred years earlier, the quarter lived through a previous episode of eviction and dispossession, when its Armenian residents were murdered and their properties expropriated during the 1915 genocide. Now, in 2013, after the local residents had moved out and emptied out their homes, many began digging the grounds beneath in search for what is commonly referred to as "Armenian gold". In a local imaginary, the former Armenian quarter and cemeteries, as well as the walls of churches, monasteries and houses, hold the promise of hidden treasures that promise redemption from current hardship.

In my broader project, I seek to make sense of this ethnographic and historical scene, in particular by thinking through the relation between a biopolitical present and its politics of debt, the necropolitical foundation of the state and its national economy, and the temporally discordant shadow of "treasures" spinning together dynamics of violence and desire. The second half of my presentation will zoom in to this phenomenon of treasure hunting and present one particular attempt to conceptualise the relation between death, value and time. I analyse treasure hunting as an essentially speculative and future-oriented endeavour that seeks to connect tools, relations and knowledge in order to bring the unknown within a horizon of controllability. And yet, even if the jewelleries, coins and statues are imagined as emerging from the ground as if out of a future undetermined by social relations (and attendant debts), death makes an appearance not only in the figure of scarcity, or as threatening curse, but also as constitutive of the historical ground and of the object of speculation.

Bieberstein, Alice (Cham,2017)

Memorial miracle : inspiring Vergangenheitsbewältigung between Berlin and Istanbul

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1683494954>

Bieberstein, Alice (New York, NY [u.a.],2017)

Surviving Hrant Dink : carnal mourning under the specter of senselessness

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1015811523>

Bieberstein, Alice (2017)

Surrogate apologies, sublated differences : contemporary visions of post-national futures in Turkey under the spectre of the Left

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1015810977>

Bieberstein, Alice (2017)

Treasure/Fetish/Gift : hunting for 'Armenian gold' in post-genocide Turkish Kurdistan

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1015810195>

Bieberstein, Alice (Baltimore, MD.,2016)

From aggressive humanism to improper mourning : burying the victims of Europe's border regime in Berlin

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=101580991X>

Bieberstein, Alice (Oxford [u.a.],2016)

Not a German past to be reckoned with : negotiating migrant subjectivities between Vergangenheitsbewältigung and the nationalization of history

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1015809472>