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Of Geosocial Relations and Separations

Detangling Violence across Scales of Extraction and Colonial Warfare

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Abstract How might an attention to the role that the geologic plays in everyday social and political formations help reveal and politicize the geographically, temporally, and stratigraphically distributed forms of violence in the Anthropocene? Building on recent work in environmental humanities, anthropology, geography, and feminist geophilosophy that aims to rethink racialized forms of violence alongside planetary forces and earthly formations, this article explores how geosocial relations and exclusions register distributed forms of violence that are often kept separate from each other. Through an ethnographic account of a state-led oil shale exploration project in southwestern Turkey during the eruption of war between Kurdish freedom fighters and the Turkish state in southeastern Turkey in the summer of 2015, the article traces the links and disjunctures between the everyday disavowal of resource exploration and colonial warfare. It explores how the disavowal of war and hydrocarbon exploration forecloses political and ethical possibilities. It further examines how emergent geosocial relations between people and rocks carry the possibility of reckoning with anti-Kurdish war and violence. In doing so, the article invites environmental humanities to rethink methodological and analytical ways of rendering violence visible. The article concludes by speculating about the possibility of geosocial solidarity, or a mode of relation with geological formations and humans that forges connections between racialized forms of othering and planetary scales of time, space, and materiality. As a mode of earthly praxis, geosocial solidarity is what might come after the unfinished task of detangling distributed forms of violence in the Anthropocene.

Keywords warfare, extraction, geosocial formations, Turkey, Kurdish issue

Introduction: Detangling War and Extraction

Since 1984, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been waging an armed struggle against the Turkish state for cultural and political rights and self-determination for Kurdish people in Turkey, who have been subjected to political repression and violence for decades. In 2013, for the first time in Turkey's forty-year-long war with the PKK, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government initiated peace agreement negotiations. This led to the declaration of a mutually recognized ceasefire. But the

peace process collapsed with the Turkish state's military offensive that began in July 2015, temporarily destroying hopes for a democratic, constitutional solution to the Kurdish issue.¹ That summer, right around the time of the eruption of warfare in Turkey's Kurdistan region, I found myself in the midst of another form of violence—one that was distributed across geologic strata. In Göynük, a small historic town in northwestern Anatolia that hosts one of the biggest oil shale reserves in Turkey, the state-owned General Directorate of Mineral Research and Exploration (MTA) was carrying out an oil shale exploration project. This unconventional hydrocarbon exploration venture was a part of the government's larger plans to decrease Turkey's chronic energy dependency. As Turkish fighter jets bombed parts of eastern Anatolia and Syria where the army claimed to have been harboring Kurdish militants, in northwestern Turkey state-employed geologists and engineers were drilling hundreds of meters into the ground, unearthing in a matter of hours remnants of marine organisms that took around ninety million years to reach their current state.

What would it mean for environmental humanities to hold these two seemingly disparate forms of violence—war in Turkey's Southeast and fossil fuel exploration in Turkey's Northwest—together, as the present is produced through the interaction of multiple systems and scales of time and space that are also often not readily visible? Building on recent approaches in environmental humanities, anthropology, and geography to think with “interscalar vehicles” and “planetary portals,” in this article I trace the interscalar connections between the geographically, temporally, and stratigraphically distributed forms of violence in contemporary Turkey.² In doing so, I aim to rethink methodological and analytical ways of rendering violence visible, and therefore also political, in a moment of planetary inequality and ecological endangerment.

I take what Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yusoff name “geosocial formations,” or the power-laden, generative, and excessive ways that earth and society interact and shape each other in the Anthropocene, as my vantage point for thinking about this task regarding distributed and disparate-seeming manifestations of violence in the present.³ Recent historical and ethnographic analyses of the Anthropocene have laid bare the ways that violence, in its multiple faces, reverberates across temporalities and environments.⁴ Most significantly, scholars working at the intersection of environmental humanities, feminist geophilosophy, Indigenous studies, and Black feminist studies have exposed the structural links between the brutalization of nature and the racialized/racializing exploitation of human bodies, lives, and communities.⁵ Geological strata register this

1. Hakyemez, “Turkey's Failed Peace Process.”

2. Hecht, “Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene”; Yusoff, Holden, and Ebbensgaard, “Planetary Portals.”

3. Clark and Yusoff, “Geosocial Formations.” See also Oguz, “Introduction: Geological Anthropology.”

4. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *Shock of the Anthropocene*; Guarasci and Kim, “Ecologies of War”; and Navaro et al., *Reverberations*.

5. Mbembe, *Brutalisme*. See also Pulido, “Geographies of Race and Ethnicity II”; Vergès, “Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender”; and Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.”

axis of violence in crucial ways, as the extraction of earthly depths has historically coincided with and depended on the reduction of some human lives into brute matter.⁶ Attention to how the powers of the earth come into contact with human forms of sociability and politics therefore points at how earth politics and necropolitics are distributed across strata and through axes of racial differentiation and territorialization.

In this article, rather than an authoritative account of how geology has been rendered commensurate with the Turkish nation-state, or an examination of an extractive frontier in Turkey's Kurdistan that unearths the links between racialization, resource extraction, and warfare,⁷ I take up a different task in order to think about disparate-seeming yet interlinked forms of violence in Turkey: delving into ordinary geosocial relations and separations in the state-led oil shale exploration project in northwestern Turkey during the eruption of war in Turkish Kurdistan and across Turkey's borders in the summer of 2015. I trace the ways that the violence of warfare and the violence of extraction are experienced. I ask what kinds of political openings these geosocial relations and separations might foreclose or render possible.

In examining violent relations and separations that constitute geosocial formations in this peripheral frontier in Turkey's extractive landscape, I am in conversation with a recent tendency in anthropology, geography, and philosophy that has grown cautious of an uncritical affirmation of relations and entanglement.⁸ Against the colonial capitalist severing of relations, many scholars in the past decade have produced valuable accounts of relatedness. Multispecies, more-than-human, and nature-culture entanglements offer an alternative and even emancipatory foundation for a political praxis of "learning to live on a new earth" (Whittington and Oguz, this issue). Yet for Eva Giraud, an attention to exclusion rather than relationality and entanglement can reveal the "particular relations or ways of being that are foreclosed when others are materialized."⁹ Stephanie Wakefield and her colleagues make a similar point, suggesting that an antirelational approach can further a politics of separation and detachment from the entangled relations of colonialism and late capitalism.¹⁰ Coming from Critical Black Studies, Axelle Karera demonstrates what is excluded or foreclosed in Anthropocene discourses that naturalize "relationality, mutual dependency, and other narratives of 'species entanglements' rest on the very exclusion of Black suffering."¹¹ Karera urges scholars to revisit the conditions that "make 'blackened' life and death unregistrable and therefore un-grievable."¹²

6. Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*; Yusoff, *Billion Black Anthropocenes*.

7. See Çaylı, "Contemporary Art."

8. See Bond, *Negative Ecologies*; Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement*; Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics"; Roberts, "What Gets Inside"; Wakefield, Grove, and Chandler, "Introduction: The Power of Life."

9. Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement*, 45.

10. Wakefield, Grove, and Chandler, "Introduction: The Power of Life," 17.

11. Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," 34.

12. Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," 44.

Inspired by these interventions, this article is interested in understanding the conditions that make anti-Kurdish war and Kurdish suffering in southeastern Turkey seemingly separate from fossil fuel extraction in northwestern Turkey. Further, if an ethics of relation can also be the product of other, even constitutive exclusions, tracing how and when things relate to each other, when they are separated, and what kinds of politics and ethics are foreclosed during these processes can render visible and thus politicize otherwise disconnected forms of violence and othering.¹³ Finally, I speculate about how emergent geosocial relations between people and rocks might also carry the possibility of reckoning with anti-Kurdish war and violence. Geosocial solidarity, I argue, can be understood as a mode of geosocial relation, which can forge connections between racialized modes of othering and planetary scales of time, space, and materiality.

I emphasize a particular mode of separation, disavowal, to think about such disparate-seeming forms of violence in Turkey. Kim Fortun describes disavowal as a “key corporate tactic in late industrialism.”¹⁴ Fortun writes that rather than an act of mere ignorance, disavowal operates as a mode of governance in postindustrial contexts.¹⁵ Here the term *disavowal* refers to the refusal to acknowledge when things are in fact connected with each other.¹⁶ Similarly, for Chloe Ahmann disavowal is a mode of power in which the slow violence of toxic relations is rendered unaccountable and depoliticized due to their geographically, temporally, and bodily distributed and uncertain character.¹⁷ In Elizabeth Povinelli’s formulation, disavowal names the forms of violence that are constitutive of liberalism’s past and present.¹⁸ I take up Fortun’s, Ahmann’s, and Povinelli’s invitations to engage with disavowal as a crucial vantage point to trace forms of violence and othering where necropolitics and geopolitics operate under conditions of uneven development and internal colonialism in Turkey.¹⁹

In what follows, I trace moments in ordinary geosocial relations and exclusions in Göynük, where the eruption of the war between the Turkish state and the PKK, as well as Turkey’s 2015 offensive in northern Iraq and Syria, was disavowed by geologists and townspeople. While disavowal and hydrocarbon exploration foreclose political and ethical possibilities in Göynük, I also choose to remain open to the potentiality embedded in both practices. Examining how geologists and townspeople relate to the geological specimens collected in this town, I argue that geosocial relations of gift-giving and deep-time imaginaries that accumulate around the circulation and experience of oil shale samples may also unsettle modes of state capitalist valuation and resource-making. These formations, however, are nevertheless far from fully reckoning with anti-Kurdish

13. Wakefield, Grove, and Chandler, “Introduction: The Power of Life.”

14. Fortun, “From Latour to Late Industrialism,” 319.

15. Fortun, “From Latour to Late Industrialism,” 319.

16. Fortun, “Corporate Oxymorons.”

17. Ahmann, “Toxic Disavowal.” See also Ahmann, “Dissociation.”

18. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground*, 49.

19. See Bargu, *Turkey’s Necropolitical Laboratory*.

warfare and othering in Turkey. Finally, I conclude by recalling an ethnographic instance where this violence might be reckoned with through an interaction with the geologic capacities of oil shale. In narrating this ethnographic account of geosocial relations and separations in an extractive zone during the eruption of war and its disavowal, this essay offers a new methodological and analytical perspective to detangling the uneven and often invisible distribution of violence across multiple scales in the Anthropocene.

Violent Geologies

In the Republic of Turkey, a postimperial nation-state characterized by uneven development, internal colonialism, and a trajectory from neoliberal populism to corporate nationalism in recent decades, geology and violence resonate particularly across landscapes of extraction and warfare.²⁰ Oil shale exploration in the Northwest constitutes only a minor aspect of the Turkish government's energy imperative and its deep links to colonial violence and warfare in Turkey's Kurdistan region. In addition to construction and armaments, in the past decade, resource extraction and energy generation projects became pillars of the AKP regime, constituting Turkey's new "military-energy-industrial complex."²¹ Since coming to power, the AKP government has increasingly pursued a violent extractive trajectory that has been shaped by its desire to pull Turkey out of its chronic energy dependence and sustain its economic growth. Pursuing a "homegrown" energy policy, the government has also aggressively pushed for the exploitation of all its domestic sources of energy. This authoritative and extractive agenda has been mainly driven by the exploitation of Turkey's vast domestic coal reserves, building coal-fueled thermal plants, and boosting hydropower production, as well as nuclear power plant prospects and conventional and unconventional hydrocarbon exploration in every corner of the country.²²

Against the backdrop of this developmentalist and extractive energy trajectory at a national scale, resource extraction in the war-ridden regions of Turkey's Kurdistan has been closely linked to the Turkish state's colonial project of territorializing the earth and people. This geography has been characterized by the extraction of oil and minerals such as copper and silver in Batman, Diyarbakir, and Siirt, and the massive hydropower-irrigation project and contemporary industrial sand mining operations on the upper Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.²³ In this context, the control and modification of ecologies and geologies have been central to the Turkish state's counterinsurgency strategy.²⁴ Building more hydroelectric dams, flooding caves, burning forests, and blowing up

20. Madra and Yılmaz, "Turkey's Decline into (Civil) War Economy."

21. Madra, "Erdoğan's Very Own Military-Energy-Industrial Complex."

22. Adaman and Akbulut, "Erdoğan's Three-Pillared Neoliberalism."

23. Çaylı, "Contemporary Art"; Harris, "Water and Conflict Geographies"; Jongerden, *Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds*.

24. Oguz, "Managing Oil Theft."

mountains to demoralize, displace, or kill Kurdish insurgents and their supporters or simply let them die, the Turkish state has been weaponizing environments since the 1990s.²⁵ Yet this process took a new turn in the summer of 2015, with the collapse of peace talks and the resumption of warfare between the Turkish army and the PKK.

Disavowal: Violence and Potentiality

In Turkish political life, the Kurdish-led, democratic pluralist, and leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) had been able to appeal to a broad spectrum of Turkish and Kurdish society, rising to prominence during the Gezi Park protests and becoming the country's third-biggest political party by 2015. The HDP emerged victorious in the general elections of June 7, 2015, overcoming Turkey's 10 percent election threshold, which has traditionally kept small parties and Kurdish politicians out of Parliament. This represented a blow for the AKP, which lost its single-party majority after over a decade in power. With such a dramatic decrease in its votes, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ambitions for an authoritative presidential system were deemed to have been rejected by the electorate.

Only about six weeks after the June 7 elections, terrible news struck. Thirty-four young left-wing activists had been killed in a suicide attack in the border town of Suruç that was caught on camera. The victims had been planning to deliver aid to the mostly Kurdish city of Kobane, across the border in Syria, which had been under siege by Islamic State forces since January. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for the attack.

On July 20, four days after the explosion, I sat around a table in Göynük, sipping after-dinner black tea with Ali Bey, a geologist employed at MTA, and his oil shale team at a large dining room of an early twentieth-century Ottoman-era mansion temporarily rented by the MTA.²⁶ The Ministry of Energy believed that Turkey could source its desperate need for domestic energy by tapping into its unconventional hydrocarbon potential. About ten kilometers away from the town center in Göynük, Ali Bey and his team were conducting an oil shale survey and exploration project, drilling into the earth and collecting core samples for the past ten months. This exploratory project was part of three oil shale exploration projects in the Northwest that Turkey had launched in 2014. Though financially costly and technically difficult, unconventional hydrocarbons such as oil shale have attracted attention globally in the past decade, especially in places with an increasing demand for energy and domestic energy deficit.²⁷

The television was on, and a reporter was talking indiscernibly on the early evening news, but no one seemed to be paying attention to him. "So why are you interested in what we are doing here?" Ali Bey had asked me. I was telling him I was interested in

25. Oguz, "Cavernous Politics."

26. "Ali Bey" is a pseudonym I use in order to protect his identity. All other names are also changed for the same purpose.

27. Coşkun, "Dünyada ve Türkiye'de Bitümlü şeyl."

how geology and sociality relate to each other. “What’s social about geology?” Ali Bey followed up. But the TV reporter’s high-pitched voice interrupted our conversation: “Following the bombing in the southeastern district of Suruç on July 20th that killed thirty-three people . . .” Hakan, a young geologist from the capital Ankara, turned down the volume. Though it was extremely difficult, I tried to focus on our conversation. I told Ali Bey that I wanted to know more about the impacts of resource exploration and extraction, and about how the earth sciences know the underground. Hakan jumped in, “I got it; she told me she is a cultural anthropologist—she must be exploring us, exploration geologists.” Amid the laughs, on the TV screen behind Hakan, the news ticker read in bold, white letters:

ISIS CLAIMED RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ATTACK

TURKISH JETS TARGETING ISIS AND PKK BASES

I was startled. These words marked the collapse of the ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish military. They meant that, four days after the attack, on July 24, Turkey had declared war on not just ISIL but also the PKK, even though the PKK was fighting against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. In the next few weeks, in this polarizing atmosphere of warfare, the peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK were going to break down and the AKP government was going to force another election.

While this watershed event was taking place, in Göynük the geologists’ attention seemed to be still focused on our prior conversation about the reason behind my presence among them. Ali Bey followed up on that exchange by asking me how I got to be interested in geology “despite being a cultural anthropologist.” I was only able to give him a vague answer: I told him I was interested in climate change and mitigation. Ali Bey’s comment on this echoed the Turkish government’s energy policy: “Climate change. Of course, it’s a fact. We are scientists. And yes, our actions in the present are destroying the future. I’m a big advocate of renewable energy resources, indeed. But, in my opinion, they aren’t sufficient to support us today, not yet anyway.” For Ali Bey, burning hydrocarbons would contribute to anthropogenic climate change, but it was an inevitable price to pay for Turkey to become, as he told me that day, “a great country.” At the same time, the TV channel of the great country-to-be was showing images of Turkish Air Force jets en route to bomb what the nationalist media claimed to be guerrilla bases in northern Iraq. The geologists gathered in the living room of the mansion seemed unbothered by it all.

Ali Bey and other geologists’ actions during the televised broadcasting of the eruption of warfare can be interpreted as a form of boundary work.²⁸ This kind of separation often has political consequences. Exploring the “partial, strategic, and performative” act of separation in Equatorial Guinea’s corporate and residential enclaves of oil production,

28. Gieryn, “Boundary Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-science.”

Hannah Appel suggests that the infrastructural violence of offshore oil work is redoubled by what she calls the “work of disentanglement,” which actively abdicates responsibility for direct and indirect harm making of infrastructure development.²⁹ Yet the work of disentanglement with the televised normalized violence in Kurdistan that the state geologists in Göynük performed was less strategic and more quotidian: it was an ordinary disavowal of violence that constituted a particular loyalty to the Turkish nation-state. In their act of disavowal of anti-Kurdish state violence, the MTA-employed geologists refused to recognize Kurdish life, grieve for Kurdish death, or reckon with how their extractive labor might be implicated in other manifestations of violence in Turkey. I interpret the disavowal of warfare as part of a deeper suspension, one that also elevates the interests of the (Turkish) nation-state above everything else and juxtaposes it against the so-called local and planetary scales and the experiences of those such as Kurds.

Disavowal, while being a mode of power, also encapsulates a political potentiality. In Göynük that day, as we kept on chatting about planetary climate change, Turkey’s national energy needs, and which one matters more than the other, the images of warfare on the TV faded into the background. Political news was followed by sports, sports by weather. About twenty minutes later, however, on the nine o’clock news, the eruption of warfare was once again on the screen across the room. And then Mustafa, a Kurdish mining engineer from the Diyarbakir bureau of MTA, did something unexpected: he picked up the TV remote and cranked up the volume. Now we had all turned toward the screen. The speaker’s voice was loud: “Turkey’s determined fight against the terror that has been ignited. Air forces have carried out successful airstrikes against ISIS positions in Syria near the Turkish border today. Turkey also began airstrikes against PKK camps in northern Iraq.” She paused, then delivered the final verdict: “The ceasefire between the PKK and Turkey is now officially over.” Mustafa looked like he was trying to hide a frown, while everyone else in the room stared at the TV in silence. They watched the flow of images of aircraft, bombs, missiles, and rifles. They awkwardly stared at their hands, their teacups, and the traditional Anatolian patterns of the carpet in the room of this historic mansion seasonally rented by the same government that was currently bombing targets within and beyond its political borders.

What I felt in this room was not disregard but disavowal. If disavowal, or the refusal “to assert or declare openly,” carries the implication of knowing and not knowing all at once, it names an active act of reckoning rather than the lack thereof. Following its own Freudian logic, disavowal is thus already an affirmative act that even inadvertently recognizes what it refuses to recognize or take responsibility for. I sense a potential for the otherwise in this refusal to relate. Therefore, I read this account in Göynük as a near-interruption, a missed encounter with the violence of the anti-Kurdish war and Kurdish death in Turkey’s Southeast, which, although it is missed, still carries within itself seeds of immanent potential. In other words, disavowal can be understood as a

29. Appel, “Walls and White Elephants,” 450.



Figure 1. A field of plastic boxes storing shale oil samples in Göynük. Photograph by the author.

practice that harbors a potentiality to recognize the violence of “geological othering” in the colonial and extractive relations that constitute this postimperial nation-state.³⁰ On that day in that living room, this possibility seemed to have waned for the moment, only to appear again in the following days. And after some time, Ali Bey announced, “All right, guys, time to rest. We have an early morning.”

Geosocial Relations: Deep Time and Gift-Giving

The next day, after having breakfast in the mansion, we drove about thirty kilometers south of Göynük to the exploratory drilling site where the MTA team had been rock core drilling. Here extremely sharp core bits, made of diamond-coated blades on one end and hollow metal tubes on the other, were drilled into the ground, gently grinding through sediments of hard rock, cutting them into cylinders with 100-millimeter diameters. The drill-hole samples—cylindrical shapes of oil-bearing strata—at the site were all silvery black to light brown, with white and silver veins running through them. On a higher field of grass across the exploratory drill holes lay probably a hundred blue plastic boxes, each containing ten to twelve core samples. Lying on the ground side by side like this, they resembled caskets scattered through a graveyard (fig. 1).

30. Clark and Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought*.



Figure 2. Oil shale samples waiting for collection. Photograph by the author.

A truck from the MTA's Ankara headquarters would deliver the core samples to MTA's geochemical analysis labs for the measurement of the amount of water, gas, and organic matter contained in each sample to assess their "resource potentiality" or their viability for commercial development.³¹ For the geologists I was with, however, these oil shale-bearing rocks were not just potential resources; they were also non- or not-yet-commodified matter that embodied geological pasts and nonhuman life on earth. At the drilling site, Hakan took a piece of a broken core sample from one of the blue boxes and handed it to me (fig. 2). Pointing at the meandering patterns on the rock I was holding in my hands, he said, "Look carefully. This is not just an energy resource. This is a tomb! A tomb for millions of creatures that lived in water some 70 to 100 million years ago. We are standing on an ancient sea." I asked Hakan if he too thought that the many boxes containing core samples resembled a graveyard. He smiled and nodded, then cheerfully started talking about the breaking of the Pangea into multiple continents and the emergence of Tethys, which split Asia from the rest of the land. In its waters, trillions of microscopic marine plankton lived and died. As the Arabian and Indian plates drifted northward, they collided with Eurasia, and Tethys was finally squeezed out of

31. Weszkalnys, "Geology, Potentiality, Speculation."

existence in the late Miocene, which extends from about twenty-three to five million years ago. The living entities that inhabited its waters, however, were buried deep beneath the ocean floors.

The oil shale-bearing sediments in Göynük, like the one I was holding, were the lithospheric remnants of the northern branch of the Neotethys Sea. The sea separated the earlier version of Asia Minor (Anatolia) from Eurasia. As the two continents started to collide, the sea continued its earlier ongoing regression, and it got shallower over time, until it completely disappeared here in northwestern Anatolia and became the Mediterranean Sea, as we know it, in the South. The Cretaceous creatures of the disappeared Tethys Sea were now buried deep into the mountains of the Himalayas, constituting the oilfields of the Middle East, and tapped into as fuel today.

Oil shale core samples were also embedded in an economy of gift-giving in Göynük that unsettled the commodifying relations through which geological matter was transformed into an extractable resource. At the drilling site, Hakan took another piece of core sample from the box and handed it to me. This was a souvenir for himself—an addition to the large collection of rocks in his display cabinet back in the apartment where he lived with his wife in Antalya. “We sometimes find tiny fossils buried in these rocks,” he added. “I wish we could run across one of those today, but for now, you’ll have to be content with a regular sample.” The sample I was holding would be my gift, I was told.

An hour later, we were at a local hardware store in Göynük. We needed to buy varnish because Hakan thought our rock souvenirs needed to be shiny—“That will make its colors pop!” I realized that similar specimens of oil shale cores were displayed on the cashier’s table at the hardware store. I noticed similar rocks in various shapes, patterns, and sizes decorating shop owners’ desks, shelves, and counters of the shops throughout the town. As it turned out, Ali Bey and Hakan had been giving them out as gifts to local shopkeepers as well. As tokens of hospitality, gratitude, and networking, pieces of oil shale circulated in the social spaces of Göynük. By gifting these rocks, geologists assumed they would be able to maintain good relations with the people of the town. Echoing the minerals in Guanajuato described by Elizabeth Ferry, which circulate as “social objects” and establish “a personal connection between the recipient and the mine, a connection made possible by the miner’s journey between the underground and the surface,” oil shale samples circulating in Göynük participated in the making and maintenance of geosocial relationships that do not usually succumb to the logic of resource-making.³² These geological souvenirs also became planetary portals into deep time, as every piece of rock harbored its unique story about its origins and the geological matter and biological organisms that constituted the subterranean space in Göynük at a given period in planetary geological history.

32. Ferry, “Geologies of Power,” 427.

Sites of exploratory and extractive mining and drilling are often heavily corporatized places where subterranean matter is transformed into commodity value. On a closer look at the circulation and use of oil shale in Göynük, however, oil shale samples are also revealed to be embedded in a broader world of geosocial relationships that denote other kinds of use and value that unsettles the logic of the commodity. Although the samples are unearthed in the context of an extractive drilling project, geological matter might circulate and be valued in multiple and overlapping ways that are not reducible to the commodifying logic of resource exploration and extraction.³³ While the latter form of value attached to geological matter sits uncomfortably with the kinds of valuation that characterize resource-making, in Göynük oil shale samples are cast not only as potential commodities but also as traces of an ancient ocean and living beings and gifts whose circulation is crucial to establishing a sense of reciprocity with townspeople. As Anna Tsing observes, “Taking the gift out of the commodity is never easy. It was work that has to be repeated over and over.”³⁴ Many of the oil shale core samples collected from subterranean Göynük ended up in MTA’s geochemical laboratories, but a few of them ended up on the desk of a tailor, a grocer, or a pharmacist, being put to use beyond their potential use value as a resource.

Geosocial Solidarity

A few days later, I arrived back in Göynük.³⁵ Ali Bey excitedly handed me my gift, which he had been holding on to since my previous visit. This was a smoothly cut, polished piece of oil shale core—a heavy, ancient, enduring, and beautiful black rock that had been modified accordingly with MTA geologists’ aesthetic choices (fig. 3). We were at a restaurant to have lunch during this gift exchange (I had brought them pistachio paste candy from Istanbul). Our waiter, Selim, a Turkish young man in his early twenties who was normally joyful and humorous, looked unusually apathetic. “What’s wrong, Selim?” Ali Bey asked, halfheartedly. He wanted others to share his enthusiasm about the shale oil sample’s new, modified condition. Selim told us that a Turkish soldier had been killed near the Kurdish town of Hakkari in southeastern Turkey that morning. Following the Suruç bombing, the collapse of the ceasefire between the Turkish army and the PKK, and the recent Turkish army offensive in Syria, there had been new clashes between guerrillas and the army. One of the dead soldiers was a friend of Selim, Murat, who had been carrying out his mandatory military service in the Southeast and was shot and killed during clashes. “He was from Göynük; he lived a few blocks from here. Everyone knew him. He was supposed to come back to Göynük in three weeks. He was my friend,” Selim mumbled, trying to hold back his tears, and walked away with our orders.

33. See Richardson and Weszkalnys, “Introduction: Resource Materialities.”

34. Tsing, “Sorting Out Commodities,” 21.

35. The actual date of this encounter is modified and purposefully left ambiguous here to protect my informants’ anonymity.



Figure 3. A gift from geologist Ali Bey and his team: a cut, smoothed, and polished piece of oil shale core. Photograph by the author.

When Selim came back with the food a few minutes later, he glanced at the black oil shale stone that had been sitting on the empty chair next to me. “Is this petroleum, Ali Bey?” he asked. When Ali Bey confirmed that it was, Selim responded, “But why isn’t it liquid?” Ali Bey explained, “This is a sedimentary rock. But you can artificially create liquid oil from it. It’s been formed by the deposition of organic matter in aquatic, low-oxygen environments thirty million years ago.” I handed the black-colored oil shale to Selim. He held it in his hands for a slice of time and then glimpsed at an old photo of his dead friend being aired on the TV. He gave the piece of rock back to me, and as if to make the violence underlying his loss legible through the time of the geologic, he quietly muttered: “This is what he will become, then.”

What to make of Selim’s encounter with this rock? There are many ways to view it. Yet in this article I have explored how geosocial relations and exclusions register such forms of violence that are often kept separate from each other in Turkey. In this postimperial nation-state, under a state of internal-colonial war against the Kurdish people for four decades, what is kept separate are not only the classed, gendered, and racialized imprint of toxic relations but also a different blurring of structural relations between warfare and extractivism. Echoing Povinelli’s call for starting a social and

political analysis of the present through the “ancestral catastrophe of late liberalism” rather than ontological assumptions of entanglement, I have shown that disavowal of the postimperial, colonial, and genocidal violence continues to haunt ordinary relations in Turkey.³⁶

I read Selim’s encounter with the oil shale sample as a mode of geosocial mourning that can make sense of his friend’s death only through the phase-changing endurance of the geological, so that his friend’s death will have some meaning. In other words, only by being able to imagine the becoming geological of his friend was Selim able to potentially orient himself toward the geological othering of Kurds. In this account, I see the beginnings of an attunement to planetary forces and to the very specific and localized experiences of violence and suffering at the same time. I call this potential for an interscalar politics of the otherwise geosocial solidarity, or a mode of geosocial relation and exclusion that forges connections between Kurdish othering and planetary timescales and materialities. Geosocial solidarity is what might come after the unfinished task of detangling distributed forms of violence in the Anthropocene.

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