Ethnographica Moralia
Panourgia, Neni, Anstett, Élisabeth

Published by Fordham University Press

Panourgia, Neni and Élisabeth Anstett.
Ethnographica Moralia: Experiments in Interpretive Anthropology.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66747

⇐ For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2329280
“Life Is Dead Here”: Sensing the Political in “No Man’s Land”

Yael Navaro-Yashin

Triggered by references to “death within life” by informants in Northern Cyprus, this paper is an attempt to write against the grain of what I would like to call normalizing representations of “the political” in anthropology. If I have picked what could be called an “abnormal” context for ethnographic research, the territory of Northern Cyprus carved out of international recognition, I intend this “facing [of] the extreme,” in Tzvetan Todorov’s terms,1 of an exaggerated context, to accentuate the “abnormal” in contexts that are usually considered politically “normal.” The purpose is not to normalize, by default, the abnormal (i.e., the illegal state in Northern Cyprus and experience in what I metaphorically call “no man’s land”) but to invite reflections on the abnormal qualities of “normal” states that are recognized by the international system. I employ the term “no man’s land” not as a literal description of a no-access or dead zone2 but as a metaphor that accentuates the abjected quality of space in places,3 like Northern Cyprus, that fall out of the recognized domains of the international law and system.4 I use the metaphor “no man’s land” to refer to the absence of Northern Cyprus from recognized transactions of the international system (its pariah political status and structure) and to the marks of such political rejection on space and subjectivity. Can ethnography in such a space be used to estrange ourselves from what is considered politically normative (legal) or “normal”? Northern Cyprus is one of the most fruitful grounds I can think of to facilitate this kind of critical project.

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes about “the concentration camp as paradigm of the modern,” rightly wondering why theorists of power, like Michel Foucault, although sitting in the middle of the last century in the middle of Europe, have not theorized “the politics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century.”5 Just as such thinking
on the concentration camp challenges current conceptions of “modern power,” so would I like to explore what an ethnography of “no man’s land,” the term I use for this manner of abjected space (here, Northern Cyprus), might have to tell us about what is too easily called transnationalism or globalization in ethnographies of the contemporary. There is a normalizing discourse in ethnographies of the transnational that tends to miss the multiple exceptions: that which falls out of the international system. But doesn’t the exception have something to tell us about the rule, totalitarianism about democracy, the camp about modernity, the illegal about the law, the abnormal about the “normal”? Anthropologies of globalization in the model of Arjun Appadurai’s work fail to study the ways in which the very processes of transnationalism, which supposedly promote mobility and flexibility, also engender the opposite: immobility, entrapment, confinement, incarceration. The bordered and militarily patrolled area of Northern Cyprus is not a remnant or relic from a time past (a monument to history) but a contemporary political formation coeval with what is often sketchily theorized as the border-lifting forces of globalization. What follows, an ethnography of subjectivity under a state of siege, must be read as a critical commentary on theoretical work in the anthropology of transnationalism, which would do away with bordered existences, violating the experience of people who inhabit confined spaces in the contemporary period.

The analytical rubrics of “everyday life” and “the life cycle” could easily gloss over the disaster that is immanent (latent or dormant) in many of the contexts that we study. What is everyday experience? asks the anthropologist. Or, how would you study the life course? One could very well write an ethnography that depicts everyday experience in Northern Cyprus. But how can one write using the concept of “everyday life” for a zone that has been trapped outside the international system for the last twenty-nine to forty years? In Northern Cyprus, people often say, “Life is dead here.” Here we are referring to a zone that has been carved out and sealed off on a small island. Anthropological framings of “the life cycle” could end up naturalizing or normalizing (by culturalizing) a context that, in the subjective experiences, lies betwixt and between life and death.

Rather than asking what “everyday life” is about (an ordinary object of anthropological analysis), I attempt to draw out the disaster that underlies a seeming pretense to normality. Certain of my informants at times wanted to pretend that things are normal in Northern Cyprus, to carry on with their everyday lives. It may be asked, what is it for an anthropologist
to point at the fault lines underneath such strategic attempts to normalize disruptive experience? Is it to imply "false consciousness," in the Marxist sense, in the native’s point of view? Talal Asad has cautioned us against conflating our informants’ ideologies with "their culture." I would agree with him that the anthropologist must work against the normalizing discourses even of his or her informants. The native’s point of view might direct us to perceive a context as "normal everyday life." Living and livelihood in "no man’s land" demands that one forget its "no man's" quality, that one numb oneself to it. The native's point of view might at times reflect this alienation. But the anthropologist can do more than understand the native's point of view. This requires not just depicting context but sensing it as well, sensing the catastrophe that underlies the pretense (or ideology) of "normal everyday life." In Northern Cyprus, it is the administrators of the illegal state guided by the military who would like to argue that "everyday life goes on."

In the ethnography that follows, I make some suggestions about how we anthropologists have imagined our "research," how we have consciously looked for the sites and spaces that could be identified as the sources of the issues we were investigating. I would like to propose that "the political" cannot be "searched" or "found" within the systems and methods handed over from a positivist tradition of research. In an older tradition, in what used to be called political anthropology, the political was tangible, "citable in all its moments," in Walter Benjamin's depiction, as though the analyst or the writer could study a context in its fullness and totality. Indeed, in that Judgment Day imaginary of research, the researcher was trained to look for something. "Only a redeemed mankind," Walter Benjamin suggested, would be able to study a context in its totality. Benjamin's aphorisms might inspire us, instead, to look away from the sites and sources identified for research, to be purposefully misguided, to be carried away.

I wonder whether the rationalizing training of anthropologists desensitizes us from the very issues we set out to study. Fully conscious, always rational, never lost. I wonder whether another sort of sensibility may keep us within the domain of the subjective experience that the political generates so that we may sense it, catch hold of it as it flees by or before it is normalized, and write about it without flattening it into the rationalizing discourse of the social sciences. What follows is an attempt to approach such a political context with this different sort of sensibility.
In his novel *Pedro Paramo*, Juan Rulfo writes about descending to Comala, his mother’s village, after her death, as heat and mist engulf the landscape and an apparition in the shape of a man shows him the way down to the ruins of a place devastated by the political power of Pedro Paramo, the protagonist’s father. Metaphors of hell shape Rulfo’s narrative, where we are drawn to a liminal space between life and death. The protagonist encounters a world of ghosts and villagers fading into one another. Villagers seem dead, ghosts appear alive. In this “town of death,” where Pedro Paramo, Landlord and Father (as a metaphor for the state), has loved as well as devastated all, the distinction between life and death does not hold.

“I wonder what could have happened to the town?” the protagonist asks the man-ghost who shows him the way. “It looks so deserted, abandoned really. In fact, it looks like no one lives here at all.” The villager responds, “It doesn’t just look like no one lives here. No one does live here.” Further on, as he enters the world of ghosts, our protagonist discovers that here, there is another order of living and death; he has to immerse himself to understand. In the village, he encounters a woman who is worried about being seen with the purplish spots, the stigmata of sin she feels on her skin. “But who is going to see you if there’s no one here?” our protagonist asks her. “I’ve been through the whole town and not seen anyone.” “You think you haven’t,” she replies. “Nights around here are filled with ghosts. You should see all the spirits walking through the streets. As soon as it’s dark they begin to come out. No one likes to see them. There’s so many of them and so few of us that we don’t even make the effort to pray for them anymore, to help them out of their purgatory. We don’t have enough prayers to go around.” Is she in the space of life or of death? our protagonist wonders, still distinguishing the two. He finds out, later, that she too is a ghost. Death has seeped into everyone’s cells, into molecules in the air. All live betwixt and between two worlds, this and the other, but in a zone recognized by neither.

Following Rulfo’s man-ghost, I would like to guide you to another such “no man’s land” where linear metaphors for the life cycle don’t apply. A place outside the bounds and off the records of the international system, administered by an unrecognized state, or what I call “a phantom state.” The reference is to “Northern Cyprus,” coined, constructed, and implemented as a separate “place” through the agencies of a local guerilla group (the TMT) that organized Turkey’s military invasion in 1974. This “zone”
has to be historically studied and situated, for it did not exist, either as
discursive category or actuality, without the imaginary of “partition” (in
Turkish, “taksim”) and war, which created it.

Official discourses in “Northern Cyprus” have marked “1974” as a mil-
ennial turning point, constructing the “before” as a period of suffering
for Turkish Cypriots under attack by Greek nationalists and the “after” as
one of “Peace and Freedom,” as the anniversary of Turkey’s invasion (July
20) has been named. Even the mental hospital has been officially assigned
the name “The 20 July Peace Hospital for Mental Diseases,” after the
very war that caused the extreme distress for many of its patients.

The year 1974 is indeed a landmark. But it is a turning point in terms
unspecified in official discourses. Since 1974, Cyprus has been practically
carved in half by an ad hoc imposition of barricades and wires between a
makeshift “North” and “South.” The capital city, Nicosia, was bisected
after the arrival of the Turkish army, with an intermediary area that be-
longs to the United Nations and a border dividing “the Greek side” from
“the Turkish side,” heavily guarded by armies on both parts. Banned from
access to the other side of the island and from contact with Greek Cypri-
ots, Turkish Cypriots have been living in a zone of spatial and temporal
surreality. Estranged from places formerly known to them through en-
forced migration from the south to the north of a small island, the drawing
of no-trespassing areas, the changing (Turkey-fication) of village names,
and so forth, Turkish Cypriots often say that “we feel as if we are being
strangled.” Expressing a feeling of entrapment in a slice of territory, a man
described his brief visit out of Northern Cyprus as “the permitted stroll
of the prisoner in the courtyard to take in some air.” In what is now the
“Turkish side” of Nicosia, I frequently visited a public park that was built
by the municipality over a hidden storage of ammunition and right beside
the barricades and fences that divide the city from the middle. Every time
I went there, there were people—Turkish Cypriots, settlers from Turkey,
and soldiers off duty—holding onto the wires and looking curiously,
through the little squares and holes, at “Life,” writ large, on the other
side. In turn, “Life is dead here,” said a man who worked in a restaurant
right beside the ruins of a house on the northern side of the border.

The making of “Northern Cyprus” was a declaration, on the part of
Turkish Cypriot officials, of (at least partial) secession from the Republic
of Cyprus. Territory and borders, as such, were carved through an imagi-
nation of state formation. Today, this cornered area of the world is ad-
ministered by “the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC),”
declared as a separate “state” in 1983 but not recognized by the international community. Heavily controlled by the Turkish army and foreign ministry, the “TRNC” operates as the contemporary outpost of a postimperial state, Turkey.

The entity “TRNC” was manifested through several stages and constructions of “statehood.” An account of these is an illustration of the energy, investment, and efforts geared toward “statehood” in this zone. Of course, Ottoman-Turkish Cypriots were already involved and associated with administrative practices. In fact, if anything differentiated “Muslim” from “non-Muslim” subjects of the Ottoman Empire, it was the easier access of the former (sometimes through conversion to Islam) to political (i.e., state and military) power.18 When the British took Cyprus over from the Ottomans, they used the Muslim Cypriots’ special skills in statecraft, to a certain extent building on existing practices and hierarchies.19 Hence, they employed a disproportionally larger number of Muslim Cypriots as police officers. The tide turned in the 1950s with the rise of Greek nationalism in Cyprus under the organization of the armed EOKA group (National Organization of Cypriot Fighters [Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston]). EOKA members not only fought against the British, soliciting unification with Greece, but specifically targeted the Muslim population of Cyprus, whom they identified as “Turks.”

During and in the aftermath of British colonialism, and through the times of conflict with Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots were administered by such administrative constructions as the “Cyprus Turkish Minority’s Association,” beginning in 1943; the “Turkish Resistance Organization,” an armed nationalist guerilla army founded to fight its Greek counterpart EOKA in 1957; the “Cyprus Turkish Associations Federation,” formed in 1958; separate Turkish councils in big towns (like “the Nicosia Turkish Council,” created in 1958) that incited further intercommunal conflict; “the Republic of Cyprus,” recognized as a bicomunal state by the United Nations in 1960; “the Turkish Cypriot General Committee,” announced when Turkish Cypriots were living in ghetto-like enclaves between 1963 and 1974; “the Provisional Turkish Cypriot Administration,” which was created in 1964 and dropped its provisional status in 1967; and “the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus,” declared in 1975 after the Turkish army’s invasion of “Northern Cyprus” in 1974 and imagined as a component of the proposed “Federal Republic of Cyprus.” State practices in “Northern Cyprus” were managed through this series of administrative constructions until “the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)” was declared a separate state in 1983.20
Those trapped in “no man’s land” have been governed by these transitory administrations, which have been recognized by no member of the international community other than Turkey. According to the Security Council of the United Nations, the “TRNC” is “legally invalid.” Greece and the Republic of Cyprus refer to the “TRNC” as the “pseudo-state.” Since 1983, Turkish Cypriot officials have been involved in all sorts of lobbying, soliciting, and propaganda activities to gain “international” status as “a state” for the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.” Rauf Denktash, the president of the “TRNC,” has been at the center of these activities geared for recognized “statehood.”

Here, I would like to draw attention to the excessive interest in the subject of “the state” and international recognition among officials and supporters of the “TRNC.” The vocabulary of “statehood” and its numerous constructions (“federate,” “confederate,” “sovereign”) imbues public discourses in “Northern Cyprus.” The topic of “statehood” predominates in international meetings and conferences abroad about Cyprus, as well.

In “Northern Cyprus,” an official discourse of Turkish Cypriot “independence” glosses over political and economic dependence on Turkey and the absence of international recognition. This ambiguous situation has produced an indeterminate and complicated language of “statehood” among Turkish Cypriots. The “ethnography of the state” in such a context in between the absence and presence of “statehood” deserves its particular analysis of the everyday imaginary of “state.”

Turkish Cypriots’ references to their “state” alters and switches between the “TRNC,” “the Republic of Turkey,” and “the Republic of Cyprus.” In school textbooks and lessons in Northern Cyprus, children are presented with contradictory references to their “state.” On the one hand, they are taught to revere the “independence” of the “TRNC.” But on the other hand, they encounter ordinary references to “Turkey” as their “state.” For instance, I saw the statement “Our state was founded on October 29, 1923” written on the blackboard of an elementary-school classroom in Lefke. This schoolteacher had not thought it necessary to distinguish between the foundation of the “Republic of Turkey” and that of the “TRNC.” “It is confusing,” one mother said. “Sometimes they teach the Republic of Turkey as our state and sometimes the TRNC. But in time children grasp the situation.” In schools today, Turkish Cypriot children, as well as children of immigrants from Turkey, are taught two separate history classes, one named “National History,” using the standard history textbooks published by the Ministry of Education in Turkey,
and the other entitled “History of Cyprus.” Such lessons serve to reify Turkish statehood.26 Children are taught to identify with a vague “idea of state”? and as descendants of generations of state makers over the centuries. “History” is constructed as a succession of state-entities. It is often called the “History of Turkish States” and includes chapters on what are called “the first Turkish states in Central Asia,” with references to the Hun and Gokturk empires; leading next to the Seljuks, the lordships in Anatolia, the making of the Ottoman state, the foundation of the Republic of Turkey; and culminating in the declaration of the “TRNC.” Identity is constructed in close association with the presence of “statehood,” here, in spite (or perhaps because) of its legal absence. With the official term “infantland” (yavruvatan) that is used for the “TRNC” in relation to “motherland” (anavatan) used for Turkey, Turkish Cypriots are taught to identify their supposed “statehood” with the statehood of Turkey. Strongly militaristic in content and imagery, narratives of history recount “Turkish” conquests of territory, where “Northern Cyprus” figures as the last such achievement. Generally, if a subtext of identification with “Turkey” underlies official discourses and administrative policies in contemporary “Northern Cyprus,” so is any willing identification with “the Republic of Cyprus” banned on the threat of punitive measures.

In these conditions of possibility, in the context of a pervasive reification of “the state” and its symbols, Turkish Cypriots have no singular, unambiguous, or homogeneous loyalty to “Turkish statehood.” Finding themselves subjects of an unrecognized state in a zone of unsettlement and temporariness, Turkish Cypriots have been pragmatically shifting their loyalties between the alternative constructions of “statehood” and “citizenship” presented to them. They feel the stigma of international nonrecognition. Subjects of this pariah state, caught in the discriminating discourses of nationalism and internationalism, Turkish Cypriots have been attempting to bypass or subvert their entrapment by soliciting, through any means, their way out of “no man’s land.” Papers of the “TRNC” do not always allow them such access away.

In 1995, there was a passport scandal in “Northern Cyprus,” when it was discovered that many Turkish Cypriots held or obtained passports of “the Republic of Cyprus,” that is, of the Greek side. President Denktash announced that police would be sent to peoples’ homes, ad hoc, to search and check whether they held Cypriot passports. The “Republic of Cyprus” does not recognize the “TRNC,” and the “TRNC” does not recognize the “Republic of Cyprus” in return. The Denktash administration announced through semiofficial newspapers that anyone caught with a
Cypriot passport would be subject to five years’ imprisonment and a large fine. Under the citizenship laws of the “Republic of Cyprus,” anyone who can prove that both of his or her parents are indigenous to Cyprus or anyone married to a Cypriot can receive a Cypriot passport. This is how the “Republic of Cyprus” works against the legitimacy of the “TRNC,” claiming Turkish Cypriots as its own citizens. For Turkish Cypriots with or without nationalist loyalties, a Cypriot passport is the gateway to access to Europe with a recognized passport and without a visa. Of course, during the passport scandal, it was discovered that top-ranking ministers in the Denktash administration also held and occasionally used “Republic of Cyprus” passports.

Finding out that he is registered as “dead” in the census books, the character Yashar Yashamaz (whose given name can be translated as “Lives and Doesn’t”) in the novel of Aziz Nesin, reflects that “one must be alive in government notebooks to be living. Unless government officials say that you are alive, you may go on forever screaming that you are alive, only to console yourself. . . . [But] just because the notebook writes ‘dead,’ can someone be counted ‘dead?’” In practices of the international system, “existence” is linked with the appearance of membership in a reified, recognized “state.” The lack of adequate representations—papers, symbols, and practices of statecraft—prevents international access, connection, and privilege. Many Turkish Cypriots do not identify with the “TRNC” that purports to represent their ethnically defined interests. Those who are critics of this polity are doubly or triply marginalized on all fronts. In other comparable contexts, anthropologists have communicated the sense of “a place on the side of the road” or of “marginality.” In Northern Cyprus, people speak of “being in the abyss” or of “hanging in the middle.”

Being a subject of a pariah state, an inhabitant of “no man’s land,” means being politically liminal. Marginalized because of their critiques of Turkey’s military presence on Cyprus, Ayse and Okan have been trying to get out of Northern Cyprus. But which papers would grant them passage to a place outside the perimeters of Turkey? The “passports” of the “TRNC” that they hold do not allow access to the hallways of international airports. The Republic of Cyprus passports they have obtained through their “rights” as natives of Cyprus do not allow them the privileges reserved for the Greek Cypriot citizens of Cyprus. On their Republic of Turkey passport, likewise, the citizenship page is empty, withholding from them the right to work and of residence in Turkey. In a series of applications, as a means to get out, Ayse has applied to Fulbright and other
foundations for higher studies abroad. However, every application asks her what country she is a citizen of. When she writes that she is a citizen of “TRNC,” she, like the unrecognized state, is not recognized and her application is filed. When she applies as a citizen of “the Republic of Cyprus,” she is not able to benefit from funds reserved for the “Greek” citizens of Cyprus. Like the “TRNC,” as a subject of “no man’s land,” Ayse is off the records of the international system, too. She has no “identity” that can properly be translated into the accepted terms of international practice. Stuck in Northern Cyprus, Ayse and Okan have been shuffling, searching, and switching papers in order, in their words, “to be able to take some air.” In this breaking point of a context between the absence and presence of state practice, where “the phantom state” follows your whereabouts through its symbolic effects and actual practices and the international system shuts its doors, experience is about political liminality.

The not-merely-constructed, but, indeed, “phantom” (“lives and doesn’t”), quality of the “TRNC” is obvious to most of its subjects, whether supportive of the administration or not. I am interested in asking why and how, despite Turkish Cypriots’ consciousness of and ability to analyze their subjection in Northern Cyprus, there is a continuous, even compulsive, interest in the topic and symbol of “the state.” Why has there been such a proliferation of discussion on “statehood” in Northern Cyprus? To use Slavoj Zizek’s terminology, we could analyze the recurring concern with “statehood” in this historical context as a “fantasy”—a symptom that repeats despite analysis or deconstruction.31 This “fantasy” of state-centricity does not emerge from an isolated cultural context handy for anthropological study. Though one can study a particular and peculiar reverence for “the state”32 in contexts of Turkish nationalism,33 particularly in the aftermath of a history of Ottoman bureaucratic practices, the “fantasy” in contemporary Northern Cyprus is, more than cultural or historical, international and political. The obsessive interest in the subject of “statehood” in this “no man’s land” has to be situated in the broader context and conditions of possibility of the state-centrism of international discourses where “livelihood” is associated with and facilitated by belonging to a “state” that has a seat in the United Nations.34 I would suggest that it is within the context of international law and its discourses that such an acute interest in “statehood” has developed in Northern Cyprus. The “TRNC” is not a product of an isolated imagination. “No man’s land” cannot be studied in self-referential (or cultural-culturalist) terms, re-reifying the makeshift maps and borders. The “TRNC,” a nonnormative state, is a product of the very international discourses that produce “normal” (or “recognized”) states at the same time.
Peripheral administrative entities and “no man’s lands” like this exist, more and more, in other parts of the world as well—in Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the Republic of Georgia, in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in Chechnya, in Kosovo, in the West Bank and Gaza, and so on. What interests me is the poignancy of the experience of existence in such areas that can be called (not literally, but for analytical purposes) “no man’s lands.” What can a study of the experience of being trapped in such a zone and the subject of such an administrative entity tell us about statehoods that we take for granted? The study of the peculiar ought not to lead us to reify its strangeness against the so-called normality of existence under recognized states. The state-centric international system operates through a normalizing discourse. The study of zones of illegality should, I think, help us become aware of “the abnormal” that underlies what is presented as “normal” in such discourses. This study of Northern Cyprus should thus be read as a narrative that will, in anthropological fashion, lead us to estrange ourselves from political practices, such as “legal states,” that we tend to associate with “the normal.” Of course, the purpose is not to legitimize the statehood of the likes of the “TRNC,” run by a military order. I am interested, rather, in highlighting the eeriness of living in “no man’s land” in order to convey the “no man’s land” qualities of zones, in Britain, the United States, and Turkey, that we “normal” citizens of the world inhabit. The purpose of such an inquiry is to ask more poignant anthropological questions about the international “legal” system itself.

Living in Ruins

It is 10 p.m. in north Nicosia. A hot summer evening when, as is customary, everyone should be sitting outside. But we are walking through a half-dead city, the capital of “the phantom state.” Many houses and flats in the neighborhoods of Yenisehir and Koskluçiftlik are empty. Homes that belonged to Turkish Cypriots, Greek Cypriots, and Armenian Cypriots are abandoned. Shutters are tightly closed as we walk past five-story skeletons of buildings standing erect as markers left from a time of liveliness.

Because we are the only souls walking through empty streets and spaces, it is hard to distinguish living houses from dead ones. We continue walking in the dark. We are the only ones walking in a neighborhood where evening strolls used to be habitual. A couple of cars whiz by, as well as a motorcycle carrying someone at a fast pace. Further ahead, a house of
yellow stone, which used to belong to Turkish Cypriots who left, is now inhabited by immigrants from Turkey. There are no curtains, nothing to cover the floors. The house is practically empty. A large extended family has set cooking pots on the ground, in the garden. Trees, burned from the sun, surround the evacuated place that they inhabit.

Next door, a living house can be detected from the watered plants, bushes, and trees that have grown to hide and surround it. An old Turkish Cypriot woman has attempted to keep a spot of paradise for herself in the midst of ruins and piles of debris all around. She sits on her one-person sofa, behind pots of living geraniums. With a frozen gaze and in silence, hand pasted to palm, she looks without seeing through the window. Framed portraits and photographs of her relatives crowd the wall behind her. All gone. In the stalled gaze and posture of this woman, I sensed that moment of emergency: an image from a world annihilated. Here, disruption, tentativeness, and temporariness seemed permanent.

In this place, living in ruins is the condition that has been normalized. “X” is the mark that the Turkish military inscribes in red paint on places deemed politically “suspect” or spaces “canceled” or “erased” from the records. Like the Kurdish areas of Turkey, certain parts of Northern Cyprus are “X-ed.” Space here is full of X marks blotted on houses, buildings, and graveyards assigned a second death after the enforced expulsion (from life) of their inhabitants. Tension is particularly high in the spaces where “minorities” have been allowed to remain. A small Maronite (Christian) community has been given leave to remain in Northern Cyprus until death, as have a few Greek Cypriots. These X-marked subjects appear in the official archives of the “TRNC” only as numbers in police records. Because Maronite citizens are not allowed to leave property to their children, when they die, their houses die with them. They are red-marked. Living Maronite houses stand, full of framed portraits, paraphernalia, crosses, and photographs, beside the dead houses of neighbors. Dark-dressed widows carry the double burden of death on their shoulders. There is no space salvaged here, where death is not political.

As we attempted to find the way to the Maronite village through the changed village names, we were asked, “Have you not found a better place to go?” by Turkish Cypriots in neighboring villages. Fearing being X-marked for visiting the Maronite region in Northern Cyprus, many Turkish Cypriots have X-ed this region from their everyday itineraries, just as they have blotted out the southern part of Cyprus, as well as the numerous military zones where entry is forbidden. The way to Kormacit, one of the only Maronite villages left in the north of the island, was amassed with
blocked-off barracks and soldiers on duty. But on arrival to Kormacit, now called “Korac¸am” in officially Turkified fashion, the scene was different. Beside the village church, members of the village were preparing to celebrate a wedding, with tables set out on the little square. Children were running around, calling to each other in Greek. Young girls, dressed up for the occasion, appeared in groups from the basement of the church. Televisions were tuned to news from the Greek side of Cyprus, broadcasting loudly through the windows. How striking it was that life and liveliness went on in this village, with festivity and sound, in the middle of X-marked ruins, debris of war, military bases, and a marginalized position in a pariah state. This was a place on the precipice of life and death.

Turkish Cypriots too live in such spaces, assigned to inhabit houses evacuated by Greek Cypriots with the arrival of troops and parachutes from Turkey. The vision of bodies floating in the water catches the imagination of Turkish Cypriots now and again. The ground, the fields, the air, the heat of the place, is swollen with such memories. Southern Cyprus, which pretends to be a corner of Italy in the popular and ethnographic imagination, must be like this as well, the Janus of “no man’s face.” The army that claimed to protect Turkish Cypriots from being massacred, as a “minority,” by the Greek Cypriot “majority” has now turned Turkish Cypriots into strategic indexes, number points in a territorial outpost. Keeping the photo albums and other belongings of the Greek Cypriot owners of their dwelling in the basement, Rasim, in a classic fashion, did not repair the house. “This is the Greeks’ house,” he said. “If things change, they will surely want it back.” The sense of temporariness, of the capture of time in uneasy space, was paramount. In the village of Argaki, previously studied by Peter Loizos, no one has erased or painted over the numbers marked on the houses that have been assigned to refugees after the forced exchange of populations. Turkish Cypriots seem in a certain way to be resisting the normalization and appropriation of other peoples’ belongings. In the village of Argaki, now trapped in the north, Turkish Cypriots don’t want to forget that this, since 1974, is abnormal time. No one whitewashes over the numbers. Let us not pretend that these are ordinary times.

In Nicosia, likewise, space is kept unkempt, ruins of war are unrepaired, wrecked buildings are left intact, garbage sits uncollected, as though purposively marking and re-marking memory. As I walk through the city, I keep an itinerary of items that I see. The list contains broken glass, rusted iron rods, a burned pine tree, spilled garbage, an old oven stuffed with newspapers, a tree growing in what used to be a kitchen, a roof that has
collapsed into a house, the skeleton of a bed on the street, a mattress turned inside out and chewed up by the cats, a half-dangling balcony, clothes hung on electric wires, shrapnel holes in walls, windows filled with sacks of sand to make shooting targets, wires marking off a military zone, white barrels lined up as barricades, a sign marking “the border,” poles carrying the flags of “Turkey” and the “TRNC,” . . . The list continues. The items of ruins are intricately related to the items of militarism, internationalism, and politics. They belong in the same itinerary, the same politography. 

“The houses here are like candles,” said Erdal, who lives here. “Everyone has left.” “Nothing has changed; everything remains the same here. There will never be a solution.” Erdal was referring to the Cyprus problem, a symptom of political discourse here. Erdal was laughing and laughing and telling jokes around the few candles lit under eucalyptus trees in the semi-deserted neighborhood. “What happened to the house you were building for yourself?” I asked him. He said, “That house will never be completed.”

In this place that was transformed into “no man’s land,” time is caught, like the flip-second of a camera shot, in between. Somewhere in the middle, life was frozen, trapped, held on hold. Twenty-nine years (after 1974), forty years (after 1963) fled by, half a lifetime: the cycle does not turn. One experiences death within life in “no man’s land.” This place is already off the records. Already inhabiting an afterlife (the other side of the border, the other world), death arrives here only as a second call.

“Before, we used to die of war,” Emine said. “Now we die of cancer and heart attacks.” Emine’s younger brother had just died of a heart attack, in his late thirties. She was devastated. As we spoke to her, she didn’t know that one evening before, in a conversation we had with Anna over the phone between London and South Cyprus, Anna had said, “So many people have died recently. It feels like everyone is dying.” Anna was referring to the sudden death of a friend in his thirties from a heart attack in south Nicosia.

A wall does not erect a boundary on the narrow line between life and death. Cypriots, whether in the North or the South, are “coeval” in Johannes Fabian’s terms; they share a time. They live in enforced division. Partition. But they are subjects of the same history, the same historical context. If encoded, imagined, and written official histories have been bisected through barricades and flags, erected by men in uniform, an excess, an uncommunicated sense of history, a structure of feeling, is shared. There is much that cannot be put into rationalized language. Consciously
articulated words do not communicate the effect of history that is shared by Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. What the anthropologist has to catch is not the formalized narrative of identity, the tamed memory, or encoded oral history. More revealing of the experience of the Janus faces of suffering are the passing comments, exclamations, statements made out of despair, sighs, interrupted sentences, ironic phrases, laughter, and the like.

Emine and Anna had shared an experience of history, waiting on either side of the border, for something to change. Both are involved in bicomunal activities. Change didn’t happen. Now it felt like everyone was dying. Somehow, Emine’s and Anna’s youths too had evaporated through the waiting. Something inside them died with the sudden death of young friends. It was not the first time that they were struck by the poignancy of death. Death lay on the flip side of each site and memory in Cyprus. But the sentiment of these new deaths, now, was different. This was a time of neither life nor death. A stasis, a stall, a paralysis. Though divided by makeshift borders, the excess, or unarticulated sense, is the same in a history that is shared on either side of the fence.

Facets of Authoritarianism

“Northern Cyprus” has a television station that operates as the voice of the self-declared “state.” BRT 1 and 2 (standing for Flag Radio and Television) operate much in line with Turkey’s state-owned TRT 1 and 2 (Turkish Radio and Television). The difference is that in Northern Cyprus, the president appears on television almost every evening to give a state-of-the-day interview or speech. On one such characteristic evening in the summer of 1999, Rauf Denktash appeared on BRT in prime time as he posed accepting visitors in his palace in north Nicosia. Sitting across from his silent visitors and staring at the television camera, addressing his “people,” the president spoke with implicit messages of threat to the opposition in the “TRNC,” to the Greek side, as well as, generally, to all subjects of the “TRNC.” What was most striking in Denktash’s speech, more than its content, was the tone, particularly as he ended with the phrase anlasildi mi? in Turkish, meaning “understood?” or “has it been understood?” This was not a question, but a reminder to the viewer of the consequences of dissent, disagreement, or opposition. Similarly, “Those who speak in opposition to Turkey are not our fellows; understood?” he said one summer evening, as though a general in a military base ordering
lower-level soldiers. Denktash continued his monologue in front of the journalists who could do nothing but keep silent. “No one can say that life was better before 1974; understood?”

“He is out of his mind, this guy,” said eighty-year-old Ibrahim Bey, watching television again one evening and pointing at the “president” on the television screen with his finger. “I turn on the TV and every evening it’s the same thing.” “Enosis,” he says. “The Greeks killed us,” he says. “Every evening, he repeats the same thing. He knows nothing else.” Ibrahim Bey paused and said, “In this place nothing changes.”

Militarism applies not only within army barracks. In this particular space, a whole territorial zone is treated like a base. Such was the feeling, once again, on the arrival of the president of the Republic of Turkey in Northern Cyprus, five days after the celebrations of Turkey’s invasion in the summer of 1998. In the days of preparation for the arrival of the “TRNC’s” most revered guest, inhabitants of Nicosia woke up, in the early hours of the day, to the sound of loudspeakers pointed toward the residential areas of the town telling people to clean up the garbage from in front of their homes, in order to receive properly the president of Turkey. Loudspeakers played the anthem of the tenth year of the Republic of Turkey. “We came out with a clean forehead,” cried the marching soldiers, “in ten years from every war. In ten years we produced fifteen million youth in every age.” Sitting in their homes and in their gardens, inhabitants of north Nicosia could not but hear this beating sound that interrupted the buzzing of cicadas in that quiet (part of the) city in “no man’s land.” One wondered whether these broadcast orders to welcome the president were also heard on the Greek side of the city, only a two-minute walk away.

In Famagusta, a Turkish army general had invited the mayor on a tour over the city with a helicopter. The general was preparing to receive the president of Turkey for the celebrations. Pointing to a few areas that disturbed his gaze, the general ordered the mayor to have them cleaned immediately. Then he asked the mayor, “But what are those beds on the rooftops that I see, and those beds on the streets and in the gardens?” “It’s a custom here, my general,” replied the mayor. “In Cyprus, people sleep outside in the summer because it’s very hot.” “In that case,” said the general, “ask them to cover their beds at least, every morning, after they wake up.”

In north Nicosia, all the main roads were blocked to civilian drivers on days of preparation for the president of Turkey. Cars of diplomatic and military protocol, marked with symbols of authority, passed by. As I
Yael Navaro-Yashin

walked to the center of town, every hundred meters was guarded by police. All the roads were colored with flags of Turkey and the “TRNC,” in red and white. Two cloth portraits of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, and Süleyman Demirel, the (then) standing president, had been hung over apartment buildings. But despite all the broadcast orders to join the peoples’ line to welcome the president of Turkey, there were only about thirty civilians, all immigrants from Turkey, standing on the side of the road, clapping at the dignitaries’ arrival. News in Turkey’s newspapers on the following day read: “The people of Nicosia flocked to the streets for Demirel.” In fact, on that weekend, most Turkish Cypriots of Nicosia were on the beaches of Kyrenia.

The road to contemporary Kyrenia, formerly used predominantly by Greek Cypriots, is now driven by Turkish Cypriots as if it were an escape route. It was worth keeping an itinerary, once again, of items on this path across the Besparmak Mountains to the sea. Attempts to “take some air” on the seashore of Kyrenia were blocked at every point by facets of authoritarianism. On the road were wires marking off either side as military bases; there were red signs indicating that military vehicles may pass, a run-down and abandoned oil factory (that belonged to Greek Cypriots), the wreck of a house with a rotten roof and burned doors, garbage on the sides of the streets, a burned forest with the inscription “Ataturk Forest” on the hill, and so on. Finally, on a public beach close to Kyrenia, two students attending university in the “TRNC” said, “We are dying; we are bored to death here.” A retiree in his fifties, Erol Bey, had brought his grandchildren to swim on this beach. As he threw his fishing pole into the sea, he said, “The point is to loiter. What else can we do but loiter in this place?”

As one enters Kyrenia in the late evening, the signs of casinos, hotels, and gambling houses flash in many colors. However, it is forbidden for citizens of the “TRNC” to enter the casinos. The casinos are made for the entertainment of foreigners and visitors from Turkey. At the center of the harbor is a military house. It is forbidden to park in front of it. At 10:30 p.m. on that Kyrenia summer weekend, the harbor area was almost silent. Groups of people, couples and families, strolled through the little port. But there was no music in the restaurants and cafes in the marina. Not even much light. Waiters were standing with signs in their hands ironically reading, “Fun is forbidden!” “Be silent!” “We have been sleeping for twenty-four years; is it not enough?” “Should we send youth to retirement homes?” It turned out that the military house on the port had ordered all music and entertainment on the marina to stop at 10 p.m.,
when soldiers were due to go to bed. “Civilians” in the marina were protesting and collecting signatures. Here, military discipline had infiltrated into the most private moments of public entertainment. Like soldiers, young people in their teens, couples, and families with children were ordered to stop their socializing at a certain hour. The militarism was not confined to the barracks. The whole space was treated like a military zone.

Here, there was a sense of no escape, of entrapment. After the undeclared curfew in Kyrenia, we drove to Bellapais, on the mountain, hoping to find a place to sit. Again, we were stopped, this time by traffic police, who asked, “Where are you going? What are you going to do there?”

Back in Nicosia, sitting out in the garden in the quiet of the evening, eighty-year-old Ibrahim Bey complains. “No goodness has been left in this place. You can’t pass here, you can’t pass there. Here soldier, there police. On this side [referring to the Turkish side of Cyprus] they strangle people. They fear that if the borders open, people on this side will rejoice. If the borders opened, let me tell you, no one would remain on this side. Everyone would go to the other side [the Greek side] to live.”

Sensing the Political

“To articulate the past historically,” Walter Benjamin wrote, “does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” My wish within this ethnographic project is to capture just such expressions of disarray and disruption as they fleet by—an image of a deserted place, a blank stare, nervous laughter—cutting through seemingly normalizing discourses of stately or quasi-stately order. “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us,” Benjamin emphasized, “that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.” An ethnography of authoritarianism, like this one, asks that we sense the emergency, as uncitable as it may be. Like the Paul Klee painting Angelus Novus cited in one of Benjamin’s aphorisms, the idea is to keep one’s face turned backward to that “catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” To perceive that gripping silence of the ruins that surround and make the everyday spaces of inhabitants of “no man’s land,” “Northern Cyprus,” one indeed needs to maintain that sense or sensitivity that works against the grain of normalizing discourses, including those of anthropology. The experience that “no man’s land” engenders in its abandonment
and military devastation must be properly retained in any ethnographic depiction. We must hold onto that strangeness, that eeriness, in the writing, so that we can employ it to defamiliarize ourselves and grasp the political in contexts that present themselves as “normal,” whether they be under pseudo- or proper states.

Orin Starn had written about anthropologists “missing the revolution” in Peru when they culturalized the Andes and depicted static, structural contexts, as though there were no movements for change there, right there and then.48 It is my wish to attempt to perceive what is between the lines, to work on what appears to pass unnoticed, and to depict those expressions of emergency and desolation in what could otherwise have been studied as “the culture” or “social structure” of Turkish Cypriots, rationalizing a situation that is historically contingent. This is not a “place” that is natural and in place. This is “no man’s land,” carved out as “place” through specific historical agencies. Here we are studying a contemporary experience unrepresented in ethnographies of transnationalism and globalization.49 In such celebratory accounts of movement across space and time written in critique of bounded anthropological imaginaries of “culture,” the walls erected by those very same processes to dissect place and divert access have not been grasped. The “TRNC” phenomenon that I have attempted to describe is no anomaly within a normal international “order of things.” It only accentuates the process, call it global or transnational, that is transforming many parts of the world into such “no man’s lands.”

When I write about sensing the political, am I referring to “the senses” in the ways analyzed by Nadia Seremetakis?50 I don’t think so. In the collection edited by Seremetakis on the anthropology of the senses, there is much to be learned from the unpacking of “sensory organs” and the domains that they reach—the scent of an orange, the taste of pomegranate—for the making of more tactile ethnography. I perceive an inherent (perhaps modern) alienation or a basic estrangement, by default, in this particular call, shared with Paul Stoller and others, to anthropologists to perceive the “sensory” memories of our informants. The sensing that I would like to write about is more akin to Walter Benjamin’s grip of what he calls that moment of “emergency” as it runs by and away, or as it boils underneath what appears to be a quiet sea. In “no man’s land,” the meaning of existence must be sensed in the unkempt places, the evacuated buildings, the wrecks of war, the loud silence, in order to be grasped.

Am I speaking about the “anthropology of the emotions,” as suggested by Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz?51 Once again, I am unsure. What has been written on the “anthropology of the emotions” is quite a
different project interested in depicting the relativism of emotions across
cultural contexts. That formulation assumes an essential cultural sieve pre-
ceding and determining the political. In contrast, in the experiences in
which I have immersed myself in Northern Cyprus, there is no space
where “culture” is not already and all the time politicized. This is not to
place an essentialist notion of “culture” with an essentialism of “the
political.” Though “the political” appears in symbolic form in the flags
and papers of the pirate state and in physical form in the military barri-
cades and fences, it is not possible to locate, cite, or corner “it” for analy-
sis. “The political,” here, as arguably in other contexts, never shows itself
in the holistic form in which it is often depicted in political anthropolog-
ies. It rather appears, often in phantasmatic form, between absence and
presence (in this case of “state”), or in the recurring imaginaries and fanta-
sies of “statehood.” Here, the meaning of existence, betwixt and between
life and death (a subversion of the opposition), must be sensed to be
grasped, in the subdued tentativeness of time, in the fleeting or cursory
remarks, in the weird surroundings.

Betwixt and between life and death, hanging in the middle of time,
living in interruption. An ethnography of a context in limbo, as Northern
Cyprus is, requires that we center “disruption” in our analyses, since it
is central to the lived experiences of our informants. Disruption, since
1974, appears permanent to those caught in Northern Cyprus.
In fact, there is now what could be called a culture of disruption or inter-
ruption. The frozen time, the time interval, has become the consciousness
of temporality in this bisected space. It is not, therefore, possible to write
yet another anthropology of “life cycles” or of “death” here, in the model
of Bloch and Parry or of Loring Danforth. This disruption, arguably
like others, undermines any structuralist or culturalist rationalizations of
concepts of life through death. There is, once again, no space here (in war
or under cease-fire) where death is not tangled with “the political.” The
life cycle does not turn. Nor is it linear. Life is kept on hold.