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Gender Revolution in Rojava: The Voices beyond Tabloid Geopolitics

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ABSTRACT

Kurdish women fighters of the Women's Protection Unit, YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastine Jin) received considerable attention in Western Europe and the United States. They made the headlines of mainstream newspapers and magazines. The emergence of an all-women, secular military force in the Middle East initiated a multi-layered process of conditional recognition of the Kurdish struggle – a 'recognition' in the sense of wide media coverage, but 'conditional' since it sought to divorce the feminist approach from its very specific political narrative and then reconnect it with Western liberalism. This paper critically delves into questions of a gendered geopolitics that portrays the Kurdish (feminist) struggle in the US popular discourses while silencing the voices of women and ignoring its historical roots and development. Based on an analysis of articles published in The Washington Post, New York Times, and Newsweek about the struggle for Kobane, we discuss the ways in which geopolitics, Orientalism and gender are inter-related in reports about this struggle. One of our main conclusions is that not despite, but rather through, the portrayal of Kurdish women fighters as heroines—even as angels—the idea of the Middle East was reproduced as a geography of fear, backwardness, and violence. The images of Kurdish women fighters may have superficially appeared to suggest a recognition of their struggle, this is a recognition that works through the presentation of images (portrait) at the expense of silencing the voices of the actors engaged in a struggle for a project that envisages a non-statist democracy. Although the portrayal of this struggle in Western media, in which the image of struggling women is disconnected from their politics, does not contribute to a recognition of their struggle, the women's enunciation of their struggle in historical and political terms pushes the door for the audibility of Kurdish women's voices.

Introduction¹

Kurdish women fighters of the Women's Protection Unit, YPJ² (*Yekîneyên Parastine Jin*) received considerable attention in Western Europe and the United States following the 2015 January victory in Kobane, northern Syria,

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which was under Islamic State (IS) siege from 13 September 2014. They made the headlines of mainstream newspapers and popular journals, and YPJ women fighters were even featured in the international, self-declared, women's life-style magazine Marie Claire for their remarkable efforts in the battle against IS (Griffin 2014). A photograph of the "Angel of Kobane," a blond-haired woman fighter of the YPJ, went viral and became a symbol of the fight against IS (BBC Trending 2014). In the columns of these publications, the women of the YPJ were hailed for their struggle against IS and represented as carriers of a Western secular heritage against radical Islam flourishing in the Middle East.

In one of the few academic studies on the subject, however, Toivanen and Başer (2016) argued that the framing of Kurdish women fighters in the British and French media produced a narrative that was characterized by their heroization and omitted aspects considered controversial. Thus, the broader context of the women as co-architects of a "new life/paradigm" in the Middle East based on non-state confederalism and with gender-equality and assembly democracy as important pillars have largely been ignored. The ignorance on display in this American media coverage of Kurdish women fighters, such as was also evidenced in the gender politics of Afghan and Iraqi invasion, suggests a case through which to explore geopolitics in terms of gender.

Although the images of Kurdish women fighters may have superficially appeared to suggest a recognition of their struggle, this is a recognition that works through the presentation of images (portrait) at the expense of silencing the voices of the actors engaged in a struggle for a project that envisages a non-statist democracy. It is *literally* to be taken at face value. In effect, it rendered the struggle of these women and their history void and solidifies a Western incorporation of their struggle in a liberal women's rights discourse, just as we see in the Afghan and Iraqi cases (Fluri 2009a). In this respect, the (women's) Kurdish forces were presented as at the vanguard of the war on terror (against IS), and the corresponding political language and socio-historical background of Kurdish geography is excluded. Here, we argue that the discourse expressed through the presentation of the women in glossy magazines and various newspapers as beautiful, "bad-ass women" (Dirik 2014) fighting IS confirms a geopolitics that was based on an ontological distinction between a modern West and a backward East that embraced an instrumental usage of the liberal women's right discourse (Fluri 2009a). This operated, in fact, as the appropriation of images of Kurdish women fighters for an Orientalist discourse.

The emergence of an all-women, secular military force in the Middle East initiated a multi-layered process of *conditional recognition* of the struggle by Kurdish non-state actors – a recognition in the sense of wide media coverage, but conditional since it sought to divorce the feminist approach embraced by

the agents of struggle from its very specific political narrative and then reconnect it with Western liberalism. In this popular representation, the women fighting IS were fighting for “our way of life” (Hoffman 2015), in which beautiful, “like-us” women – enjoying “the cosmopolitan knowledge of the latest fashions” (Faria 2013) – were supported by the West in fighting villainous Muslim men who symbolized the barbarous Middle East. What we witnessed was what Said refers to as the brutal imposition of a Western narrative on the East (2003, 335).

This paper is structured as follows. After presenting our methodology, we discuss the way in which geopolitics, Orientalism and gender are interrelated, and then continue with an analysis of the incorporation of the Kurdish struggle in an Orientalist geopolitical discourse in three mainstream newspapers: *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. One of our main conclusions is that not despite but rather *through* the portrayal of Kurdish women fighters as heroines – even angels – the idea of the Middle East was reproduced as a geography of fear, backwardness and violence. This occurred at the expense of silencing the voices of the Kurdish women and their geopolitical imagination.

Methodology

This paper critically delves into questions of a gendered geopolitics that recognizes the Kurdish (feminist) struggle in US media discourse while excluding socio-political and historical references to the corresponding political body in the field. The aim is not to identify relations between different types of media and forms of representation but rather to consider the potential of corresponding re-presentations for the audibility of Kurdish women’s voices. The statements made in this article, therefore, do not claim to stand for “the media” as a whole, but rather to identify particular forms of representation through which we can (re)think the problem of representation, geography and politics – including the means for counter-hegemonic struggles of an alternative geopolitics – and we seek to (re)think this in a way that is not based on the establishment of an ontological difference between the West and the East and a related politics of domination but redefines geopolitics in terms of self-governance and radical democracy, the two central concepts of a developing Kurdish politics.

Referring to Culcasi’s (2006) remarks on the geopolitics of cartography in US print media since the Second World War, we note that Kurds have been posited as potential agents of danger in communism’s spread and as violent barbarians threatening Western democracy during the 1940s. *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have been interested in Kurdistan through this period, mostly as a threat. In the context of the US media-driven

rhetoric and politics after 9/11, these publications discovered the Kurds as an asset – a representation of Western liberal values in the Middle East. In this respect, we discuss the focus on Kurdish women fighters in the Syrian civil war of the three media publications, going from Kobane as a city under siege (2014) to the aftermath of victory (2015–2016).

The sample selection is limited to the results of searches on Kurdish women and the Kobane siege and victory, since this was the only legitimate issue of concern around Kurdish politics for the US media during the period. By late 2014, it had become evident for the United States that Kobane and the Kurdish resistance also had a symbolic power that ought not to be neglected in the war against IS (Anisa 2015). Accordingly, it became usual to encounter news about Rojava in the three aforementioned publications, *The Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. In these articles, the struggle for Kobane was linked to liberal ideals of secularism. The columns and articles are chosen also to point to the potential of tabloid geopolitics for the counter-hegemonic struggle in the context of the Kurdish women's conditional recognition. In this sense, examination of *The Washington Post's* articles selected exposes the Kurdish women fighters' use of the space recognized for them. Thence, they gain some audibility in respect of their revisioning of the state-centred understanding of the Syrian war and peace possibilities. Following *The Washington Post*, the case of *Newsweek* continues the discussion. Giving a space to reports from the field set to the photographic images of Kurdish women fighters, it increases the presence of the women's voices. Finally, the *New York Times*, not using visuals in addressing, again, the heroic Kurdish women fighters, points to the women as the politically legitimate agents in the field. Seeing these samples through the lenses of both primary and secondary sources from the field during the period, our perspective is developed through close readings of the Kurdish women's movement drawn from several written and oral sources in Turkish and English. The conversations with Kurdish women in the movement took place in Qamisli, Diyarbakır, Kandil and the Netherlands.

Tabloid Geopolitics and Gender

The global order is deeply entrenched in forms of knowledge-power referred to as geopolitics. Gearóid Ó Tuathail characterizes this geopolitical global order in his writings as “governmentalized forms of geographical knowledge, imperial writings from an unquestioned centre of judgment that sought to organize and discipline what was increasingly experienced as unitary global space into particularistic regimes of nationalistic, ideological, racial, and civilizational truth”; geopolitics became “the name of a tradition with a canon of classic texts and a parade of prophetic men” (1996, 13) who ordered the world into a West and the Rest. It simultaneously silenced those who

were dominated (Shapiro 1992, 110), as Edward Said shows through Arthur James Balfour's 1910 explanation in the House of Commons of why England should dominate Egypt:

England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows; England knows that Egypt cannot have self-government; England confirms that by occupying Egypt; for the Egyptians, Egypt is what England has occupied and now governs; foreign occupation therefore becomes 'the very basis' of contemporary Egyptian civilization; Egypt requires, indeed insists upon, British occupation (2003, 33).

Geopolitics is knowledge-power, the production of the other as a deficient image of the West, as needing either invasion or domination through the "(mis)representation of other cultures and places as primitive, savage, and uneducated, in need of Western civilization and enlightenment" (Routledge 2006, 237). Geopolitics became understood as a "cultural complex of practices and representations" (Agnew 2004, 621). The understanding of geography as the existential and essentialist pre-condition for politics through its creation of an ontological distinction between an "us" and a "them" (Said 2003).

As a term employed to indicate the determinacy of geo-power in international politics, "geopolitics" has also involved shifting references of multi-layered and differential dynamics of geography. While we see the post-Cold War era at the edge of a homogenized global space in the early writings of Ó Tuathail (1996, 13), Simon Dalby indicates that "the codification of the appropriate geo-graph in the mappings of the war on terror had to wait for the event of 9/11" (2008, 414), after which the cartography of "terror" was reshaped by imperial powers on the basis of religion and secularism. The US-led intervention of Iraq, with its ongoing debates and consequences, has become the most recent case of geopolitics in several respects, including new technology, communication and spatial fluidity. In line with this, Dalby emphasizes the fact that a theological enemy took the place of the Cold War evil (the Soviet Union), such that American rhetoric of Christian rectitude became a hegemonic instrument (Dalby 2008, 431). As established by Talal Asad, it became impossible to publicly discuss the aftermath of 9/11, due to concerns shaped around the war on terror discourse and the role of Islam and Arab nations in the attacks (Asad 2003). Accordingly, we came to talk about a re-production of the Middle East within a new set of power-knowledge relations ontologically based upon a present danger for Western values. The re-presentation of the feminist struggle in Rojava on the basis of Kurdish women's fight against IS together with Western state powers thus functioned as an instrumental, insofar, that is, as it represented the fighting women as the boots on the ground of a Western intervention. Accordingly, we discuss this representation as a form of "tabloid geopolitics" (Debrix 2007).

The tabloid geopolitics is a “popular geopolitical narrative” that offers easy-to-digest fragments, both text and images, as a kind of fast-food, stories to-go of people and the places where they live (Debrix 2007, 934; 2008, 6). These stories are presented in a flashy, surprising, shocking and moralizing way. What is important here, though, is their reproduction of the idea of what Edward Said (2003) refers to as an ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West.

Thus, a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on (Said 2003, 2–3).

Edward Said could have added to his textual enumeration the representations of visual imagery, such as photograph, film and video. Relatedly, tabloid geopolitics generally feature images to facilitate the easy consumption of stories that function to shape popular understandings of people, places and politics.

Visual imagery has played an important role in geopolitics, and the female body has been at the centre of this, with a strong emphasis on corporal visibility. Thus, when an international coalition led by the United States intervened in Afghanistan in 2001, this was partly justified not only with general reference to a defence of women’s rights (Abu-Lughod 2013, 3) but in particular to their right not to wear the burqa. The burqa was represented as Taliban barbary, and Western style civilization was linked to its removal, made possible by military intervention (Fluri 2009b, 242, 262).

After 9/11, failed operations in Somalia and Iraq resulting in the proliferation of images of mutilated bodies of American soldiers and mercenaries helped to discredit the flashy tabloid story of intervention. This was reinforced by the success of IS in Iraq, capturing Mosul in just a few days, parading with American weapons and vehicles and ridiculing American politics, which produced images of Western impotence and defeat that circulated in social media. Against this background, the women fighters of the YPJ, represented by the “Angel of Kobane” and many others, provided a new opportunity for positive identification. The rapid proliferation of images of these women fighters in several media channels created the possibility for a new identification. The images of these women fighters replaced those of the impotence and failure of American intervention and became re-presented as the face of the local, liberal Western forces beating the villain jihadists.

In fact, the images of women fighters and, later, women in Syria taking off and burning their burqas after being liberated from Islamic State rule – implying “Damn this stupid invention they made us wear!” – were more powerful than, for example, a staged unveiling at a vagina monologues event

in California specially organized as a media presentation (Fluri 2009b, 245). This was not an enacted unveiling but a spontaneous performance of self-liberation, captured by the journalistic lens. Here, though, we suggest that the circulation of visual imagery of women from Afghanistan and Rojava expressing, symbolizing and even fetishizing a liberal liberation operated at the expense of silencing their voices. We meet the contradiction, therefore, that while their bodies were made visible for the reader's gaze, their voices were rendered mute and their agency in the region was made invisible. Although filmed and portrayed, their verbalization of their selves and their struggle was denied through what Santos referred to a dominant or mono-cultural mode of thought (2004, 238). Here, we would like to draw attention to two ways in which audible absence is produced in the context of visible presence.

First, women in the Middle East, often simplistically equated to Muslim, are widely objectified as victims, without agency – occasionally they have been shown as instruments of terror, carrying explosives under their clothing to self-detonate, whereby there is generally a sub-text of them having been used by the men. This is affected through enforcement of a “secular” vision of European modernity, itself presumed as an inevitable and singular process (the unilinear development of human civilization). This representation is both facilitated by and has multiple effects on feminist politics (Reilly 2011, 6). Hegemonic, Western-centric understandings produced the category of the “Muslim woman”, a woman in need of secular values for her emancipation, which is thus dependent on the replacing of a local religious consciousness with a universalizing ideal developed in the West. Positioning Muslim women in need of help in accordance with a narrative of Western feminism was and continues to be a characteristic of war on terror discourse around Afghanistan and Iraq (Fluri 2009a; Mesok 2015). In this discourse, women in the Orient are first produced as “Muslim”, and then, on the basis of this Muslim identity, *ex ante* declared as outside modern political life. They are not only disempowered, a lack that is definitive of their represented social identity, or non-identity, but are systemically prevented from self-empowerment. In short, they need our, the West's, help. Such an essentialist understanding blocks from sight an understanding of diversity and agency in respect of women and gender in religion as well as hindering approaches that look beyond religion (Reilly 2011).

Non-existence is also constructed in the form of the particular and the local. Realities characterized as local are defined as incapable of being credible alternatives (Santos 2004, 239). This is related to the troubled nature of the local/global pairing, as Escobar (2011) and Doreen Massey (2004) have argued, in which the local is inevitably figured as dependent and subordinate to the global. Escobar argues that the defence of particular constructions of the local has become an important site of contestation in the strategies of social movements, since these have been rendered invisible. This discursive

erasure of the local, which Escobar attributes to the globalization craze in the social sciences, has as an effect that resistance and the production of alternatives for hegemonic forms of social ordering become invisible too (Escobar 2011, 140–1). In the words of Massey, however, the local may become the moment “through which the global is constituted, invented, coordinated, produced,” and thus a local politics with a wider reach is imaginable, one that intervenes in and alters “the very mechanisms of the global itself” (Massey 2004, 11). Accordingly, if we want to see the women fighters in Rojava more than as local actors in a global play but as moments through which a politics is constituted, we need an understanding that goes beyond popular geopolitics. Paul Routledge, refers to this as a “geopolitics from below” (2006, 236–7) and Massey (2004, 11) as the local actors as “agents in globalization”. It implies a challenge to representations of the world as “seamless self-constituting singular identities, and the assertion of the presence in their own right of other forms of practice”, not only “in terms of resistance or fightback”, but as a politics that attempts to produce other societal forms. The YPJ, the women subjects, then, can then be understood as agents in “criss-crossings in the wider power-geometries which constitute both themselves and the global” (Massey 2004).

Others have used the term “alter-geopolitics” to bring the possibility of a local politics to (and of) the global to the attention. Koopman (2011) used the term to bring into focus local practices as a way of doing geopolitics. Sharp (2011, 271–2) has suggested the term “subaltern geopolitics” for the politics of representation from the margins, creating space for voices that have been rendered silent. A subaltern geopolitics has the potential to make visible other geopolitical subjectivities. This is what Gibson-Graham (2008, 624, 614) refer to as a “reading for difference,” which aims to shift the focus to marginalized, hidden and alternative activities (to make them visible as credible experiences and widen the possibilities of social experimentation and different futures (Santos 2004, 239–9). However, the appropriation of Rojava, in the form of images of women fighters, in a discourse counterpoising the liberal West versus the authoritarian East renders such an alternative invisible.

“A dream of secular utopia...”

The Washington Post carried columns on the resistance in Kobane in terms of US overseas intervention. Referring to the name “Rojava” as the residents’ term for northern Syria (Hubbard 2015), and taking US airstrikes against IS in coalition with Kurdish forces as a threat to relations with NATO ally Turkey (Holmes 2015a), the articles in *The Washington Post* served a state-based international politics. As such, Kurds were referred to as a “stateless” nation, one that was also a glue for many of the interlocking conflicts in the Middle East (Tharoor 2016), and Kurdish militants were addressed as a potential threat to relations with Turkey (Tharoor 2016). Moreover, based on Turkey’s view on the YPG/

YPJ as an extension of the PKK, articles in *The Washington Post* mostly included the Turkish authorities' accusations against the YPG/YPJ (Sly 2016), accusations that are thought to have paved the way for recognition of YPG/YPJ as a terrorist organization by the United States. Within the limits of popular geopolitics, Kurdish women fighters of the YPJ thus emerge as a uniquely "recognized" part of the struggle in Rojava.

David Ignatius (2016), who depicted Kurdish women fighters as "so tough they sometimes go into battle with suicide belts so they won't be captured by Islamic State fighters who would turn them into sex slaves," suggested that the construction of the YPG-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was not ideal politically, but that it made military sense considering Turkey's attitude towards Kurdish fighters. He continued by stating that the "equality of male-female sacrifice, proclaimed on billboards in Kurdish regions, is a breath of fresh air in a Middle East where women's rights are suppressed." We contend that such an understanding – of equality based on sacrifice as a regional breath of fresh air in the Middle East – affirms a colonial gaze and a hegemonic liberal-secularism.

Conversely, it is the women militants' declarations that call for a recognition. The declarations of women fighters assert their agency against broader structures of patriarchy, due not only to IS but also to the patriarchal norms of "their own culture" and the capitalist state writ large (Holmes 2015b). The only audible voice in Ignatius' (2016) *Washington Post* article that goes beyond a colonial discourse in this modern gaze is that of YPJ commander Meysa Abdo representing the women as defenders of "a democratic, secular society of Kurds, Arabs, Muslims and Christians who all face an imminent massacre" in the name of the fight for "the rights of women everywhere". Discursive ruptures to the *Post*'s dominant narrative caused by such declarations are important in the sense of the structural promise for alternative truth regimes through field journalism that remain unfulfilled.

By late 2014, it had become evident for the United States that Kobane and the Kurdish resistance also had a symbolic power that ought not to be neglected in the war against IS (Anisa 2015). Accordingly, it became usual to encounter the factual situation in Rojava in the three mentioned publications, *The Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Newsweek*, through its embodiment of Western ideals of secularism. Reporting from inside Kobane under siege and headed by the image of a young, armed Kurdish woman, on 24 November, 2015, a special issue was published by *Newsweek*, a medium "concerned with the "big picture" of power and anger in politics" (Dittmer and Dodds 2008). *Newsweek*'s choice for cover posited the woman's body as the primary means of recognition of the factual situation, while the special issue, including the voice of journalist Heysam Mislum (2014a) and an article by Patrick Smith (2014), considered the dynamic processes of encounter and recognition in terms of experience and analysis, respectively. Opening with

an image of Kurdish women fighters, the latter, “The Kurdish angels of Kobane are fighting on a second front”, comprised an attempt to historicize the women fighters in relation to their sisters in Diyarbakır, who were actualizing gender equality-based political participation in Turkey (Smith 2014). Their actions resisted the myth of the “Angel of Kobane” in order to expose the wider promise of Kurdish women fighters against nationalism and patriarchy (Smith 2014).

Referring to the Kurdish movement’s early attempts in the name of women’s involvement, Smith associated the women of Diyarbakır with those of Rojava on the basis of their engagement within the Kurdish movement. While recognizing the political Kurdish subject beyond territorially defined nation state borders, however, the article limited the encounter to victimizing women and minimizing their will to power in several aspects. Although Smith’s comparative analysis (2014) escaped the tabloid geopolitics of state-based international politics, it also affirmed the instrumental use of the woman’s body in the images that fill the journal.

The will of the community as a whole to self-governance was established in “Kobane diary: joy, sadness and struggle in town under siege,” by Mislim (2014a). Again, mostly decorated with images of women fighters, the two diary entries by Mislim promoted US air-strikes in contrast to Turkey’s rejection of help for the resistance. Unlike *The Washington Post*’s emphasis on Turkey’s ambiguous position regarding the war on terror, *Newsweek* posited the Kurdish women along with Kurdish men as the defenders of human values and human dignity, sacrificing themselves for the entire world. In this respect, the women fighters announcing a change from traditional and patriarchal ways of life in Rojava were also central to the promise of the Kobane resistance. The diary entries by Mislim in *Newsweek* repeatedly ensured the secular promise of the Kurdish movement through the gendered resistance of the women fighters against radical Islam, as seen in the following:

Ululation is used in Kurdistan to express joy at celebrations such as weddings. But the YPJ women fighters are using it when they fight. The ISIS [IS] gunmen shout “*Allah u akbar*,” but Kurdish women ululate in joy against ISIS. When ISIS hears that women are fighting against them then they feel degraded and ashamed (Mislim 2014b).

Contrasting the religious exclamation of IS gunmen with the wailing of YPJ women fighters, the diary addresses the liberated women as against Islam (Mislim 2014b). Mislim’s diary becomes an attempt to instrumentalize feminized resistance in Rojava to expose the Turkish government’s propaganda and policies anticipating the end of the Kobane resistance. Thus, the women’s bodies repeatedly come to the lenses of tabloid

geopolitics in order to affirm the corresponding journals' engagement with the issue for their secular Western audience.

Finally, two remarkable articles on Rojava, entitled "On the road in Syria, struggle all around" and "A dream of secular utopia in ISIS' backyard", were published in *The New York Times* in November, 2015. Contrary to the *Post* and *Newsweek* articles, these were not accompanied by images of Kurdish women fighters. The first article, by Ben Hubbard (2015), opened with an image of uniformed YPJ and YPG fighters at a grave with sad faces; this accompanied an introduction to the socio-history of the Kurdish movement with reference to American anarchist Murray Bookchin (who influenced its leader and main ideologue, Abdullah Öcalan). From this perspective, the protagonists of the narrations emerge as historical subjects with a kind of (Kurdish) national memory that is politically shaped. Such an introduction is crucial to the establishment of a contextual understanding of the actual struggle between the YPG/YPJ secular values and IS Islamism and its political promises. In comparison to the immediate and state-dependent representations of the hegemonic Western perspective, such a historicity opens the space for an alternative truth regime that is shaped from below.

The article followed the words of women fighters declaring that "the homeland is belonging, loyalty and sacrifice" and claiming not solely the Kurdish people but also the Syrian people as agents of possible futures. Underlining the secular vision of the Kurdish administration in contrast with jihadist threats and their attitudes towards the "eyebrows" of women, towards bodies of women, however, it again becomes the women's bodies that ensure the secular ideals in the Middle East. This emphasis on beauty in terms of an aesthetics of eyebrows is crucial. As David Jones Marshall (2013, 56) underlines: "(...) trauma draws pain out of the body, whereas beauty draws the body out of pain". While glorifying Kurdish women's beauty and braveness, the articles in these newspapers avoid the traumatic experience of the constant threat of jihadism and the need for a military – violent – resistance.

The second *New York Times* article opened with an image from the academy in Rojava, deepening the understanding of "sympathetic Western visitors" that see the blossoming of plants seeded in the "Arab Spring" in the form of a utopia (Anisa 2015). Alongside such historical and political references, however, it was once again the woman's body and subjectivity that emerged as the focus of interest. Unlike the male YPG fighters, the women fighters are questioned about marriage and necrophobia, as if trying to lay bare a "woman's nature" as domestic and fearful, or supposed to be thus. A women fighter's response quite succinctly dismantles the journalist's gendered question: "Why should I be afraid? Being a martyr is the best thing possible," she states; "Fighting is ugly... but

fighting for this is beautiful. Fear is for your Western women in their kitchens” (Anisa 2015). Here, we see a re-interpretation of the notion of beauty by Kurdish women by liberating it from a universal language of cosmetics and body politics and attributing it instead to the act of resistance. Additionally, referring to the environmental and gender equality-based philosophy of Öcalan, this article opens a space for a critique of a capitalist modernity grounded in its reproduction of hierarchical structures in politics.

Notwithstanding some positive moments, however, these attempts to cover the situation in Kobane were limited by a tabloid-type interest in women fighters, in their beauty, bravery and war tactics as extraordinary rather than as a situated practice within an ensemble of revolutionary politics. Although the three agents of tabloid geopolitics investigated here operated in the service of quite different political discourses, the women’s bodies and subjectivities still emerged as at the core of their common interest and representations for a Western audience. Unlike the American interventions of Afghan and Iraqi that, respectively, employed the *Female Engagement Teams* (FETs) and *Lioness Team* in the name of female counter-insurgency (Mesok 2015), the Syrian case has its own women actors in the region with their own feminist perspective. Tabloid geopolitics, in this sense, repeats itself with a pragmatic use of a women’s rights discourse in a foreign (Muslim) land, regardless of whether this was enabled via US military forces or not, and when not, largely regardless of the women and their discourse themselves – largely, but not entirely, since these do escape through the cracks of occasional lines, notably the quotations where the women are allowed to speak for themselves, in their own words.

Becoming Political Subjects in Rojava

In the Kurdish movement’s political discourse, the construction of gender hierarchies and the state are considered to have been historically at the foundation of both economic and cultural injustices. Turning the thesis of Marie Mies, Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof (1988) on its head, Öcalan (2013) argued that social inequalities and cultural injustices started in the Neolithic era with the emergence of gender hierarchies and the identification of women with the domestic sphere (“housewifization”), referring to women as the first colony or the oldest form of slavery. In the movement’s contemporary discourse, therefore, the history of civilization is represented as a history of the enslavement of women, analysed as an ideological or cultural slavery, political slavery and economic slavery. This history of the enslavement of women is also the history of the dominant male and the foundation of state-formation and economic exploitation. A struggle for equality, freedom, democracy and socialism, it follows, require a

thorough analysis of the ways in which gender hierarchies have been created and institutionalized in the spheres of culture, politics and economics (Öcalan 2013, 9–11). Gender inequalities are not seen as a side issue to the struggle, but as a key challenge (Tax 2016).

Differing from other national liberation movements that have mobilized women, the Öcalan-inspired Kurdish movement took gender relations as fundamental by the end of 1990s. Analysing the Kurdish women's dynamism in the context of black feminism by addressing the Kurdish movement's late-1990s mythological embracing of Ishtar the Goddess, Handan Çağlayan (2012, 2) emphasizes the new perspective of positioning women as active agents in history-making processes. Meanwhile, the evolution of the Kurdish women's movement in terms of a masculine womanhood (1984–1994), women's color (1995) and the "goddessness" (1996) is addressed by Esin Düzel (2018). She positions Öcalan as the genderless figure of "leadership" in the first era of the Kurdish national movement, and argues that the claim for recognition from Kurdish male guerillas has imposed a masculine womanhood that competes with manhood on the basis of a readiness for violence and killing. In the second era, though, the women's self-critique of the excessive masculinities emerges under the umbrella of the women's "color" – through which gender binary intersects with power on the basis of a "feminine touch," as Düzel (2018, 11) puts it. And in the final era, the myth of "Zilan the Goddess" – real name Zeynep Kınacı, who in 1996 became the first Kurdish woman to commit a suicide bombing attack – is expressed through the internalization of Öcalan's discourse on female guerillas' "Goddessness" (2018).

Referring to both Çağlayan's and Düzel's works, the Kurdish women's involvement and participation in politics have not been diminished by the voice of Öcalan but rather the women party has had its own agenda and tools to assert its presence. Within the Kurdish movement, this has resulted in the development of what is referred to as a *jinoloji*. This is defined as "women's science" and "the basis for an effective ideology for the future of future generations to achieve and preserve the full rights of women" by Nazira Korea (2018) who was then the Legislative Council co-chair – positions in the movement's administration are generally shared by a woman and a man – of the Cizîre Canton democratic autonomous administration's and a member of the Syriac Women's Union. Declarations of YPJ commanders make assertive calls for recognition – as we hear from Nesrîn Abdullah, General Commander of YPJ:

We are not an instrumental power in the use of states against ISIS. The ones who recognize us [the YPJ] should also recognize our identity (Abdullah 2016).

Women fighters, and the role of women in armed conflict, have been studied by several scholars. Some have focused on the "impact" of armed

conflict on the lives of women, while others have directed their attention to women as actors, affirming their “interests, demands and expectation” within a wider context of so-called structural constraints at “familial, communal, national and global levels” (Gökalp 2010, 563, 568). Although impact studies position women as an object of violence, coping studies direct attention to agency, although of a re-active kind. Other studies have discussed the participation of women fighters in armed movements, such as the strong participation of women in the national liberation struggle in Zimbabwe (Kesby 1996, 584), El Salvador (Shayne 1999), Eritrea (Bernal 2000), and Algeria, Iran, and Sri Lanka (Sajjad 2004). What emerges from this literature is that the participation of women was instrumental to national liberation struggles and was determined by the context of men’s control at various levels.

Women have played an important role in Kurdish politics (Bruinessen 2001; Mojab 2001), and a common theme in studies of Kurdish women has been the issue of violence and nationalism. In the context of national liberation struggles, violence against women is used as an instrument to humiliate or destroy. Men are de-masculinized for not being able to protect “their” women, and rape is used as a means to undermine women’s role as mothers of the nation (Weiss 2010, 58). Brutal violence against women is embedded in the nationalist idea that men are the political agents and women the carriers of national culture (Yuval-Davis 2000). Related to women’s symbolic position as reproducers of national identity, rape has become a tool in conflict (Boesten 2014). Yet “national liberation” does not even automatically imply much less result in an improvement in women’s lives. It has been argued that a “significant issue for many women activists after the creation of the safe haven” – in Northern Iraq, bringing the *Kurdistan Democratic Party* (KDP) and the *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* (PUK) to power in the region – “was the increase in so-called honour killings and other crimes against women” (Al-Ali and Pratt 2011, 344). This has been referred to as “gender-cide” (Mojab 2003, 20–25).

Although other liberation movements have mobilized women, therefore, the Kurdish movement may be claimed as unique placing gender relations as to the fore in its analyses and challenging patriarchal relations, internally as well as externally (Zilan, personal communication, January 18, 2018). During the course of the 1980s and particularly in the 1990s, the theme of gender-inequality emerged as a main ideological theme in Öcalan’s work. This is referred to as the first paradigm shift within the movement (Jongerden 2018). Throughout the 1990s, the active participation of women in Kurdish politics – from unions to representative politics and guerrilla activity – increased to the point at which it there developed a “situation in which women were no longer objects waiting to be liberated, but active subjects, developing a space of their own within the movement” (Casier and Jongerden 2012, 14). In the

new ideological discourse, free women and men were reconstituted as liberated from sexuality and bodily relationships (Çağlayan 2012, 14). The ideological appellation made by Öcalan created the possibility for a process of subjectification in which women become key-actors. Öcalan argued that:

...the struggle for women's freedom must be waged through the establishment of their own political parties, attaining a popular women's movement, building their own non-governmental organisations and structures of democratic politics. All these must be handled together, simultaneously. The better women are able to escape the grip of male domination and society, the better they will be able to act and live according to their independence initiative. The more women empower themselves, the more they regain their free personality and identity (2013, 60).

This citation not only shows how ideology functions to recruit subjects (Althusser 2006, 174), but also indicates how women make themselves subjects by responding to the call and enacting it in terms of Öcalan's paradigm. In a rare interview providing insights into internal contestation within the Kurdish women's (armed) movement, Malatyalı Dilan, a member of the KJK (*Komalên Jinên Kurdistan, Kurdistan Women's Community*) and one of the women commanders, explains how the evolution of the women's movement in the Kurdish struggle has involved a rebellion against the hegemonic male power within the Kurdish movement itself (Malatyalı Dilan, personal communication, October 29, 2014). Interestingly, this took place by mobilizing Öcalan in the struggle within the movement.

Following the capture and imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, his status in the PKK became an issue. Should he remain the political leader of the party, with effective competences over the organization and giving direction to the movement as a whole, or should he better be considered a symbolic leader, without the practical power to influence the party's tactical and strategic politics? Discussions on the subject became entwined with the direction the party was to take more generally, which included the position of the women's organizations. Against Öcalan's argument for the need for women to build their own structures of democratic politics, attempts were made to bring the PKK-affiliated women's movement under control of the party leadership. Thus, an intended rollback of an independent institutionalization came together with an ideological challenge to the gender analysis developed by Abdullah Öcalan. With the move to centralize decision-making powers and subordinate the women's movement to the presidential council of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan was being turned into a symbolic leader. This was countered by fierce opposition from women in the organization, who successfully defended their independence and autonomous decision-making powers. Malatyalı Dilan explains what occurred thus:

A tendency emerged saying "The leadership is imprisoned in Imrali [Öcalan's prison island] and the women's movement is now left to our mercy, so from now

on you have to get our approval for all decisions you take.” Of course, the women’s movement did not accept this. There was an uprising. We made a now famous uprising. Whatever happens, no way will men make decisions about us. Our uprising was about this. All the women cut their hair. (...) It was a way to show that we did not accept [what was happening]. It created a shock: “What’s happening within the PKK movement?” This was the beginning of an insurgency. If the women do this today, other things may happen tomorrow. Everywhere we have hundreds of women fighters and we are organized. (...) Because of these actions, our male friends had to give up on what they had insisted on. (...) These actions took place in the process towards the 7th Congress, in 2000 (Personal communication, October 29, 2014).

By turning Abdullah Öcalan into a symbolic leader and taking his mandate, a move had been made to centralize decision-making powers and subordinate the women movement to the presidential council of the PKK. The women’s movement disputed the validity of this decision that would withhold from them the power to give direction to the movement, and in so doing successfully defended their independence and autonomous decision-making powers. It was a pivotal moment in the development of the organization, as we see today – and as we saw in the American media publications.

The ideological appellation creates possibilities, shows new possible futures, but it is dependent for its enactment on those who recognize it as a viable option for self-realization. While these references are often posited as signifiers of a nationalist awakening of Kurdish women (Çağlayan 2012, 14), therefore, they may also be read through a Marxist lens, that revolutionary moments enact history differently, in such a way as to create new imaginations and perspectives for action. A revivification through the valorization of histories is then enabling:

The awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not recoiling from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk again (Marx 1852, 322).

Edward Said has argued that the French novelist Flaubert, and more in general Orientalism, “produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history,” since, rather, “*He* spoke for and represented her”. The Orientalist discourse, wherein women “were there to be used sexually, and if it could be suggested that they were inherently licentious, then they could be exploited without misgiving” (Oakes and Price 2008, 6), is echoed in the practices of IS, but is not (only) written by them.

Contrary to this objectification of women, there emerges a process of subjectification in the Kurdish case that takes place through a dialectical relationship between Öcalan inspiring the women and the women’s choice to become inspired by him and enact new subjectivities. As such, no-one made

the women speak (Spivak 1988), but the interpellation and its active recognition created the conditions for speech and action, allowing the emergence of women fighters as agents, as self-determining actors in the political (and military) process. The Rojava Revolution as *event*, in terms of the historical rupture it has caused in politics, came together with Kurdish women's performance of new subjectivities through their embracement of the political.

Importantly, gender inequalities are considered to be at the heart of the production of unequal geographies. Therefore, a separate and autonomous organization of women, not only in the (YPG/YPJ) protection units but also in other domains of life in Rojava, is now considered important in order to be able to address patriarchal social relations (Amini Osse, personal communication, October 15, 2015). Gender inequality has become embedded as a key theme in the Kurdish movement, such that the movement has developed the jinology's own body of analysis and thought (KJA, *Kongreya Jinên Azad, Free Women's Congress*, personal communication, July 27, 2016). Investigating social and political liberation through the lens of women's liberation, this discourse treats the development of civilization as a history of the progressive enslavement of women and production of the "dominant male", which is considered to be at the foundation of the institution of inequalities in state formation and economic exploitation. A struggle for equality, freedom, democracy and socialism, therefore, has required a thorough analysis of the ways in which gender hierarchies have been created and instituted in the spheres of culture, politics and economics.

Consequently, as the women's militant wing of the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratîk, Democratic Union Party*), the YPJ is constructed via a political discourse that rejects patriarchal, homogenizing and assimilating apparatuses in the service of modern nation states and, instead, embraces Öcalan's employment of Bookchin's paradigm of democratic autonomy. Accordingly, the self-governance principle is mediated through communes (neighbourhoods), and these provide instant and direct communication among members of the community that is then used to develop a democratic public space. As explained by then co-president of the PYD, Asya Abdullah, it is through this system that the monopoly of power is transferred to the commissions instead of being in the hand of the central authority:

Cizir Canton, which has Kurdish, Arabic, Assyrian, Circassian and Armenian populations, has recognized each group since its foundation. Therefore, Cizir Canton was created by 57 political parties, modern social organizations, and representatives from the communities. Only 10 of them were political parties. The women's organizations, which actively participated in the resistance, have a central role in developing a political and democratic solution. The women and young militants were the founders of the cantons. That is why we are able to talk about a successful women's organization that is sufficiently hegemonic. One of the cantons in which women have authority in different levels of governance is the

Afrin Canton. In the other two regions (Cizir and Kobane), at the level of administration there are two co-presidents and co-president assistants. That is why we see women actively participating at every level of decision-making processes today. We have the women who take on the highest responsibility and authority in the 22 commissions in three cantons. Today, three commissions are directly governed by Assyrian people. Two are governed by Arabic people, while three of them are governed by the women. All religions are free to work in the commissions as communal and equal partners (Abdullah 2014).

In a context in which the freedom of the people is measured by the freedom of women, therefore, the imperative to metaphorically “kill the dominant male” has become a fundamental principle for liberating life (Öcalan 2013, 52). This is the geopolitics from below in the Kurdish case.

Discussion and Conclusion

Tovianen and Başer (2016) have argued that the Western media representation of the women’s struggle against IS tended to depoliticize the struggle by omitting possible subjects of controversy, such as gender relations and its place within the Kurdish movement’s wider environment. The struggle by the women fighters of the YPJ became portrayed as a heroine struggle against the IS “evil” (2016, 25). In other words, in disconnecting war from the struggle of the Kurdish movement in Syria and the northern Middle East, the media channels investigated here embraced a Western feminist frame to posit women militants as the representatives of a civilized Western “us” as a satellite geography. We claim that US media channels also contribute to the reproduction of the idea of an ontological difference between a “civilized” West and an “uncivilized” East, so that while being home to Kurdish women fighters who are portrayed as heroines, the Middle East maintains its position as the geography of fear, backwardness and violence. Through an identification with the women’s bodies, the consumer of tabloid geopolitical texts and images are narrated “elsewhere wars” (Fluri 2014). This elsewhere-war discourse not only distracts the audience from the reality on the ground but also helps the hegemonic state powers to determine the conditions of recognition for the stateless communities.

Articulated by Routledge (2006, 236) against colonialism and cold-war geopolitics, we suggest two forms of anti-geopolitics to consider in this context. These are first, a challenge to the discursive ordering of the world in which the West is constructed as rational, active and modern and the Rest as irrational, passive and backward, and second, the liberation struggles. Today, a specific body of resistance, the political paradigm and military force of the Kurdish struggle developed in the light of Öcalan’s thoughts, has become the agent of a geopolitics from below in the Middle East. This makes imaginable a local politics with a wider reach (Massey 2004) and fits

the category of “globalized local actions” (Routledge 2006). It can also be stated through the three requirements of an effective anti-geopolitical struggle as argued by Robinson (1998) and Escobar (2011): (i) a link that binds political force and the broader vision of social transformation within different place-based social movements, (ii) an alternative socioeconomic model to neoliberalism and (iii) a trans-nationalization of local/national struggle.

In such a context, although gender politics in Rojava is supposed to be “geographically re-imagined” as a part of the West by means of tabloid geopolitics, the material practices and ideological struggle in the region go beyond the popular understanding. Expressed through (as) the voices of women fighters’ (which also take their male companions and peoples in Syria into account), a “gender politics “from below” as part of a social morphology of counter-violent politics to resist, produce and reproduce political subjects” is geopolitically invoked (Fluri 2009, 260). This also occurs as a part of re-imagining of the history of the region, not as a history of danger and threat as in the Orientalist discourse, but as a site of a struggle for social justice in which gender-inequality is axiomatic. It is in this context of the Rojava revolution that the local feminist resistance becomes globalized in the media, despite the hegemonic and pragmatic discourses of the tabloid geopolitics.

The emergence of the YPJ fighters in this geopolitics implies a shift in the US employment of the women’s rights discourse, which derives from a non-Western feminist struggle – namely, that shaped within the history of the Kurdish liberation struggle. With its roots in a national awakening and resistance movement, the empowerment and enrichment that comes with this women’s participation addresses a geopolitics that goes beyond the hegemony of the nation states’ territorial determination and recognizes the multitude shaped through gender, ethnicity and religion in the region. Manifestly, the future of this new gendered geopolitics from below is strongly dependent on the recognition of this counter-hegemonic struggle. Although the portrayal of this struggle in Western media, in which the image of struggling women is disconnected from their politics, does not contribute to a recognition of their struggle, the women’s enunciation of their struggle in historical and political terms pushes the door for the audibility of Kurdish women’s voices.

Notes

1. The authors express their gratitude to the editors of the journal for their continuous support during the review process and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions to improve the quality of the article.
2. The YPJ (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, Women’s Defense Units*), is the women equivalent of the YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, People’s Protection Unit*). The YPJ/YPG formed the

main defence units in Rojava since the beginning of civil war in Syria. Today, they are the backbone of the SDF (*Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk, Syrian Democratic Forces*).

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