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Experiencing Homeland: Social Media and Transnational Communication among Kurdish Migrants in Northern Italy

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This article examines the ways in which experiences of homeland take shape through the use of social media among first- and second-generation Kurdish migrants living in Milan and surrounding areas in the Lombardy region of Italy. Drawing on a short-term ethnographic study of social media practices carried out in spring and summer 2018, the paper presents and compares the uses of social media among two migrant generations and conceptualizes homeland as a *mediated experience* that takes shape through people's everyday social media practices. This approach to homeland can account for the multiple ways in which the affordances of digital platforms and the subjective aspects of homeland are interconnected with one another through social media practices. The paper is part of the *Global Perspectives*, Media and Communication special issue on "Media, Migration, and Nationalism," guest-edited by Koen Leurs and Tomohisa Hirata.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s seminal works in anthropological theory problematized the idea that culture is bound to territorial spaces (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997). These scholars also pointed out the powerful role of media in bringing about this conceptual unbinding between cultural identities and geographical territories, which raised questions about how processes of advanced globalization, including travel, migration, and communications technologies, would reconfigure the significance of territorial space in people's lives. The early research on the role of web communications in formations of political, economic, and emotional attachments to territorial homelands focused on Web 1.0, and hence the idea of the "homepage" gained prominence in analyses of digital home-making and the nation-state (Mallapragada 2006; Eriksen 2006; Basu 2007; Collins 2009b). For migrants in particular, online representations of the "home" or sending country made an entry where media genres such as ethnic television and diasporic cinema had been the dominant forms. However, perhaps more than any other transnational media form at the time, the internet was associated with a spatial realm of its own making: cyberspace. This is a term that earlier ethnographers of diaspora used to conceptualize web communications through a spatial metaphor (Bernal 2006; Everett 2009; Graham and Khosravi 2002).¹ It also persists in certain discussions of transnational homelands as an online media space, but one that increasingly situates diaspora within various offline localities (Yin 2013). Thus, the relationship between physical territory, on the one hand, and people's senses of belonging and feelings of home, on the other, is mediated in changing

ways.

With the rise of Web 2.0 and its "social" character, the internet has become more deeply embedded into people's daily lives through everyday uses of social media (for an overview of digital diaspora scholarship, see Candidatu, Leurs, and Ponzanesi 2019). Apps and platforms therefore raise new questions about how people relate to spatial territories and localities through digital media. Research on migrants and digital media usage shows that the internet and social media are used as part of everyday practices to maintain complex spatial attachments to both homeland and host country on various different scales of locality (e.g., Collins 2009a; Alinejad 2013; Lim, Bork-Hüffer, and Yeoh 2016). Such work has contributed to demonstrating that in imagining nation-state homelands transnationally, people also engage in everyday uses of digital media that make them feel physically and emotionally situated with relation to the physical places they inhabit and move between. In this article, we revisit discussions of the spatial and relational dimensions of "homeland" formations in the age of social media from a specific conceptual vantage point: we approach the notion of transnational homeland as a digitally mediated experience. While a consensus has developed around notions of homeland consisting of both cognitive-imaginative and physical-spatial aspects, our understanding of homeland as mediated experience contributes to explaining how the spatial, the digital, and the subjective aspects of homeland are related to one another through media in complex and nonlinear ways. Understanding homeland as a formation rather than as a bounded territory per se, we posit *mediated experience* as a lens through which to understand how the attachment to a locality is produced

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¹ These scholars, for instance, discussed cyberspace as an "alternative 'territory'" for migrants, "where a transnational community or virtual neighborhood can be constructed" (Graham and Khosravi 2002, 228).

through people's everyday social media practices. Homeland is thus not a place from which someone's transnational migration originated, but an experience produced in/for that person through specific forms of digital media use.

In this article, we elaborate on the important ways in which this conceptualization of homeland as experience reveals unique potentials for understanding differences between first- and second-generation migrants from various parts of Turkish Kurdistan to Milan, Italy. Prominent ideas about second-generation migrant transnationalism have suggested that cross-generation change follows a linear path of assimilation into the host society as engagement with the homeland declines for newer generations. But scholars critiquing this perspective have called for ways to better understand how cross-generational shifts reflect qualitative changes—rather than decline—in engagement with the homeland (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2006). Differences in mediated experiences help us explain how the formation of a Kurdish homeland is subject to dynamics of cross-generational digital media engagement. Among second-generation Kurds, social media mostly contribute to shaping expressions of their political and ethnic consciousness and their becoming engaged in homeland politics. On the other hand, among first-generation Kurds who arrived in Italy as political refugees in the last few years, above all social media constantly reminds them of their exile, contributing to feelings of loss and distance and shaping their experience of homeland as loss.

MEDIATED EXPERIENCES

Anthropological writing on experience has been quite extensive and diverse throughout the years, with the most relevant contribution being the insight that experiences do not take place in the minds of individuals but rather in their doings and social actions (among others, see Desjarlais 1994; Geertz 1973; Ingold 2000; Mattingly 1998; Throop 2003; Turner and Bruner 1986). Geertz (1973, 405) defined human experience as “the actual living through of events.” Turner and Bruner (1986) viewed experiences as concrete, immediate, fluid, and indeterminate. The philosopher John Dewey (1980) also argued that experience is always the result of interaction between human beings and some aspects of the world in which they live. His contribution informed the work of practice theorists (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Schatzki 1996; Ortner 1984), who have conceptualized experiences as always bound to active doings.

Nevertheless, anthropologists did not elaborate on the notion of *mediated experience* until recently. In contrast, the sociologists Thompson (1995) and Tomlinson (1994) adopted this concept to develop a social theory on media, modernity, and the formation of the self in the age of mass media. Their concerns focused on making sense of the societal transformations brought about by globalization and diffusion of mass media. Media scholars and cultural studies scholars (Hill 2018) investigated the link between place-making, media, and lived experience. The digital ethnographer Christine Hine (2015) emphasized how our relationship to the internet is always an embodied experience. The focus on experience has also been central to the development of nonrepresentational theories in cultural geography (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Thrift 2008), which have emphasized the role of practices, materiality, and embodied experiences in people's relationships to place and space, using these to go beyond constructivism. In their views, emergent media can shape the experience of places in ways

that are plural, heterogeneous, and bound to daily activities (Kraemer 2017). Building on this theoretical framework, anthropologist Jordan Kraemer (2017) has shown how social and mobile media practices in Berlin have woven together people and places in new ways, developing a new sense of Europeanness that is often not recognized as such. Recently, other digital and media anthropologists used the notion of mediated experience either to analyze the sensorial dimension of media consumption (Gunn and Donovan 2016; Pink et al. 2016) or to understand the entanglement of digital media and emotions (Bareither 2019). In this article, our primary goal is to build on the notion of *mediated experiences* as a complex and dynamic process: a state of being, a set of perceptions, feelings, and emotions that are bound to media practices and doings. This accounts for the important role that social media play in the making of homeland among migrant populations. From this perspective, homeland is an experience that emerges from the interaction between migrants and their social media usage. It is deeply embedded in their social media routines, which are situated within the rich texture of their everyday lives across different localities.

This conceptualization of homeland as experience also draws on work that has discussed the role of situated practices and sensory experience in the formations of home and homeland. Home has been conceptualized as a “kind of place” that acquires meaning through practice, rather than a space independent from human subjects (Petridou 2001). The anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis (1996) explains that the nostalgia of the exiled migrant is a residue of memories that are activated through embodied acts in the here and now. In this perspective, memories of the homeland are commingled with the senses and situated within a temporal landscape that connects the present to the past through bodily practice. Petridou (2001) brings together Seremetakis's discussion of food as a unique part of material culture that can evoke the sensory landscape of home and the work of Daniel Miller on self-creation processes to show how migrants attain a sense of history and identity through the foods of home. In her discussion of the sensory relation of migrant home to specific locations, Hamilton (2017) builds on Seremetakis to argue that places persist within (mobile) persons and thus “leave their traces, inhabiting us as much as we inhabit them” (185). Alinejad (2011) engages with Seremetakis's (1996) and Ghorashi's (2002) work on diasporic memory in discussing migrants' weblogging practices, suggesting the notion of “transnational embodiment” to understand homeland as how people “experience and think of (personal) history on an everyday level.” Such ideas of home and homeland as experienced through inhabitation practices is instructive for the idea of mediated experience we develop here.

THE KURDISH DIASPORA IN MILAN

The Kurds constitute one of the largest stateless diaspora groups in the world (Van Bruinessen 2000), and their relationship with politics and media has been widely investigated (Bozdağ 2014; Keles 2015; Koçer 2014; Mahmud 2016; Sheyholislami 2011; Smets and Sengul 2016). Although studies on the Kurdish diaspora across Europe and Asia are vast, very little research on Kurds in Italy has been published so far (see Armelloni 2008; Duru, Favell, and Varela 2019; Purkis 2018). The Kurdish diaspora in Italy constitutes a small group compared to the big diaspora communities in Germany and Sweden, with Milan being the Italian city with the largest number of Turkish Kurds (Purkis 2018).

In the region of Lombardy, registered Turkish migrants number 7,133, whereas in Milan, they number 1,288 (National Institute for Statistics in Italy, ISTAT), most of whom are Kurds.² Our research participants estimated that there might be between 2,500 and 3,000 Turkish Kurds in Milan and surrounding areas. The migration of Kurds from Turkey to Milan for political or economic reasons started in the mid-1990s and increased significantly in the following decade. Only with the introduction of the Dublin Convention³ in 1997 did Kurdish asylum applicants from Turkey start considering Italy as a country of residence rather than only a transitory country in their journey toward Germany and Northern Europe (Armelloni 2008). Most Kurds living in Milan are Muslim Sunni from the town of Pazarçık and its nearby villages in the province of Kahramanmaraş, located north of Gaziantep. A smaller number are Alevi from the same province, and others are Sunni from the province of Konya and other regions in Turkey. The majority of the first of these migrants were men who brought their wives and families through family reunification. In the last few years, a new wave of Kurdish migrants from all over Turkey arrived in Milan as asylum seekers, to escape military service and political persecution, as a result of the crackdown on freedom and civil rights under the authoritarian turn of President Erdoğan of Turkey. After the AKP political party lost its parliamentary majority in July 2015, new violent attacks hit the Kurdish population. These attacks started a new phase of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict that has affected the lives of millions of people in Turkey and caused the suffering of civilians and political leaders. This new wave of forced migration brought into northern Italy a new generation of young and not-so-young Kurdish adults, who belong to the same age group as the second-generation migrants who either arrived in Italy as children in the 1990s and early 2000s or were born there.⁴ The presence of these two migrant generations makes the Italian case study relevant for our comparison.

There is no cohesive Kurdish community in Milan, and relationships between Kurds tend to be dominated by kinship ties. Most Kurds from Pazarçık often meet at each other's homes, at weddings or mosques, and they marry relatives. There are no specific neighborhoods where Kurds live, and the only public places where they regularly meet are kebab shops. These are places of work, business, and socialization and are in most cases dominated by men, who spend their days here and weave social relations with others. They can work there up to twelve or fourteen hours every day. Recently arrived migrants often work in kebab shops of relatives and friends and are badly paid. Kurdish people's lifestyles vary significantly between different age groups, social classes, level of education, and time spent in Italy. This is the case with their social media usage as well. Kurds in Milan tend to see themselves as located in the periphery of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, which has its center in Germany. Those with lower socioeconomic status often mention Germany as a possible destination in their journey toward better life conditions: low salaries and the high cost of living in Milan do not allow them to have a de-

cent life. They claim to be waiting for Italian citizenship to be able to move as soon as possible to a richer European country. The status of refugee does not grant them this right. As a result, many Kurds do not speak fluent Italian even though they have lived in Italy for several years. Most of them sympathize with the Kurdish movement, although there are significant differences in their level of engagement in Kurdish national politics.

METHODS

This article reports on research with first- and second-generation Kurdish migrants based in Milan and surrounding areas. It focuses especially on well-educated Kurds in the age group 20–35, with either a diploma or a university degree. It builds on a short-term ethnographic research project carried out in the summer and autumn of 2018. Formally, Costa spent a total of two months doing fieldwork in Milan. The research also draws on the insights she acquired through her previous long-term ethnography on uses and consequences of social media on people's everyday life in the Kurdish region of Turkey (Costa 2016a, 2016b, 2018). The data informing this paper includes offline and online participant observation and in-depth interviews. Costa hung out in a multicultural inner-city neighborhood in northeast Milan, where the majority of the kebab shops that are part of this research are located. She showed up in kebab shops, introduced herself, and asked to have a chat or interviews with the owner and shop assistants. She also took part in different events in solidarity with Kurdish movements in Milan, and she gained access to informants through personal contacts she had with friends and acquaintances living in Milan. She conducted a total of fifteen recorded interviews with women and men in the age group 20–35 and had several informal conversations with Kurds and Italian activists supporting the Kurdish cause. The interviews were conducted either in Italian or Turkish, with the help of a translator from Turkish to Italian on two different occasions. The interviews aimed at collecting data on practices and routines of mediated transnational communication and long-distance national politics, as well as at understanding how people made sense of these practices. The sample this article is based on is made up of ten first- and second-generation Kurdish female and male interviewees. They are not representative of the entire Kurdish population in Milan but rather were selected because the comparison between the two generation groups illustrates how experiences of homeland significantly differ between them and are deeply entangled with practices of social media usage.

After explaining the goal of the research and gaining oral consent, Costa started observing the public-facing Facebook of six research participants, with posts in Italian and Turkish, and the Instagram profiles of two others. The observation continued throughout 2018. The findings of the online observations have been used to better interpret and contextualize narratives and stories emerging from the interviews. Online participant observation is not seen here as a different method per se but rather as the continuation and

2 Official numbers of Kurdish Turks are not available.

3 The convention determined that the European state responsible for the asylum claim of an applicant is the state in which the asylum seeker first presents the application.

4 However, for the purposes of this investigation, by "second generation" we refer to all those who have a Kurdish migration background but were born in Italy and those who were not born in Italy but grew up there.

extension of ethnographic research into the online space of social media (Miller et al. 2016). Facebook and Instagram are the most popular social media platforms in Milan, together with the more private and less accessible WhatsApp. However, the limited fieldwork period, along with widespread feelings of suspicion caused by the political climate in Turkey and in its diaspora, prevented the researcher from building more in-depth relationships with all the research participants, which would have given her access to more private social media channels, such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. For the same reasons, not every research participant agreed to friend her on Facebook and Instagram. Nevertheless, the online observation played a significant role in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the participants' social media usage.

HOMELAND AND DIGITAL POLITICS

Although young adult second-generation migrants occasionally used social media to maintain transnational communications with Kurdish relatives and family friends abroad, their social media practices mostly revolved around participation in homeland politics, local expressions of their Kurdish identities, and the maintenance of local family ties and friendships in Milan. They more rarely engaged in long-distance personal communications with people living in Turkey. Among this group of migrants, mediated attachment to the Kurdish homeland is bound to practices of long-distance national politics that take place in an online public environment characterized by "ambient co-presence" (Madianou 2016): "the peripheral awareness of the actions of distant others, made possible through the affordances of polymedia environments" (Madianou 2016, 186). On Facebook and Instagram, they share news, images, and content in a venue that is seen as public and that creates a feeling of co-presence with others, whose presence remains peripheral to the users' awareness. It is not so much the maintenance of transnational personal relations that matters to them but rather the participation and engagement in transnational politics within an online transnational public.

Cihan,⁵ Sidar, Kemal, and Nuran are descendants of Kurdish migrants who moved from Turkey to Milan in the 1990s and early 2000s. Cihan is a 27-year-old man who arrived in Milan with his parents at the age of 8. The father had political problems in Turkey and was forced to leave the country together with his family. Cihan speaks both fluent Turkish and Italian, with a thick accent from Milan. He is well integrated in the life of the town and claims to have many friends and to be happy with his life overall. Cihan, together with his older brother, runs a newly renovated kebab shop he inherited from his father. He spends most of his life there, up to ten or eleven hours per day, six days a week. Far from being a fast-food kebab shop like many others in Milan, the shop also sells alcohol and has a more varied menu. The shop has been renovated in a hipster style, and customers can sit there to have an aperitif or spend the entire evening. Cihan does not have strong ties with his Kurdish relatives, who are all based in Turkey and France. He does not have many contacts with other Kurds of his age living in Milan either. He very rarely travels to Turkey, the last time being five years earlier, for a couple of weeks in the summer. However, Cihan extensively follows Kurdish and Turkish politics online. Although he does not define himself as

an activist, he reads news about Turkey and Kurdistan every day, and he actively uses Facebook to engage in Turkish and Kurdish politics to advocate for the Kurdish cause in Italian, since most of his Facebook friends are Italian speakers. He actively follows Italian politics as well but very rarely posts about it on Facebook.

"I post more about Kurdish politics [than Italian] because it is more urgent. People die there. [...] The situation is more serious. I know that posting news on social media is useless and will not have any impact. But I am a human being, and I have emotions. I never post on Italian politics, it would not make any sense. The problems in Italy are ignorance and lack of education. If you post analysis that goes more in depth, people would not understand you and would label you as pretentious and elitist. In Turkey the situation is different."

Cihan uses Facebook as a communication tool that facilitates access and sharing of information on Turkey, Kurdistan, and the Middle East. He regularly expresses his opinions, communicates his ideas, and informs the Italian audience on the most important events in the region. Management of online information is the main way in which Cihan engages in homeland politics. He rarely takes part in offline demonstrations and protests, and he does not regularly engage in other everyday actions related to the Kurdish cause, nor is he regularly in touch with Kurdish relatives and friends in Turkey or Europe beyond his nuclear family.

Nuran, a 30-year-old Kurdish woman who arrived in Milan at elementary school age, also uses social media extensively to read and share news about Turkey and the Kurdish struggle in the region. Like Cihan, she is also fluent both in Italian and Turkish, and she regularly posts news on Facebook in both languages. But unlike him, she is actively involved in Kurdish politics in Milan. She often takes part in the organization of local events and acts as a linguistic and cultural mediator between Kurdish and Italian activists. She massively uses social media as an everyday communication tool to access and share news on Kurdish and Turkish politics. Occasionally, she adopts social media to fully immerse herself in Turkish and Kurdish affairs to the point that she feels detached from social and political life in Italy:

"There are weeks in which I feel I am completely disconnected from Milan, and I don't need my Italian friends anymore. I like reading news all day, talking to my Kurdish and Turkish friends, and being in touch with my culture. In those days I am continuously on social media, and I don't know anymore what is happening in Milan and Italy. I am completely disconnected from here."

This is also the case of Sidar, a man in his mid-30s who has lived in Milan for many years and is now well integrated in the city. Sidar is politically active in Kurdish politics in Milan and Europe. He uses Facebook extensively to share news on Turkish and Kurdish politics, in both Turkish and Italian. When important political events take place in the region, he shares up to six or seven posts a day. Although he speaks Italian, his partner is Italian, and he hangs out with Italian friends and enjoys life in Milan, Sidar often declines invitations from Milanese friends and prefers sitting at home to spend time reading and sharing news on Facebook. Among more well-educated politicized Kurds in

5 To ensure anonymity, all the names in this article are pseudonyms.

their 20s and 30s who have grown up in Milan and have lived there for many years, social media play an important role in their relationships with Kurdistan. They construct their own attachment toward the Kurdish cause and a Kurdish-imagined homeland through online communication. Experiencing this homeland is enacted through practices of online political engagement and expression. This is what Bernal (2014) calls “infopolitics,” an affective environment, a public venue, an arena for ordinary people to share ideas, analyze news, and narrate histories, beyond the direction of state and mass media (Bernal 2014). More than any other online and offline actions or habits, Cihan’s, Nuran’s, and Sidar’s experiences of their homeland are enacted through their engagements with “infopolitics” on social media, which are embedded in their everyday life in Milan. Although they might also take part in formal and organized activism on the occasion of specific events, online participation in “infopolitics” remains the main conventional, regular, everyday activity that contributes to shaping their perceptions and feelings about their Kurdish homeland.

Just like the three stories presented above, the following also introduces a form of social media usage that contributes to the local expression of Kurdishness and Kurdish politics. Unlike the others, however, the online practices here revolve around the active promotion and performance of Kurdish identity. Kemal is a 21-year-old guy Costa met in his parents’ kebab shop early in the afternoon on a normal weekday. He was sitting there visibly bored, given the lack of customers at that time of the day. He was happy to talk to Costa and to tell her more about his life in Milan. He was born in Italy a few years after his parents left the region of Pazarçık in Turkey, and he had lived in Milan all his life. Kemal left school at the age of 16 and has worked in his parents’ shop since then. He dreamed of becoming a musician. Like many other Kurdish people working in kebab shops, Kemal kept talking about his dreams, plans for the future, and new job opportunities. He wanted wealth and fame that could redeem him from a childhood of poverty as a child of migrant parents. He sings Italian hip-hop and uses Instagram to promote his music. His art name is an acronym of a Kurdish name, and the contents of his songs include many references to the Kurdish political struggle. He was planning to make a video of his songs, post it on YouTube, and use Instagram to promote it. Like many peers of his age, he believes that Instagram and YouTube have huge potentialities to promote people’s talents and turn them into business. Kemal very rarely travels to Turkey to visit his family’s relatives, and he does not particularly enjoy it. His knowledge of the Kurdish territory and culture is mediated by the stories of his family and relatives in Milan and by what he has been reading in traditional and online newspapers. He feels that he is well integrated in Milan, and he has many friends, most of whom are second-generation migrants from Albania, Egypt, and Ecuador. The connection to the homeland he has never inhabited takes the form of artistic production and promotion of music through the use of social media channels. Social media has enabled practices of promoting Kurdish culture and identity, facilitating everyday practices of identity politics.

In these four cases, the mediated experiences of second-generation migrants can be fully understood by taking into account the Milanese left-wing subculture, which has been sympathetic toward the Kurdish struggle since the exile of Abdullah Öcalan in Italy in 1998. With the more recent conflicts between ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and YPG (People’s Protection Units)/PKK (the Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and the increased international media attention

given to the Kurdish fighters in northern Syria, Italian left-wing supporters have been expressing their solidarity toward the Kurdish political struggle even more intensively. Young Italian activists passionately support the Kurdish cause and often organize events to discuss the foundation of Rojava, the autonomous region in northern Syrian, its ruling ideology, *jineology*, and the political events in south-east Turkey and in the region. In the demonstrations in solidarity with the Kurdish fight against ISIS and the Turkish armies, the number of Italian participants sometimes exceeded that of the Kurds. Even outside the more politicized circles, the Kurdish struggle has become increasingly known. Although the political and ideological support from Italian leftists very rarely translates into more frequent everyday interactions between Italians and Kurds, it does create a local public arena in which the Kurdish political identity is seen and recognized. The dissemination and discussion of political posts on Facebook take place both in Italian and Turkish, and, just like the promotion of Kurdish/Italian hip-hop music, it addresses an Italian-speaking audience as well. The widespread awareness and support for the Kurdish struggle within Italian society and its leftist subcultures contributes to shaping online practices of infopolitics among second-generation Kurds and, in turn, also shapes their local political identities, mediated experiences, and ideas of homeland.

These four stories have shown that consuming, commenting on, and sharing news online, as well as promoting music with Kurdish references, not only contributes to the production of ethnic and political identity within Italian society and the Kurdish diasporic community but also actively contributes to and provides insights into the Kurdish homeland as migrants’ subjective experiences. Existing literature on the Kurdish diaspora has shown that different generational groups, gender, and social classes of Kurdish migrants develop different representations and relations to their homelands (Alinia 2004, 2014; Alinia and Eliassi 2014). Second-generation Kurdish migrants in Sweden, for example, are far more reflexive than their parents in regard to their sense of belonging and relation to their homeland (Alinia and Eliassi 2014). Homeland for them is “something they create according to their wishes and needs” (Alinia and Eliassi 2014, 78) and changes on the base of their existential desires and political convictions. In Milan, second-generation Kurds have expressed the need to communicate their political ideas and convictions to the Italian public, which was perceived as, overall, sympathetic to them and receptive to Kurdish issues.

This resonates with Alinejad’s (2017) discussion of second-generation identifications with the homeland through political social media engagement. Drawing on Sokefeld (2006), Alinejad argues that social media are used to transnationally mobilize homeland solidarities among the second generation via discourses, symbols, and styles that circulate beyond the diasporic group and into mutual spheres of wider host country political awareness and international humanitarianism. In Milan, social media have been appropriated by young Kurdish adults to mobilize Kurdish culture and politics to maintain relationships with the Kurdish diaspora and simultaneously to make a place for themselves in Italian society. Facebook and Instagram have given new opportunities to articulate political identities in an online public space that is simultaneously inhabited by diasporic Kurds, other second-generation migrants, Italians, and to some extent also Kurds from Turkey. These practices, in turn, have created experiences of homeland as digital politics, the everyday mobilization of political ideas

and culture that contribute to creating the recognition of Kurdish identity in the context of Milan and northern Italy. Homeland manifests itself as the object of online political activism, an activism that is subsumed under the expression of political identity within the Kurdish diaspora and wider Italian society, simultaneously.

MEDIATED PERSONAL CONNECTIONS AND HOMELAND AS ABSENCE

In this section, we will focus on the “mediated experiences” of Kurdish forced migrants who left Turkey for political reasons when they were already adults. Unlike those Kurds who grew up in Milan and have spent a longer period of time there, new migrants have struggled to come to terms with their new lives, to define their new selves, and to renegotiate their social relationships. Displacement has forced them to rewrite their own autobiographies, and social media have played a role in this effort. Although recent forced migrants do use social media to share and consume political news on Turkish and Kurdish politics, their interviews rather foreground the importance of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp in redefining their bonds and attachments with relatives and friends left behind.

At the time of Costa’s (2016a, 2016b, 2018) previous ethnographic research in southeast Turkey, in 2014, Serhat was a 21-year-old university student enrolled at Mardin Artuklu University, who was born and had grown up in Istanbul. One day he asked Costa if she could use her Facebook account to find and talk to Mehmet, his older brother, who was living in Italy. Mehmet had left Turkey ten years earlier and had never been in touch with any family members since then. When their father died a few years earlier, Mehmet did not show up to the funeral, nor did he send condolences. Serhat was suffering from this situation and desired to talk to his older brother again. Costa found Mehmet on Facebook and sent him a text message. At first he replied nicely, but when Costa wrote that she was getting in touch on behalf of his brother Serhat, he answered rudely and ordered her to not interfere in his life and family business anymore. She then discovered that Mehmet had had a fight with another brother and decided to cut off the relationship with the entire family. This story shows that social media not only have multiplied the opportunity for displaced populations to keep in touch with relatives and friends left behind, but might also turn this new opportunity into a burden. Social media, indeed, can increase the expectations that people have to be connected even when such connection is undesirable or not straightforward. Research on mediated transnational relationships has largely showed that the emergence of new media has opened up new opportunities of enhanced communication that can strengthen bonds with relatives and friends, even though this process is not always smooth or with positive outcomes (Madianou 2016; Madianou and Miller. 2013; Parreñas 2005). Ulla Berg (2017), in particular, emphasizes that digital technologies do not simply mediate relationships in new ways; but the contrary, they make Peruvian migrants in the United States feel less connected to their loved ones. This was also the case with Sonnur, Hülya, and Nuran.

Sonnur is a female Kurdish woman in her early 30s. She arrived in Italy in 2014, following her husband, who had left Turkey as an asylum seeker after spending seven years in prison. Sonnur has a degree in sociology and a 2-year-old daughter; she spends most of her time in the house alone with the child, while her husband works twelve hours a day in a kebab shop. She is completely unhappy and unsatisfied

with her life. She has not learned any Italian because there are no free language courses near her home and because she cannot leave the child with anyone else during the day. Also, Sonnur and her family are planning to move to Germany as soon as they get Italian citizenship, so they are less motivated to learn the language. Although she feels lonely sitting at home all day, Sonnur rarely calls her family in Turkey and only infrequently chats with them. She does not like to get in touch with them. Communication at a distance reminds her that she cannot see them face-to-face anymore. She feels guilty for having left them alone, and she blames herself for not being there. Feelings of guilt often become overwhelming:

“My husband’s father is sick, and we can’t go there. I can’t sleep at night when I think that I can’t see my mother if she dies [. . .] I don’t want to know what they do. I would like to help them and be there, but I can’t, and I feel guilty. We talk once a week only for two or three minutes on WhatsApp, not more. But in those few minutes, we avoid so many topics. We talk, but we say nothing.”

In describing the relationships with her family, she sobbed tears of despair:

“I also miss my extended family from the village. I used to go there and visit them at least twice a year. On WhatsApp they ask me continuously why I am not visiting them. I am not answering. I stopped talking to them.”

Obligations imposed by social media are experienced as a burden:

“My mum wants to see my home in Italy, but I don’t want to send her images of my crumbling, small, poor one-bedroom flat. I feel under pressures. In Konya I grew up in a beautiful and well-furnished house, but we are poor here. I always send her images of external places, such as the lake or the hills in front of the lake. I always find excuses not to send the photos of my home.”

Communication mediated by social media does not help Sonnur feel closer to her family members back in Turkey. Whatsapp, Facebook, and the mobile phone, rather, continuously remind her that she won’t be able to be in physical co-presence with her loved ones anymore.

Hülya is another Kurdish woman in her mid-30s who arrived in Milan in 2016 as a political refugee. She could not handle communication on social media anymore, and she incessantly described to me online conversations as shallow, cold, and superficial. She longed for face-to-face interactions in which she could touch and hug people. She repeatedly mentioned how she wanted to end the frequent trivial conversations she had on Messenger and WhatsApp with friends and relatives based in a country that she would never be able to visit again. She thought that she had to put an end to her mediated online interactions in order to create new, offline relationships.

Nuran is a well-educated, talkative Kurdish woman in her mid-30s who grew up in Izmir and worked as a social worker in the south of Turkey. She arrived in Italy in the summer of 2017. She first left Turkey to go on holiday and take a break from the heavy political climate, but she never went back. While on holiday, she found out that many of her friends had been arrested. She decided not to go back to Turkey and to apply for asylum in Europe. She first started the application in Switzerland, but Swiss authorities rejected it, sent her to prison for a couple of weeks, and repatriated her to

Italy, where she started the asylum application again. At the time of the interview, she had temporary permission to live in Italy. She was living in a small town near Milan while trying to fill her free time with many activities, like following knitting courses organized by a local charity and learning to make pizza, which she hoped could become a remunerative activity in the future. She was struggling to recreate a new, ordinary life: she spoke no Italian, English, or French and had almost no contacts with any Italians living in the region. Kurdish and Turkish acquaintances and friends became her primary source of support. Nuran, like Hülya and Sonnur, disliked digitally mediated communications, which she described as impoverished and shallow. She was also self-censoring herself due to political concerns, and this limitation was affecting the conversations she had with relatives and friends in Turkey, to the point that very little was left to talk about. The impossibility of mentioning people's names and stories significantly limited her interactions:

"I would like to talk to my relatives more often, but I can't. I would like to tell them everything, but I can't. I would like to text them more often, but I don't. I have emotional problems, but also I don't want to put them in troubles. Social media and phones are under control. Basically when we talk, we talk about nothing [. . .] My friends in Turkey are telling me that I express myself through my heart and not through my words."

Engaging in sporadic calls and poor communications with family members and friends at home, despite the variety and excess of communicative tools available, was common among Kurdish political migrants who grew up in Turkey and recently migrated to Italy. The ubiquitous presence of a large range of social media channels continuously reminded them that it was not possible to engage anymore in the kind of multisensorial and body-mediated communication they could have before their forced migration. Not only did feelings of sadness and suffering over separation continue to be present in their lives despite the communicative channels available (see also Berg 2017), but social media also incessantly reminded them that they were not at home anymore and that they would not be able to go there anytime soon. Among forced migrants who recently left Turkey for political reasons, social media contributed to producing a sense of absence and feelings of longing.

Recent work on forced migration and the internet suggests that migrants have mixed feelings about using social media in their everyday lives (see also Leurs 2019), including experiencing hope and overcoming isolation and existential insecurity while living under conditions of limited mobility (Twigt 2018; Smets 2018). Previous research on political refugees has highlighted how this migrant position is marked by the pain of longing for a lost homeland, but also by possibilities for renewal and engagement in the country of settlement (e.g., Ghorashi 2002). Naficy's (1993) important discussions of exile satellite television media demonstrates how media representations produce fetishized notions of homeland as a way of protecting the past from further loss. Meanwhile, the political economy of the production and consumption of these images integrates exile culture into the local Western capitalist modes of cultural and entertainment production (Naficy 1993). However, looking closely at those who engage in forced migration under the current global technological circumstances, the notion of homeland as a pristine memorialization is deeply complicated by the frequency of demands for personal communication with people left behind, as well as accessible consumption of the same news and information as these left-behind friends and family. Like Nuran, Sonnur, and the

others we have mentioned here, today's forced migrants engage with social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp.

The ubiquity of social media communications in everyday life seems to give the contemporary condition of exile new qualities. In the cases of these recent Kurdish migrants, while the longing of exile structures the relationship to the long-distance homeland, the potentiality of continuous or daily communications with those left behind complicates their attachment to their home country and appears to intensify feelings of guilt and sadness. Alongside the practices of infopolitics discussed earlier, these various social media practices produce a specific experience of homeland that is difficult to cordon off in one's memory as a distinct past in the way that classic exile notions theorize. Homeland in this formation is neither an idealized home of belonging, familiarity, and permanence that is imagined through media, nor an uncomplicated emotional support network of loved ones that situate the migrant within a web of solidarity. Here, homeland manifests as a routine experience of tension between competing desires for communicative distance and proximity through social media. As the cases discussed in this section show, such experiences are produced through the momentary practices of using social media and in the ongoing negotiations of what constitutes intimacy and depth of feeling in contexts of displacement and transnational communication with others.

This conceptualization of homeland as experience bound to media practices follows seminal literature on diaspora and migration that has problematized discourses of homeland as a fixed geographic origin (Brah 1996), as well as pointing out the multiscalar character of homeland identifications (Brun and Fábos 2015; Gorman Murray and Dowling 2007). Experience is a way of understanding how ideas of homeland as the Kurdish village, or the city of Istanbul and its Kurdish community, and the family home that recent refugees miss, and the intimate relationships with kin they no longer see in person are enmeshed with one another. It reveals how social media practices bring each of these experiences of homeland into being through the enactment of or disengagement from specific social media uses. Our discussion of homeland as experience explains how, for these forced migrants, homeland is produced in the experience of opposing emotional desires for social connection and disconnection that are reconfigured by the transnational communicative possibilities that social media present.

CONCLUSION

Everyday social media practices in the lives of young Kurdish people in Milan generate important experiences that we have conceptualized as formations of homeland in the age of social media. These mediated experiences are entangled with and shape how people situate themselves in relation to Turkish Kurdish relations in Turkey, globally circulating ideas of Kurdish nationhood and the local Kurdish solidarity movement, as well as the transnational networks of long-distance relationships. The particular modes of social media practices we have identified and discussed in this paper—digital politics and personal (dis)connecting—have helped us show three important points regarding how Kurdish homeland comes to be experienced.

First, social media and their affordances play a new, significant role in shaping mediated experiences of homeland among migrant populations. Second, experiences of homeland produced through social media are clearly shaped by how the condition of migrancy has been lived in the life cy-

cle. Although the respondents roughly belong to a single age cohort, the experiences of being first- and second-generation (post-migrant) migrant shape their primary modes of using social media to engage with Kurdish nationhood on everyday basis. The two main modes of social media use we discuss are enmeshed in specific priorities that emerge in the emotional and political spaces people are engaged in on a daily basis. Different migratory trajectories produce different social media usage and experiences of homeland, which in turn reinforce differences between these two migrant generations even further. Third, the main theoretical implication that follows from the above points is that the current understanding of how homeland is formed in the age of social media requires further conceptual refinement. We have shown that the way homeland is formed through social media practices cannot be conceptualized in terms of representational activities. Homeland is not an idealized geographical territory or an internal mental state, but rather a social process in which the migration trajectory, the lived everyday social life, and the routine social media practices of people come together to produce specific experiences for them. We see this approach to homeland as opening up fruitful directions for thinking further about the changing forms of spatiality and sociality produced through the social media usages of diasporic and otherwise transnationally mobile subjects.

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