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An unstable sacrificial economy: The politics and poetics of Kurdish martyrdom in contemporary Turkey

"As pain piles up, words turn into rubble underneath." This a citation from one of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) annually published Martyrs' Albums (*Şehitler Albümleri*), which assemble hundreds of obituaries for fallen PKK guerrilla fighters, penned by friends and comrades. What kind of emotional labour do these obituaries perform, this paper asks? How are the words they contain able to grapple with pain piling up? And how does the labour of ruined words render death a potent yet highly ambiguous political force? At once celebrations of heroic self-sacrifice and intimate statement of personal grief over the loss of loved ones, obituaries like the one I cite above reveal the PKK's culture of martyrdom to be one that continuously labours against the doubts and anxieties spawned by violent death. Based on a close reading of martyrs' albums ranging from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, this paper argues that taming these doubts and anxieties requires both narrative and emotional labour: an intensive yet never entirely coherent process aimed at making sense of violent death and at rendering it thereby productive for the political collective. Celebrating martyrdom, the paper suggests, is not a self-evident reflex of nationalist ideology, but a fragile endeavour that has to grapple with mortality's destabilizing affects. It shows violent death to be a potent but highly unstable site of emotional engagement, which a moral economy of sacrificial debt and redemption finds hard to fully tame.

Oberseminar

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