

## CHAPTER 3

### Ideological Politics of Femicide: The Speaking State, Gendered Subjects, and Violence

*[H]ow do we imagine that speech is heard, taken up as motivation, mechanically or contagiously inducing the listener to act? (Butler 1997, 21)*

One of the major claims of this dissertation is that femicide is political not only in the feminist sense of the word (i.e., broader power relations), but also in the narrower Weberian sense (i.e., state power and institutions). The literature on femicide, which brings the state (back) into the debate on violence against women, has successfully demonstrated how institutional practices such as insufficient regulations, inefficient investigation and prosecution, and lack of policy implementation increase women's vulnerability. This literature, which mainly focuses on Latin America, frames femicide as a "state crime," arguing that states are ideologically and materially complicit in the violence (Lagarde 1999, 2010). Chapter two of this dissertation deployed the theoretical concept of biopower in order to argue that this framework is applicable to Turkey. Institutional practices such as inefficient prosecution, delays in issuing orders of protection, failures to implement the anti-violence law (No.6284), and so forth demonstrate that the Turkish state ignores women's lives to the point of death. These practices not only let women die, but also let men kill in Turkey's femicidal context. That being said, the existing literature does not completely capture the Turkish context where there is another mode by which state agents enable and justify femicide: Speech acts, utterances that "do things" (Austin 1975), or, what I call, the ideological politics of femicide.

Although the femicide literature does mention the "ideological complicity" of the state and treats it as given in femicidal contexts, it has not rigorously conceptualized or sufficiently tackled this notion. Ideological complicity is usually identified in silences that conceal, manipulate, and trivialize information about femicide. However, the Turkish case shows that it is crucial to have a more thorough understanding of the dominant ideological framework that sustains institutional practices; and provides a rich setting to see ideological complicity "in action." This chapter unpacks this concept, untangling how it operates and assessing its consequences. How do we see "official" (gender) ideology? How do we *know* that it

promotes violence? In the Turkish case this complex dynamic can be observed in statements given by Turkey's ruling elite who define the "legitimate" boundaries of gender categories and render women disposable.

To explain this phenomenon, I introduce the concept *speaking state* to refer to the speech acts - utterances with creative and destructive capacity - of those who speak with the authority of the state. The *speaking state* is a conveyer of official ideology that endows acts of discrimination and violence with institutional legitimacy. This does not mean that "the state" has a unitary voice separate from society and the individuals who fill its executive, legislative, and bureaucratic cadres. It means, rather, that the elected or appointed representatives of the state speak with institutional authority thereby creating a "state effect" (Mitchell 1991). The speaking state operates in two ways: First, it creates an ideal subject against whom individual performances are evaluated. Secondly, it maximizes the vulnerability of those who challenge this ideal.

In this chapter, I make a three-fold argument. First, I argue that analyses of femicide should consider the speaking state *in addition to* the governing state in order to give fuller accounts of state actors' roles in femicidal contexts, better capture the complexity of the phenomenon, and understand more concretely the significance of "the symbolic" in enabling violence, which is important beyond the scope of this work. In Turkey, "the state" speaks through the political elites who speak with institutional authority and claim to embody the people's will. They overtly circulate messages such as "men and women aren't created equal" (Bianet 2014), women who have abortions are "less innocent than their rapists" (Arin 2013), and thus they "shall die rather than the baby" (Gokcek 2012). In doing so, they reinforce and reconstruct conventional gender norms that are central to sustain a conservative political project. As such, the speaking state signals that certain acts of violence are tolerable when gender norms are transgressed and thus creates a "femicidal feedback loop."

Second, I argue, what Radford and Russell (1992) call "the politics of woman killing" follows from "the politics of woman making." Speech acts do not only destroy. They also have significant creative potential. In the case of Turkey, for instance, they create the category of "proper woman," which then

justifies the killing of women who “fail” to comply with its standards - fulfilling one’s “God-given function” by giving birth, staying within the bounds of “proper female behavior,” protecting one’s chastity and honor, and serving national politics through her behavior. In other words, the variables that constitute the category of “proper woman” are also the ones that render women correctible, punishable, and disposable.

The relationship between the speech acts of state representatives and acts of violence by private individuals is far from being a causal one. In explaining this complex relationship, I turn to Austin’s theory of speech-acts (Austin 1975). My theoretical argument is that the speech acts uttered by state representatives with state authority are both illocutionary and perlocutionary. Violence is both embedded in these very utterances as a foundational element of gender categories, and is a result of them because “words do things” (Austin 1975) especially when they are heard as the word of “the state.” In other words, speech in contexts characterized by symbolic and physical gender-based violence, such as Turkey, is both reality-creating (Scarry 1985) and “world-shattering” (Butler 1997, 6). By contextualizing the speech and underscoring the identity of the speaker, my analysis intervenes in the debate on the potential and actual impact of speech (Cf. Butler 1997, Matsuda 1993 among others). I conclude that context and the identity of the speaker change the answer to the question of whether words can wound, and how. As such, I mitigate the divide by demonstrating that words can wound in and of themselves, and they may turn into sticks and stones in somebody else’s hands.

In this sense, the discussions in this chapter have implications that go beyond its specific geographic and thematic focus. In this historical moment of the rise of neo-fascism and the alt-right, we witness how “real” the symbolic can get. Populist political leaders who promote xenophobia and us/them dichotomies have had significant electoral support around the world. Their actions and utterances seem to be key factors in encouraging a citizenry that accepts, internalizes, and performs various kinds of hierarchies. These speech acts are not simply utterances by politicians with problematic gender politics. Nor are they scandalous declarations meant to divert the public attention from “political events with real importance” (Korkman 2016). Rather, they are central elements that sustain and justify a conservative

political agenda that deploys gender as a governing technology. Long-term impacts of the bully politics are yet to be seen, but in the short term, numerous examples have illustrated that overt everyday racism, sexism, and so forth easily take root in these political environments. In this regard, it is necessary and urgent to tackle the symbolic politics, and understand its material effects. Analyses, which inquire the link between state-sponsored injurious speech and acts of violence committed by individuals in one context, can help explain similar dynamics in other contexts where the state shares its monopoly on violence with the privileged. Moreover, such studies can help reveal novel ways of “talking back” (Butler 1997), and create more effective solutions to the rise of deadly “-isms.”

This chapter comprises three interrelated sections that support the above arguments by combining empirical field research, femicide literature, and political theory. In the first section, I draw from the findings of my field research in Turkey and Mexico. I start with activists’ and lawyers’ insights about the political nature of femicide and the state’s role in allowing it. I identify one major difference in Mexican and Turkish/Kurdish activists’ evaluation of the scope of the problem and trace their claims against existing femicide literature: the role of speech acts in enabling femicide. Interviewees from Turkey insist that the problematic statements of state representatives, especially their active investment in defining “proper womanhood and/or femininity,” is the major factor that increases women’s vulnerability, since they give a green light to potential perpetrators.

Why do practitioners and activists think that what comes out of state actors’ mouths is killing women? What is the role of speech in “enabling and encouraging” violence? I answer these questions in the second section by employing critical discourse analysis of the state representatives’ statements that concern gender relations and violence. I discuss their illocutionary (creative) aspect with reference to the construction of “proper woman” through speech. In the last section, I theorize the perlocutionary effects of these speech acts, or their potential material consequences. I also discuss how circulating such speech creates a “femicidal feedback loop” that influences institutional behavior, and encourages potential perpetrators.

### **What is different about Turkey?**

Feminist scholars have long argued that the discourses of sexuality and gender reproduce “legally and culturally acceptable discrimination[s]” by setting up behavioral norms against which individual performances are judged (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002, 579). Among the most common consequences of these discourses are victim blaming (Rude 1999), biased scrutiny of women’s actions and the normalization of aggressive male behavior (Musalo & Bookey 2013), legal double standards such as lenient treatment of perpetrators who use provocation defenses (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002), and (*de facto*) impunity for perpetrators of gender-based violence (Lagarde 2010). Thus, the relationship between the symbolic and material is not foreign to feminist scholarship. However, it has not attracted much attention as a topic to be covered on its own in the literature on gender-based violence. How the discourses operate and the means that secure these effects are yet to be uncovered.

Understanding this relationship has been one of the major objectives of my research given that the speech acts by politicians are central to discussions of gender-based violence in Turkey: They are commonly cited by women’s organizations as a major *reason* for femicide. When I began my exploratory field research in Mexico, I expected my interviewees to touch upon a similar problematic rhetoric as well. Yet, discursive politics did not stand out as a major problem area in my interviews with Mexican lawyers and activists. They prioritize institutional complicity (e.g., failure or unwillingness to prosecute femicide cases), implementation problems (e.g., not investigating a case as a potential femicide although it meets the legal criteria to do so), discrepancies among different states’ practices (e.g., Chihuahua does not have a femicide law, and there are significant differences among other states’ femicide regulations), and information pollution (different institutions report different numbers) as major problems to tackle in order to better address the issue of femicide.

When asked directly, they mentioned instances where politicians made problematic comments especially during the initial years of anti-femicide movement. Thus, hearing about the situation in Turkey did not surprise them because they had been through similar problems. For example, in the 1990s, murders in Ciudad Juarez had long been trivialized by governors who emphasized that the murder

numbers fell “within normal ranges for the city,” and claimed that the victims were “public women” (read: sex workers) (Wright 2011, 710, 713). The anti-femicide coalition in Ciudad Juarez challenged gendered discourses of necropolitics by mobilizing around the notion *buenas hijas* (good daughters) reclaiming the femicide victims’ status without completely refuting the government discourse (Ibid., 715). A more recent example of problematic political rhetoric about femicide is the officials’ victim-blaming statements on the murder of Lesby Berlin Osorio that led to the twitter campaign, #SiMeMatan (#IfTheyKillMe), in 2017 (Global Voices 2017). Women started tweeting how the authorities would slander and criminalize them if they were killed. Similar to the claims of activists in Turkey, some tweets argued: “Our authorities are one of the main reasons why the violence persists. ENOUGH with blaming the victims” (Ibid.). However, in my interlocutors’ account openly sexist statements by politicians do not constitute a major issue in the current femicidal context of Mexico. They mention instead a complete denial of the problem by various state representatives (Interview by author, Mexico City, 06/13/2016) or a more tacit way of condoning of femicide, manifested as inaction. Interestingly, they also point to an opposite trend: an overt cooptation of the anti-violence discourse by politicians for populist purposes (Interview by author, Mexico City, 06/18/2016).

This was an unexpected finding because for interviewees from Turkey the ruling elite’s speech acts play a very central role in fostering Turkey’s femicidal context. Without exception, all participants argue that they are the major factor behind the increase in femicide rates. It is cited as the primary reason why laws are ineffective in deterring femicide, and why they are not implemented by lower-ranked state representatives.<sup>1</sup> The major anti-femicide platforms in Turkey, such as We Will Stop Femicide Platform and Urgent Action against Femicide, Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation (the oldest organization that focuses on violence against women in general), and larger feminist collectives such as Istanbul Feminist Collective and Turkish Women’s Associations Federation support this claim in their related declarations. They ask state representatives to change their rhetoric, and start condemning violence instead of

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss institutional problems of Turkey’s femicidal context in the chapter entitled “Institutional Politics of Femicide” (Chapter 2)

controlling women's lives (Cf. We Will Stop Femicide Platform Platform 2013, Mor Çatı 2014 among others). In fact, a significant amount of women's rights/feminist activism is organized around these speech acts in Turkey, which differentiates it from other femicidal contexts.<sup>2</sup>

In the eyes of Turkish activists, lawyers, journalists, and academics “the connection [between the speech acts and acts of violence] is not that subtle at all” (Interview by author, Istanbul, 07/28/2016).

Reacting to my rather neutral formulation of the issue, a feminist lawyer stated:

Of course there is a causal relationship. Voters here act like soccer fans. They worship Erdoğan. They speak and act along with whatever comes out of Erdoğan's mouth. [...] The society would have been different if Erdoğan stood up and said something like “women and men are equals and you should not do anything that contradicts equality” rather than quarrelling with everyone. (Interview by author, Istanbul, 08/02/2017)

Except for the government-organized women's organizations (GONGOs), this position is shared by most women's organizations and feminist platforms despite their political and organizational differences. In one way or another they express that these speech acts are directly related to femicide because this is how “the state conveys the message to men that they will not be punished but they will be protected”:

We clearly see that the government, the state, encourage men, and reproduce violence against women in every way possible. If a minister says that you would be allowing things if you ... laugh out loud in public, it means nothing but legitimating violence against women. (Interview by author, Istanbul, 07/29/2016b)

Another lawyer explains this relationship as a simultaneous “boomerang and domino effect”:

When Erdogan declared in a meeting with women's organizations that he doesn't believe in gender equality because men and women are created differently ... its effect was felt in each and every level of the state. One mayor declared that he wouldn't work with a female deputy, the Director of National Education in the city of Trabzon complained that girls and boys are using the same stairs in the dormitories. [...] Aylin Nazli Aka [a former MP] was insulted in the parliament for using the word vagina. Of course this language will affect uncle Mehmet [an ordinary man] too. (Interview by author, Istanbul, 07/29/2016a)

As these quotes demonstrate, my interlocutors are referring to a much more complex relationship even though they sometimes use the language of causality. In Turkey's current conservative authoritarian regime, the striking increase in femicide rates, daily news reports about rape, harassment, and quotidian violence against women by strangers, as well as extreme manifestations of the influence of political

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss feminist mobilization against this problematic political rhetoric in the chapter entitled “Feminist Politics against Femicide” (Chapter 5).

leaders (e.g., people facing armed soldiers, lying in front of tanks upon Erdoğan's call) all create a perception of causality. However, what is at stake here is a more complicated relationship among the historico-cultural elements of the Turkish context, the ruling elite who reinforce and reinvent these values, and the listening subjects, perpetrators. In order to explicate this complex relationship between "the symbolic" and lethal violence, I present a detailed discussion of some of the discursive strategies deployed by the political elite in the next section by employing a critical discourse analysis of related speech acts. In doing so, I turn to speech acts theory, which provides a fresh and useful approach to this relationship, and explain the potential harm that speech acts cause, without collapsing linguistic injury and physical injury (Butler 1997).

### **When "The State" Speaks of Women: Creating the "Proper Woman"**

Austin calls one form of utterances illocutionary speech acts, referring to the "performance of an act in saying something" (Austin 1975, 99). In other words, the speech and its consequence are one and the same. For example, scholars of hate speech argue that immediate harm is inherent in such speech acts because hate speech is interpellative; it reproduces the social hierarchy and constitutes the target of that speech as inferior (Matsuda 1993). To the extent that they exert similar impact, the speech acts uttered by the Turkish politicians are illocutionary. In fact, they can well be identified as "sexist hate speech" (Council of Europe 2016).

Governing elites are rarely committed to gender equality; and Turkey is no exception. However, this general condition manifests itself more clearly in the case of Turkey since the ruling cadres do not even pay lip service to it. Instead, they openly promote gender hierarchy, which, as I discuss in the first chapter, is central to the conservative authoritarian government's political agenda, despite the country's constitutional commitment to gender equality. It is worth noting that the statements that are thought to be influential in encouraging violence are not necessarily about violence or femicide. In fact, violence against women is rarely a theme covered in Turkey's discursive gender politics. To the contrary, the state representatives want the media to self-censure so that the problem is not magnified (Kadin Cinayetlerini



Durduracagiz Platformu 2014), or they invite people to drop the terms femicide<sup>3</sup> and violence against women all together since “they dramatize the issue, and increase the murder rates” (Cumhuriyet 2015). When politicians do speak about femicide, they trivialize it by suggesting that the opposition and media distort the facts to defame the government and Turkey. The data and news highlighting the severity of femicide are identified as ill-intentioned traitorous exaggerations. They manipulate the data and claim that murder rates are contained and reduced by the efforts of the government (Durukan 2005),<sup>4</sup> while non-governmental sources report an increase, and emphasize that the real numbers are probably even higher.<sup>5</sup> Thus, complicity through silence or silencing is also a feature of Turkey’s femicidal context. However, in this case, the silence of the *speaking state* around women’s deaths is accompanied by numerous statements on their lives.

These statements “interpellate,” using Althusser’s (1970) term, a model woman that serves as a performative ideal against which the individual performances are evaluated. The notion of “proper woman” operates as a significant control mechanism, and a means of identifying which members of the category are worth protecting. Women who “fail” (or are perceived as failing) to conform to this ideal (e.g., sexually active single women, women who have extra-marital affairs, women who have abortions, and so forth) are deemed justifiably disposable. As such, disposability implicitly becomes a feature of the institutionally accepted and endorsed definition of “woman” and/or femininity, whereas the entitlement to punish comes with the definition of “man” and/or masculinity. In other words, the category of “proper woman” in Turkey functions as a political artifice that is simultaneously unifying, homogenizing, exclusionary and fatal all at once. The major discourses that constitute and sustain this ideal are propriety, motherhood, pro-natalism, *fıtrat* [divinely ordained creation], private personhood, and modesty.

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<sup>3</sup> Femicide as a term does not exist in Turkish language. The term used is “kadin cinayeti” whose direct translation is “murder of women.” It has started to be translated as femicide very recently.

<sup>4</sup> They emphasize that the AKP government is the only one in Turkish history that makes an effort to reduce VAW and improve women’s conditions. This is true with respect to the legal changes discussed in the second chapter. However, the unofficial records of women’s organizations and the independent news agencies show that the problem is far from being “contained” (Adali 2013), and as Chapter 2 discussed the legal regulations are not implemented.

<sup>5</sup> The counter data only reveals the cases that covered in the news given that third parties are not allowed access to police records.

*Female Propriety: An Amorphous Ideal that Kills*

The discourse of “female propriety,” which includes but is not limited to fulfilling one’s reproductive function, accepting one’s inferior status, not assuming public roles that would distract one from her role inside the house, abstaining from intimate relationships with men other than one’s husband, behaving modestly in public so as not to attract unwanted attention/behavior, and protecting one’s chastity. I argue that through frequent speech acts that call for “female propriety,” the ruling elite make what is implicitly agreed upon a publicly acceptable phenomenon. This is not to say that speaking subjects have the power and ability to conjure a gender regime from the scratch, even when they speak with the authority of the state. They rather incite an “existing convention” (Butler 1997), which is already harmful and widely accepted, and enhance its influence and legitimacy.

“Proper woman,” as a performative ideal, is an abstraction supposedly stripped from all intersectional identities, and designated as deserving the respect of society, the love of her husband, and protection by the state. It does not correspond to real life performances, and is always-already accompanied by its constitutive other - disposability. What is perceived as non-conforming behavior not only makes one a legitimate target of violence but also responsible for it. This victim-blaming message was especially clear in the early commentaries of government representatives on femicide cases. For example, in 2009 Erdoğan commented on the murder of Münevver Karabulut, who was brutally murdered and dismembered by her boyfriend with the help of his family (Özcan 2009): “If you let your daughter have her own way, she will end up with [someone who is not fit for her]” (*Bianet* 2016a).<sup>6</sup> In other words, Karabulut’s death was her own fault, and perhaps that of her family.

The more visible femicide and anti-femicide movement have become, the less explicit the victim-blaming. Yet, the ruling elite continues to link violence to women’s impropriety. A recent declaration of Bülent Arınç, the former government spokesperson and deputy prime minister at the time, is symptomatic of these amorphous yet widely accepted standards of proper female behavior required to avoid violence (Millyet 2014):

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<sup>6</sup> This is a sexist proverb that means if you do not restrain women they will run away with some person who is not respectable.

Modesty and chastity are of great importance. [...] Women should know the difference between public and private. They should not laugh out loud in public. [...] They should protect their honor. Until now we have never heard of the vicious husband who stabs his wife forty times, and leaves her in the middle of the street. [...] We have never heard of heartless people who commit murder in front of their children.

He attributes this “new” phenomenon, the increase in violence against women, to moral decay, and the fact that “*our people* started to react to this very strongly” (*Milliyet* 2014. Emphasis mine.). The alleged connection between moral decay and femicide is important due to the contextual significance of the concept of “general morality” in Turkey. The latter does not have an explicit definition. It stands for an amorphous blend of religious and cultural norms deployed whenever norms of gender and sexuality are supposedly transgressed. Similar to Rousseau’s “General Will,” although it is beyond individual moral values, its presumed existence implies a public consensus. It is specifically invoked in adultery-, homosexuality-, and female immodesty-related debates.

Attributing skyrocketing gender-based violence to moral decay conceals the institutional, legal and political factors that contribute to it, and absolves the perpetrators of guilt. Framed this way, the solution to the problem of violence does not lie in systemic critique, political transformation, institutional measures or deterring individual perpetrators. It requires reinforcing moral values, or gender norms, which would further strengthen and justify the discourse of “female propriety” that renders women disposable in the first place.

#### *Motherhood: Reproduction for the Sake of the State*

Motherhood is another discourse commonly deployed in the political making of the “proper woman” in Turkey. This is neither surprising nor unique to the Turkish context given the tendency to define women with respect to their reproductive “function,” embedded in modern thought systems globally. In the context of Turkey, the meaning attributed to motherhood also has Islamic roots. Numerous Qoranic verses and hadiths attribute a sacred and respect-worthy status to mothers, more so than fathers (Kütüb-i Sitte, Vol 2, Part 1). One hadith, commonly quoted by Erdoğan in his speeches that condemn violence against women (NTV 2011), ordains that “paradise lies at the feet of mothers,” and treating them well guarantees going to heaven more than jihad does (Nesâî, Cihâd, 6).

However, in the discursive framework of gender politics in Turkey the discourse of motherhood as the definitive characteristic of “proper woman” fixates on women’s mothering roles rather than elevating their status as individuals. Frequent references to motherhood delegitimize other roles that women may assume outside of the home. They allow claiming the “sacred career of motherhood” to be the only career of women, as the former Minister of Labor and Social Security, Mehmet Müezzinoğlu, argued (Hürriyet 2015). At times, this understanding openly strips women who are not mothers of any value:

Women who refuse to become mothers because they are working are actually refusing their womanhood. A woman who refuses motherhood, who doesn’t take care of her home, is incomplete, missing her other half no matter how successful she is in business life. She faces losing her authenticity. [...] A woman is a woman thanks to her motherhood, her influence on her home and children, her grace, aesthetics, instincts and her characteristics that differentiate her [from a man]. We absolutely refuse the understanding that disregards this truth, and frame men and women as enemies. In short, I don’t accept turning business life into an alternative of motherhood. More broadly, [refusing to be a mother] is giving up one’s humanity. (Cumhuriyet 2016)

It is important to note that President Erdoğan gave this speech at the opening ceremony of the new service building of Women and Democracy Association.<sup>7</sup> As a discursive strategy that usually ignites widespread public debate and resentment, he gives his most sensational speeches in meetings that concern women and their rights where he argues for conventional gender norms and increased control over women. These speech acts position their target, women, as inferior to the speaker, and restrict their ability to express themselves linguistically and physically so as to challenge their position in this ascribed hierarchy, fitting Matsuda’s definition of hate speech (Matsuda 1993).

Another negative consequence of the emphasis on motherhood is that women’s deaths are rendered truly mournable losses, only when they are (considered as) mothers. In a statement regarding the

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<sup>7</sup> Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği - KADEM [Women and Democracy Association] is a government-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO), which was founded with government support as an alternative to Turkey’s established women’s organizations. The GONGO whose wise-president is President Erdoğan’s daughter, Sümeyye Erdoğan, today represents Turkey as a women’s rights NGO in international meetings such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CWS). It prioritizes women’s role within the family, and refuses the notion of “gender equality” and rather uses “equality of opportunity.” For further information please see <http://kadem.org.tr/en/>. KADEM representatives also attend femicide trials as a party to the case despite the criticism of other women’s organizations, as I discuss in Chapter 5, “Feminist Politics against Femicide.”

death of thirteen seasonal workers at an accident, Sare Davutoğlu<sup>8</sup> claimed that “these deaths should be regarded as part of maternal mortality since they have a meaning beyond human loss, given that those women have children, spouses or elderly relatives to take care of” (*Cumhuriyet* 2015). Here, Davutoğlu does not only define these women as mothers only, she also frames them as the sole caretakers of the other family members, which makes their deaths more tragic than “ordinary” deaths. They are attributed a status that is “beyond human” with reference to their reproductive and caregiving capacities that underestimates the value of non-mothers’ lives, and significance of their deaths. In doing so, she also disregards these women’s intersectional identities, as seasonal laborers who work under overly exploitative conditions, which is the reason why they died travelling in the back of a truck.

In this respect, this statement is of great significance to understanding how the discourse of motherhood is deployed to elevate women’s status in appearance, whereas in actuality it reduces them to lesser human-beings defined by their function. The loss of women qua women or workers is not as tragic as the loss as mothers. And yet, the value and mournability of mothers are not inherent in motherhood itself. They are rather granted due to the higher utility of mothers as caretakers; that is, their loss is more of a problem since it threatens the family unit given that children, husbands, and the elderly will not be taken care of in their absence. This tendency to frame women in the home as mothers also constitutes the basis of other discourses, such as pro-natalism, deployed in the construction of “proper woman.” A proper woman is not *simply* a mother, according to Turkey’s president she is a mother of “at least three children before it is too late” (NTVMSNBC 2009). Refusing to give birth is morally wrong not only because it means defying one’s nature, but also because it is treason.

#### *Pro-natalism: Abortion is Genocide*

As I discussed in the first chapter of this work, abortion is legal in Turkey despite the attempts by the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP [Justice and Development Party] to criminalize it, and thanks to the widely organized counter-campaign by women. The Law on Family Planning allows abortion until the

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<sup>8</sup> Sare Davutoğlu is the former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s wife. Although she is not a politician herself she had been an important political figure who attracted a lot of media attention as Turkey’s “second lady” especially with respect to issues concerning women.

tenth week of pregnancy. However, AKP's anti-abortion campaign, primarily led by then Prime Minister Erdoğan, was successful since this regulation is not implemented in practice. Today, very few public hospitals perform abortions at the discretion of pregnant women. Some only agree if the pregnancy is threatening the health of women; others completely refuse. Women's organizations occasionally phone public hospitals to monitor their abortion policies (Bianet 2015). They report a variety of rationales behind this non-compliance with the law, from insufficient infrastructure and staff, to doctors' refusal to conduct the operation due to their religious beliefs. Some hospitals explained that they are simply complying with the directives of the Ministry of Health although the Ministry refutes that it gave any unlawful directives (Bianet 2016). Put simply, while there is no law or official policy that bans abortion in Turkey, acquiring an abortion from a public hospital is now virtually impossible.

AKP's anti-abortion campaign is based mainly on emphasizing women's function as mothers, instrumentalizing their procreative capacity as essential to Turkish nation's thriving, and equating abortion with murder. Hence, Erdoğan demands women to reproduce. For those women living outside of Turkey, the responsibility is even higher. He requests that expats have "not three but five children" to make the countries they reside their own (NTV 2017). Doing otherwise is a conspiracy against the Turkish nation (*Radikal* 2012):

I know that these are planned moves to stunt our population growth. [...] Each abortion is an Uludere.<sup>9</sup> I am asking you: How different is killing a baby in mother's womb from killing it after birth? We know that this is a sneaky plan to eradicate this nation from the world scene.

In the case that women prefer abortion, the discourses of pro-natalism easily translate into those of necropolitics, framing the *bad* mothers as cruel murderers who deserve to die instead of the innocent embryos. In this framework, as the President of AKP's Human Rights Commission states, "the rapist is more innocent than the rape victim who gets an abortion" (Arin 2013):

Women in Bosnia were raped but they did give birth. If all those children were killed in the womb, it would result in a much worse tragedy and crime than that committed by the rapists. [...] Those children are innocent. Of course, there will be some side effects such as mother's going through depression.

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<sup>9</sup> In December 2011, Turkish Air Forces massacred 34 Kurdish individuals in Uludere/Roboski (in Iraqi territories), claiming that they were PKK members.

This statement, which depicts women's experience of rape as tolerable and trivial, can be considered moderate compared to those of the infamous former Mayor of Ankara who openly suggested: "the mother shall die if she is raped ... not the child" (Youtube 2012). Considered together these statements reveal that women's health, lives, and rights are not a priority as long as they fulfill their function as mothers, serve "national interests," and do not defy God's will.

*Fitrat [Divinely Ordained Creation]: It is in your Fitrat to Die if you don't Behave*

A paternalistic and authoritarian interpretation of Islam is one of the discursive tools deployed to legitimate the hierarchical gender regime promoted by the ruling elite. As opposed to some accounts that necessarily juxtapose Islam and gender violence, Islamic doctrine explicitly forbids various forms of violence against women and girls (e.g., Quran 16:58-59, Quran 58:2-4).<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, there also exist verses that openly declare men to be women's wardens due to their superior status, and prescribe beating as a punishment of disobedient behavior (Quran 4:34).<sup>11</sup> Some theologists claim that there is no room for beating in the verse referenced in this debate, and that it only suggests expelling dishonorable women from the house as a last resort (Öztürk). A more detailed analysis of different sides of this debate is beyond the scope of this work. My point is that there is no necessary causal link between Islam and gender-based violence, and there are conflating interpretations of Islam's treatment of violence against women among experts and believers. Thus, Islam is neither a sufficient nor a necessary variable to explain gender-based violence. However, the Turkish version of political Islam is a necessary component of this discussion since religious discourse mobilized as an instrument of populist political rhetoric does contribute to the justification of women's subjugation and gender-based violence, although in an indirect way.

Conservative Turkish politicians' hetero-normative and sexist interpretations of *fitrat*, which is commonly presented as the divine basis of women's nature, and thus the amorphous notion of female propriety, vividly exemplifies this dynamic. The word means creation and/or one's natural disposition

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<sup>10</sup> For the entire verses, please see <https://quran.com/16/58-59>, and <https://quran.com/58/2-4>.

<sup>11</sup> For the entire verse, please see <https://quran.com/4/34>.

intended by God. However, in a context characterized by widespread violence against women and high femicide rates it paradoxically connotes destruction, and becomes a powerful instrument of populist politics in securing women's inferior status. As it is used in Turkey, the notion of *fitrat* determines the boundaries of legitimate female behavior, how women *should naturally be*, and when the boundaries of female propriety are transgressed. Since these boundaries are never strictly set, this discourse of creation renders all women's actions subject to control, correction, and punishment.

As President Erdoğan repeatedly declares, due to the differences in their *fitrat* men and women are not, and cannot be, equals: "Arguing otherwise would be against *fitrat*" (Bianet 2014). In the same speech, he accuses feminists with not understanding this religious principle, and being obsessed with the notion of equality at the expense of equity and justice. The latter should be the basis of the only equality that is acceptable according to "our religion," "equality among women [and...] equality among men." Thus, Erdoğan presents gender hierarchy as a natural requirement of justice that is God's order, and frames anyone who questions this approach as challenging God's will.

#### *Private Personhood: State-Sponsored House Wives*

Not surprisingly, the above discursive framework commonly associates women with housework and married life, which are necessary and useful both for individual men and the state. In a public speech addressing youth, former Prime Minister Davutoğlu stated that the state wants "the fertility in this land to increase," and can help young people find spouses if needed (Bianet 2015c). Once women are married they are considered *de facto* housewives, whose major utility is doing house work, and who have to reconcile their professional and private lives if they work outside of the home. Within this symbolic framework, women's existence is only celebrated as a function of their role as housewives, as the former Mayor of Ankara Gökçek articulated on an International Women's Day event. He thanked women for "picking everything up after men," and emphasized "how much [men] owe them for this service" (Bianet 2014).

One might think that these statements do not have actual harm in the sense of promoting or enabling violence. However, they repetitively designate the private sphere and the traditional heterosexual



family as the legitimate place where women belong, revitalizing dominant gender norms, and providing them with institutional legitimacy. As a natural continuation of this demarcation, the standards of propriety are erected especially when women “violate” their prescribed/ascribed roles. In this way, although the home is globally “one of the most dangerous places for women” (Schechter 1982, 5), it is framed as a safe haven rendering any form of public appearance questionable and risky. Being a woman in Turkey, says a lawyer, is “knowing what kind of threats are awaiting you when you step foot in the street” (Interview by author, Istanbul, 07/29/2016b). And, whatever happens to you can be easily justified, usually with reference to women’s (presumed) inappropriate public behavior (sometimes literally just being outside of the home).

#### *Modesty: Brace Yourselves*

One common discourse that renders women’s public behavior questionable, correctible, and punishable is female modesty, which requires abstaining from behaviors that would emphasize or simply acknowledge that women are sexual beings. This is paradoxical because the same political rhetoric treats women as beings whose major function is reproduction. However, female modesty requires concealing any hint of this sexuality in public, by avoiding anything that could be considered obscene (including being visibly pregnant). A religious opinion leader, for example, declared on state television that “announcing pregnancy openly is immodest; [women] shall not walk around with a big belly” (Youtube 2013). Using the word “vagina” is also an example of despicable manifestations of female immodesty, because “openly talk[ing] about [one’s] sexual organ without blushing” is a shameless behavior (*Bianet* 2012).<sup>12</sup>

It would not be wrong to argue that the most important manifestation of modesty or its violation is dress code, which is commonly used to justify economic, psychological, and physical violence in Turkey. For instance, AKP’s vice president once declared on a TV show that “the outfit of the hostess of a competition program was so extreme [and...] completely unacceptable,” which led to the TV channel

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<sup>12</sup> Here the former deputy Prime Minister Arınç was reprimanding Aylin Nazlı Aka who criticized Erdoğan’s anti-abortion campaign, invited him to “stop acting like a vagina guardian” (*Bianet* 2012).

firing said host (*Bianet* 2013a). Upon criticisms, he explained to the press that he was using his “natural right” and expressing his ideas that overlap with the society’s sensibilities, and thus “It is an ill-intentioned effort to interpret [his] words as interference to someone’s life style” (Ibid.).

Although government representatives frequently emphasize that they do not intend to interfere with other [read: secular] life styles, this has increasingly become a lip service to individual freedom. Recently, Turkey has been witnessing an increase of quotidian violence against women by strangers (sometimes public servants) who have taken on the task of “executing” the unwritten law of female propriety measured by one’s public appearance. Thus, the discourse of modesty, put in practice in the form of public policing, interferes with women’s daily life with traumatic effects. Clothing serves as an epitome of “unacceptable public behavior” used to justify the “resulting” violence. By virtue of living in Turkey, “proper women” are expected to avoid wearing revealing clothing, such as miniskirts. Choosing to wear it means that one is deliberately taking on the risk of violence and accepting that they may not be welcomed in public places, such as parks.

These speech acts are illocutionary to the extent that they create the construct of “proper woman,” and ascribe to it certain meanings and expectations, commonly shared by the institutional and private actors. Clearly, not all speech acts have such an influential capacity. For them to “do things” they should be uttered by a person with relevant authority (Austin 1975). The constitutive power of speech acts is especially at work when those who speak do so in the name of the Sovereign and the nation because the reality-creating power of these utterances is secured by an institutional structure that augments and legally protects their interpellative effect.

My point here is not to reintroduce a static and unidirectional understanding of power monopolized by an omnipotent sovereign state. To the contrary, it is crucial for this work to keep in mind that speech acts do not always work as intended even when uttered with state authority for “power comes from everywhere,” and cannot be concentrated in a single person or institution (Foucault 1998, 93). “Hailing,” in Althusser’s terms, might miss its target creating consequences that are not intended by the speaker (Butler 1997, 32). Moreover, as the differences among femicidal contexts show, the potential or

actual impact of speech acts vary depending on the intersecting historical, geographical, economic, and political factors. In authoritarian settings with paternalistic charismatic leaders who can appeal to the masses like Turkey, it is less likely for the speech act to miss its target if it is uttered with the authority of the Sovereign. In such contexts, the speech acts of political leaders have the capacity to transform people's perceptions.

On the one hand, one may question the validity of attributing such responsibility to those who do the speaking but are not the originators of the discourses of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, "remaking language *ex nihilo*" is not a requirement of responsibility (Butler 1997, 27). To the contrary, responsibility is linked to repetition not origination (Ibid., 38). The citational nature of illocutionary speech acts intensifies responsibility since those words are not uttered in a position of complete unawareness of their possible consequences. Their very utterance reveals the existence of the agential act of "negotiating the legacies" that limit or enable certain types of speech (Ibid., 27). Herein lies the state's ideological complicity.

The meaning-creating power of the aforementioned political rhetoric stems from its ability to *call for* submissive feminine subjects and aggressive masculine subjects, both of whom risk punishment if they defy the "hailing." In this discursive framework, women's non-compliance creates a crisis of masculinity, which depends on the recognition and submission of the feminine subjects. Thus, it "requires" punishment by men whose non-compliant behavior, passivity, is punished through social stigma. The *speaking state* sustains and reinforces this meaning system through repetitive citation of the category of "proper woman":

The message could not be clearer: only the deserving (our sisters) are worthy of protection, the rest, and especially those with the audacity to break the norms of modesty ... put themselves in jeopardy (Kandiyoti 2016, 106).

It is worth noting here that "our sisters" invokes a particular image in the Turkish context: Muslim, veiled, Turkish, and white women. This is an important discursive strategy that the government uses to demarcate "us" and "them" (Ibid.). However, this does not mean that this group of women in Turkey is safe from gender-based violence. Because the standards of propriety are highly amorphous,

they can delegitimize any action (not necessarily sexual “misconduct”) by any women given the malleability of meaning for notions such as honor, creation, modesty, and so forth that are so freely used as stable control mechanisms (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2003, 587). They can mark any behavior as “provocative” enough to “unleash” legitimate and natural violent behavior in men (Rude 1999, 24), and thus to justify violence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2003, 588; Faqir 2001, 69). In fact, in most femicide cases in Turkey, the lack of the amorphous notion of “propriety” is always assumed, and somehow identified. This is especially true when the victims belong to intersectional identity categories that intensify their abject status, as can be observed in the cases of murders of trans individuals, sex workers, undocumented immigrants, and so forth. In this sense women’s propriety is in the eye of the beholder, who may literally assume the simultaneous roles of judge, jury, and executioner. In this way, impunity for perpetrators manifests before it is materialized in court decisions.

The illocutionary role of speech acts here are threefold. First, the construct of “proper woman” becomes a *real* phenomenon with dangerous implications because, as with race, gender categories have “intense present reality” (Alcoff 1999, 15, 16). These speech acts influence the phenomenological experience of being (perceived as) a woman in a femicidal context, created by complex institutional and discursive practices. The lived reality of femininity contracts bodies and delimits the area of movement of persons who are feminine (Young 2005, 31). The discourses of propriety expose these bodies to further risk, and render the category a source of threat for all people who are perceived through it, marked as failing to comply with its contingently determined standards, and excluded from it.

Second, they reinforce conventional hierarchical gender norms and give them institutional legitimacy through repetitive citation. What is implicit and formerly condemned by those who look down upon “our values” [read: seculars, Westerners, etc.] becomes explicit and justified. As such, an authentic self is reclaimed, and posed against so-called progressive values such as gender equality that defy God’s will, and bring about social degeneracy. Third, they do not simply cite what is always already there but also attribute to it new meanings that serve the speakers’ political agenda. In other words, they reinvent the commonsense with the claim that they are simply reminding the people of cultural mores, God’s

commands, and thus “who we are” authentically. What is at stake here is not simply a conservative tendency to preserve the cultural or institutional status quo but a neo-conservative one that “shape[s] the future with reference to an imagined or reconstructed past” (Altunok 2016). This feature of speech acts also provide yet further evidence that such complex phenomena as gender-based violence cannot be explained with reference to “culture” only, because cultures are subject to alteration. Invoking the “tradition” not only obscures multiple and complex institutional practices (Kogacioglu 2004) but also the discursive practices that create social meaning, set the public agenda, and constitute the environment within which the perpetrators make the decision to kill.

### **From Speech to Injury, from Injury to Impunity**

In 2016, while on a public bus, a man kicked a woman in the face for wearing shorts (*Cumhuriyet* 2016). Among others, this incident attracted attention, revealing the AKP government’s approach to the violent policing of women’s public appearance. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım stated that the perpetrator should not have attacked Miss Sağlam: “He could have just hummed along if he didn’t like what he saw, and wanted to criticize it” (*Cumhuriyet* 2016). Like many other problematic declarations by the state officials, Yıldırım’s statement received significant criticism from women’s organizations for signaling that women may be condemned publicly (by random strangers) based on their dress, and providing institutional legitimacy and encouragement for such behavior (Özdilek 2016). The president of the Turkish Women’s Associations Federation, Canan Güllü, argued that these statements create a “domino effect” (Türkiye Kadın Dernekleri Federasyonu); men who attempt to harass and rape women on the streets are encouraged by the political leaders’ statements. The Prime Minister sued her for defamation, and claimed there was no such relation between his statements and acts of violence.<sup>13</sup>

I concur with Güllü, and argue that there is a relationship, and it should be stated even more explicitly, because these statements are also perlocutionary; that is, they do not perform an act

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<sup>13</sup> By the time I finished this chapter the lawsuit has still not been concluded. This is one of the examples of increased hostility to women’s movement in Turkey, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 5. Together with arrests of numerous feminist activists based on espionage and terrorism charges, this is also an indication that producing and disseminating information that is critical of the government practices is a very risky endeavor in today’s Turkey.

automatically but they bring something about (Austin 1975, 109). Furthermore, in their consequences one can see the state's ideological complicity "in action." However, it would be a gross overstatement to claim that these speech acts directly instigate violence. "After all, they don't tell anyone to go and kill women," as one of my interviewees put it (Interview by author, Istanbul, 07/2/2016). In this case, the link between saying and doing is a loose one (Butler 1997, 102). Yet it cannot be ignored since sexist speech acts, as racist speech acts (Alcoff 1999), have significant material consequences such as influencing institutional practices, legal culture, and perpetrators' behaviors. But how are the aforementioned speech acts, mainly concerned with promoting a certain image of "proper woman" and controlling women's lives, related to their deaths? What is the role of "woman making" in "women killing?"

To explain the sense of expectedness and normalcy of violence both feminist and critical race scholars employ the Gramscian notion of "common sense" (Alcoff 1999, 19). In many contexts, even non-violent subjects and the targets of violence naturalize it as something acceptable and/or necessary (Jakobsen 2015). Although the Gramscian framework is useful, it is not sufficient to account for contexts such as Turkey where gender norms and the normalization of violence are not only implicit in people's thinking and practices but also explicitly reproduced by state representatives and institutions. The latter speaks to the potential perpetrators in a more direct sense than common sense, which justifies their violent actions in a tacit way. I call this complex indirect relationship a "femicidal feedback loop" (Image 1),<sup>14</sup> which enhances the legitimacy of a given gender regime (common sense) so as to provide moral justification to certain acts of violence and institutional practices, such as gender-based discrimination, and poor implementation of the existing laws and conventions. The latter provides the perpetrators with (quasi) impunity, and lets women be killed.

Perlocutionary speech acts serve, in a more direct sense, as points of reference for the listening subjects who see authority figures as role models or legitimate sources of information. The *speaking state* signals through them that, like the perpetrators, it views certain female/feminine behaviors (e.g., wearing miniskirts) as intolerable and thus deserving of punishment. In this sense, speech acts function as "oral

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<sup>14</sup> Submitted separately with this application.

contracts” between the authorities and perpetrators, letting the latter know that their violent actions may be tolerable if supported by the “right” claims. As such, gender-based violence, which is “always at the horizon of social imagination, even for those who do not perpetrate it” (Young 2011, 62), is put in practice more freely with the knowledge that it is socially and institutionally tolerable. In this regard, the political elite do not directly instigate crime but act as amplifying transmitters of the codes of a hierarchical and violent gender regime.

Sometimes, the violent repercussions of speech acts can be seen overnight as in the case of public policing and harassment of female students who lived with male roommates, which started right after President Erdoğan’s speech condemning mixed gender student houses (*Taraf* 2013). More recently, a man attempted to attack a woman who was laughing loudly at a metrobus stop yelling: “What kind of a women are you? Have some honor!” (Mokum.place 2016); another said “This is the reason why rape happens.” It is not possible to observe such a direct relationship in the femicide cases. However, it is possible to trace the signs of similar reasoning and understandings of gender norms in perpetrator defenses, and lower-ranked state officials’ institutional practices, which echo this political rhetoric that holds victims responsible for their own deaths because they “took risks.”

Institutional actors such as the police and judges share the same understanding of propriety. In most cases, courts give penalty reductions based on “impropriety” allegations that allow provocation defenses (Ümit Atılğan 2015). A woman’s clothing, level of intoxication, whereabouts, and level of intimacy with men are common bases of penalty reductions, providing grounds for undue provocation, as the next chapter discusses. These court practices are common knowledge that perpetrators exploit. When they do not come up with these defenses themselves, other inmates or their lawyers teach them what to say to reduce their penalties. The perpetrators increasingly engage in victim blaming as they become more knowledgeable about the dominant gender discourses that result in sentence reductions (e.g., a cheating wife and hurt masculine pride). Hence, as the Derya Ala<sup>15</sup> case clearly exemplified, the initial testimonies they give at the police station may completely change. A story of robbery, rape, and murder can turn into

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<sup>15</sup> This is a pseudonym because the victims family and their lawyer requested that I do not reveal her actual name.

one about a fabricated romantic relationship, the victim's unfaithfulness, and the perpetrator's damaged masculine pride.

As these parallels in the aforementioned speech acts and perpetrator defenses demonstrate, these discursive strategies rationalize femicide in a paradoxical way: criminalizing the victim for challenging the norms of propriety, and excusing the criminal for punishing the former (although they do not necessarily act in line with the same norms).<sup>16</sup> For instance, Arzu Boztaş's husband, who permanently paralyzed her shooting her seven times in the arms and legs had a history of sexual violence. He had been abusing Boztaş from the beginning of their marriage, raped a woman with mental disability, and finally tried to kill Boztaş. However, his lawyer requested a penalty reduction presenting his client as the victim who acted under conditions of serious provocation. He claimed, the defendant's purpose was solely to wound the victim, not kill her, and he did so because "he could not take it [alleged extra-marital affair] anymore" and wanted to protect his family (*Yarin Gazetesi* 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The ideological politics discussed in this chapter is significant in providing contextual evidence in support of the literature that points to the state's ideological complicity in violent gender relations. I argue that the speech acts by those who speak with the authority of the state are concrete manifestations of such complicity due to their creative and destructive capacity. They reinforce gender hierarchies by constructing an ideal gender category, "proper women," and rendering the (perceived) members of the category vulnerable by influencing institutional practices and perpetrators' behaviors. In this sense, the above discussions help enrich the femicide literature upon which this work builds. As such, my dissertation serves as an example of much needed horizontal dialogue in knowledge production, which leads to the development of original approaches without colonizing or disregarding the knowledge production elsewhere.

These discussions also intervene into the debate concerning the characteristics and effects of hate

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<sup>16</sup> Please see Chapter 4, "Courtroom Politics of Femicide," which discusses how these dynamics are translated into judiciary action and impunity, and how femicide is rendered a lesser crime.



speech, or injurious speech. It shows that there is no singular answer to the question of whether words wound simply by being uttered or if their harm lies in effecting others' actions. The answer varies depending on the context, and the identity of the speaker bound by that context. If the speaker utters words from an authority position in an authoritarian setting, words can turn into dangerous weapons (figuratively and literally). In this respect, the importance of the role of the *speaking state* goes beyond this work. Encouraging or allowing gender-based violence is only one example of the consequences of such speech. Turkey's ruling elites is only one group of actors who help us understand the extent to which sexism is embedded in state ideology and practices. However, these examples can be multiplied by looking at other contexts where, for example, state actors promote racism and xenophobia as we see today in the U.S..

However, the effects of discursive practices are not limited to the ones discussed here. They also create an aggressive masculine subjectivity supported by institutions, such as courts, that provide the perpetrators with impunity while blaming the victims. The next chapter discusses the "courtroom politics" where parallels among the rationalities of the state representatives, legal personnel, and perpetrators can be observed. Speech acts, on the other hand, frequently miss their target and create unintended consequences such as resistances and different ways of "talking back" (Butler 1997). The last chapter tackles this aspect of speech acts in discussing "feminist politics" against femicide in Turkey.