

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Queer debt

The affective politics of security and intimacy in the sex work economy of Kurdish Turkey

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Abstract

In the Kurdish-majority city of Amed (Diyarbakır), Turkey, the local sex work economy has become increasingly and intimately interwoven with institutions, discourses, and practices of securitization. In this context, queer and trans Kurds adopt, adapt, and use surveillance to negotiate the value of their work and life with one another, the broader community, and the state. These negotiations involve vocabularies, strategies, and affective attachments derived from the long-standing militarized conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Key to this dynamic is the notion of *bedel*, or the indebtedness and obligation that Kurds feel toward the struggle for Kurdish rights. Through affective debt, queer and trans Kurds police boundaries for their security and livelihoods through surveillance, defining those who can and cannot do sex work. In the process, they shift the meanings and functions of *bedel* as they endure, embody, and embrace violence and homophobia to gain acceptance of their identities.

KEYWORDS

debt, Kurds, queer, security, sex work, surveillance, transgender, Turkey

One evening in March 2020, I found myself struggling to keep pace with a new acquaintance, Elis, as she quickly walked down the street.¹ Elis had just promised to introduce me to the famous trans scene in Amed, a majority-Kurdish city officially known as Diyarbakır, in southeastern Turkey. Elis, lighting one cigarette after another, was furious, yet she kept joking about her friend Dilan, whom she called “a living bomb” for her endless efforts to “blow up,” or ruin, others’ affairs in sex work. Dilan had invited Elis to what Amed’s sex workers call a *baskın* (raid)—a sudden, organized, and often aggressive visit to someone’s home.² Dilan had organized a *baskın* at the home of Serdar, Elis’s close friend. Serdar had been a queer sex worker for the last two years,³ but he had now decided to work as a “cross-dresser,” meaning he would don feminine attire and wigs for sex work. This was a decision that put him under the scrutiny of his trans competitors.

I was quite nervous, since I did not know anyone involved in all this, not to mention that I had never participated in a *baskın*. During my fieldwork I had heard stories about these house raids: that they typically involved conflicts; that they would sometimes escalate into physical attacks; that attempts

might be made to reveal a person’s identity or their sex work to their whole apartment building and the street; or that violence might put someone in a hospital or a police station. Yet I was determined to go, dizzy from the cigarette smoke and wondering why my heart was beating so fast.

As we stepped into Serdar’s flat, a small, smoke-filled room welcomed us. There were about 10 trans and queer folks, some of them shouting at each other, while others greeted us with smiles and hugs. A trans woman in the middle of the room was trying to calm everyone down. She asked Dilan to speak and “explain the fuss” to Elis. Dilan replied,

Sister, now tell us what we should do. Two years ago, we let Serdar work in Amed when he wanted to move here [from a smaller city in southeastern Turkey]. We did this because you asked us to, since he’s one of your dear friends. We decided that this *lubunya* [Lubunca: effeminate gay man, in this context] could work only if he worked as a *lubunya*, not as a CD [cross-dresser]. Now he has wigs and works for 50 liras [about \$US8].

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Serdar protested, telling us, “I only charged [a customer] 70 liras once.” But Dilan was insistent. Serdar, she said, had lowered the standard price for a sex work session, which was 100 liras (US\$16.50). Dilan said, “Look, my dear, even if you wear your wig, you can’t compete with us. I have breasts. I always find customers. But many girls don’t, and we know that customers always opt for cheap ones. So they’ll choose you, of course.” Dilan wanted to bar Serdar from working in Amed, insisting that he immediately leave the city. She tried to rally everyone to support her position. Eda, another trans woman, agreed with her, saying that they would have never known what Serdar up to if she hadn’t found out by baiting him with a masked call.

But there was a further point of contention. As the situation got more tense, Elis told everyone to find a different solution. Exiling him from the city was unfair, she said, because he had worked in Amed for two years and was already settled there. Dilan was resentful, saying,

If he wants, he can go to the West [of Turkey], where no one cares about where anyone was born. You can work however you want. But here, the circumstances are different. Everyone here has paid the *bedel* [price] for being here.

Here, Dilan invoked *bedel*, a regionally charged concept referring to one’s debt to elders and to society, a debt that must always be paid. Her point was that they—the longtime, well-established sex workers of Amed—had paid the high price of working there, but Serdar had not. Her threatening voice calmed as she responded to Elis’s insistence, and soon she was talking about the rules of staying and working in Amed as a cross-dresser. According to her, the punishment for Serdar’s infraction would be that he raise his prices, even more than the going rate. “You will work for 150 liras per session,” she told Serdar, “and charge 250 liras per hour.” When Serdar rejected this, since it would be impossible to find customers at this price, the negotiation came around to the usual going rate of 100 liras per session and 200 liras per hour. As the quarrel ended out of respect for Elis, the discussion was settled with an agreement based on rates rather than *bedel*.

In the following days, I found myself puzzled about Dilan’s invocation of *bedel*. In the context of a sex work economy, this idea had appeared in ways different from how I would have expected. Usually, sex workers might use *bedel* to mean the price of a sexual service. In Lubunca, this would be *belde* (“price” or “money”; Kontovas, 2012, p. 5). In Amed’s sex work economy, however, there was more than a shift in the term’s meaning, since *bedel* also refers to the price one pays for the Kurdish cause, representing a collectively shared feeling of indebtedness and obligation to Kurdish society at large. From the traumas experienced by individuals or their families to street politics and national political discourse, *bedel* is widely used among Kurds to account for how they have paid their debt to the struggle. While younger generations often feel a profound indebtedness to the loved ones who dedicated themselves to the struggle at the cost of losing their lives or facing incarceration, Kurdish leaders like Selahattin Demirtaş

use the term to acknowledge the collective “honorable stance of tens of millions of Kurds who have endured suffering and paid *bedel*” (Okatan, 2020).

In the sex work economy, then, what does *bedel* entail in relation to the broader Kurdish notion of debt, and how is this debt paid? For the sex workers, this *bedel* is not simply payable by money or a type of exchange, and it is unclear who the creditor is. To whom and how, then, do these sex workers “pay their debt”? This article shows that *bedel* emerges in the sex work economy as an affective reality, shifting in relation to the Kurdish struggle against the Turkish state.

During 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork with queer and trans Kurds in Amed and Istanbul, I participated in their lives in apartment settings and makeup rooms where we were often involved in dramas, gossip, and chitchat. I also participated in *gullüm*—a Lubunca term for affirming, fun chats involving performances, jokes, humor, gossip, sexual narratives, and funny comments about one’s own and others’ failures, conflicts, and tragic experiences. We spent time at cafés, sitting or dancing *halay* (Kurdish folk dance) as they waited, sometimes on Ecstasy, for customers. At night, we went to bars and pubs, where we would often face harassment from managers, customers, and police officers. We took long walks through Amed’s famous Hevsel Gardens and had picnics at the old city walls in the Sur district. During these and many other activities, I observed their experiences and documented their life stories through interviews and informal conversations. These interactions allowed me to develop an emotional connection with them while keeping me acutely aware of how my identity and role, and the nature of my research, would raise security concerns in the sex worker community. As a queer Kurdish man who grew up in Turkey, pursuing a graduate degree at a US-based institution at the time, I consistently found myself reminded of my insider status (and privileges). This reminder was not solely because of our shared and intersecting identities, but also, more significantly, because of the intricate entanglement of my research with the broader politics of *bedel*. My work was seen as part of this political struggle, albeit diverging to focus on the *bedel* of sex work.

In the context of sex work, the meanings and use of *bedel* resemble those in the broader Kurdish struggle as well as those in specific contexts, like the underground drug market, in which surveillance and value regimes are also prevalent. Yet these various contexts differ in several crucial respects. In the case of sex work, the labor and sexual identities of queer and trans Kurdish people are entwined with the national struggle, which is itself an intersectional phenomenon (Crenshaw, 1991). Because sex workers pay their debts to the struggle through their sex work, and they lack material and affective support, they experience surveillance more intimately and intensely than people in other contexts.

The meaning of *bedel* among Kurds more broadly is well known and documented as a social code that ties one and one’s (extended) family to the Kurdish national cause through loss and obligation (Neyzi & Darıcı, 2015; Özsoy, 2010; Yoltar, 2020). Its origins date to the extreme and often sexualized violence that the Turkish state inflicted on Kurdish prisoners, whose deaths incurred a feeling of indebtedness to their

comrades, particularly in the notorious Amed Prison (Üstündağ, 2019).

Today, *bedel* is understood as paid if one, or one's family member, has died for the cause or spent a long time in prison. There is thus a familial aspect to *bedel*. It is constituted through the sacrifices of families (including nonnuclear, extended families), known as *değer aileleri* (families of value), and it thus connects kinship to the Kurdish struggle (one might be asked, for example, "What has your family contributed to the cause?"; Özsoy, 2010, pp. 78–79). In a sense, then, queer and trans (sex worker) Kurds have appropriated and adapted a notion of *bedel* that is fundamentally constituted within the domain of heteronormative kinship, reinscribing it with the intimate experience of violence and loss that connects them to one another and to the Kurdish struggle.

Bedel saturates social relations in Kurdish Turkey. As a Kurd, one knows that many others have struggled, and continue to struggle, for Kurdish rights and self-determination—ranging from activists to politicians to guerrillas from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or PKK). One is therefore indebted to them by default. The implicit logic here is that as bad as it is for Kurds in Turkey, it would be far worse were it not for those who have struggled and sacrificed for "the Kurdish cause," as it is known (Bozarlan, 2004; Üstündağ, 2019). As a Kurd, one thus benefits from their efforts and sacrifices. To "opt out" of this whole system of *bedel* would be considered a betrayal. *Bedel*, then, is an affective debt that one incurs as a result others' actions, not one's own.

In Amed, and other Kurdish cities, *bedel* manifests both discursively and materially. There is, for example, a lot of *bedel*-themed graffiti, street art, and sloganeering that refers to debts paid through armed struggle or through suffering state-sponsored violence, exile, or incarceration. Notable expressions include posters of prominent exiled Kurdish leaders; slogans such as "We haven't forgotten Halabja" (referring to the 1988 chemical attack and massacre), "Down with solitary confinement," and "We will end up like the Berlin Wall" (alluding to the potential division of Turkish and Kurdish societies); denunciations of the Turkish state's invasion of Efrîn in 2018; and declarations of support for "Apo," the abbreviated name of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's imprisoned leader. The widespread materiality of *bedel*, as protest and as sentimental discourse, demonstrates its affective power to bring people together around the Kurdish cause.

So why would queer and trans (sex worker) Kurds invoke *bedel*? And how do these invocations relate to the powerful affective attachments and moral economies of the broader Kurdish concept of *bedel*? My study of the queer and trans sex work economy in Amed shows that these affective attachments manifest themselves in intimate intensities of indebtedness and right, saturating everyday life with an "affective debt," an infinite mode of moral obligations and values. Subjects feel this debt in what they have lost in their struggles to protect their livelihoods and rights and what they earn through their struggles to pay that debt (e.g., to achieve respectability, value, and belonging to the community, or to advance the cause).

These different uses and meanings of *bedel* in the lives of queer and trans Kurds are intricately linked to Turkey's emergent security regimes (Akarsu, 2020). At the same time, Turkey, like other countries, has seen a concomitant push for sexual rights for over a decade. Observers of Turkey's sexual politics have pointed out that the country's LGBTI organizations, identities, and socialities have achieved unprecedented visibility, which is sometimes called Turkey's "queer turn" (Özbay & Öktem, 2021). While Turkey does not legally prohibit homosexuality per se, it does not protect LGBTI persons either, which makes them vulnerable to violence and harassment. Top public officials, including President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reject LGBTI people and accuse them of corrupting the country's national values; they ban LGBTI events and marches, subjecting organizers and participants to police repression and detention. In everyday life, LGBTI people face the utmost securitization under the ruling Justice and Development Party (Savcı, 2021), and they experience various forms of discrimination in housing, employment, and health care (Korkman, 2023; Zengin, 2024).

While it is unquestionable that trans sex workers are forced to resist or work around state repression, the case of queer *bedel* shows that queer and trans Kurds themselves practice a kind of securitization, since they adopt and adapt the state's surveillance strategies, along with broader Kurdish notions of debt, rights, honor, and betrayal. They refashion these regional, more affective socialities to make claims on the value of their lives (and work), to influence society, and to protect themselves from surveillance by others. They do so by creating alternatives to individualist notions of agency and emotion. Thus, *bedel* is already and always affectively charged, determining one's capacity to act and be acted on, and it connects these actions to a broader affective politics (Ahmed, 2004; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Navaro, 2012; Rosaldo, 1989).

The affective aspect of debt goes well beyond Kurds, since many countries, including Turkey, have repurposed care, guilt, resentment, and obligation in nationalist projects (e.g., military service), as well as policies to recover from or reconcile with the violence of neoliberalism (Açıksöz, 2019; Han, 2012; Yoltar, 2020). Moreover, debt has been operationalized in the moral worlds of monetized exchanges and financialized economies; as a result, the obligation to pay something (e.g., time, labor, and freedom) has been a fundamental feature of neoliberal subjectivities and citizenship, as has criminalization, now based on the state's valuation of life and labor (Joseph, 2014). Today, securitized regimes of valuation have a significant impact on the lives of queer and trans people, who are inscribed as "threats" to the nation-state and its cis-heteronormative order, especially as gender-critical feminism and right-wing movements increasingly align and entwine themselves with neoliberal and racialized ideologies across many parts of the world, including Turkey (Beauchamp, 2019; Bey, 2022; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Tracing how Amed's sex workers cultivate indebtedness through feelings, sentiments, and attachments, I show how subjects write their own intimate scripts of valuation in contexts in which values are measured by one's indebtedness to community and society at large, and how one pays those debts,

which are, in practice, never ending and, therefore, unpayable (Guérin & Kumar, 2020). In so doing, I examine how feelings of indebtedness and obligation connect subjects, emotionally and intimately, to collective struggles against state-sponsored violence and valuation.

Furthermore, I show how queer and trans Kurds, especially sex workers, (1) use surveillance to constitute and police boundaries for their personal and communal security and income, defining those who can and cannot be members of *bedel's* intimate and affective economy and how the *bedel* gets paid; (2) link histories of everyday homophobia and of state-sponsored violence against Kurds, and how they embody, endure, and embrace these hardships as a way to shift society's perceptions of LGBTI identities toward accepting them; and (3) shift the meanings of *bedel* in their efforts to constitute respectability, belonging, and honor in the Kurdish society. Affective debt unites different interpretations and experiences of *bedel* through one's indebtedness and obligations left to, and shared with, others; the accumulation of affective debt constitutes a network of indebtedness among people whose struggles to discharge this debt become never ending, honorable, and valued for the community. Sex workers pay their affective debts to the struggle by being visible, enduring everyday violence, and undertaking difficult labor in a precarious economy—all of which contributes to transforming society and advancing the broader cause.

"Queer debt," then, refers to how queer and trans (sex worker) subjects intimately constitute and negotiate the value of their identities, rights, and labor through the very suffering they endure. In the Kurdish context, accounting for such affective debts initially requires surveillance to protect the economy from outsiders, who might undermine insiders' right to work, which is attained through struggle and suffering. Outsiders' lack of knowledge about security and customer demands may also result in misdeeds that, then, disrupt the relationships between insiders and customers, leading insiders to pay more *bedel*. Accounting for how one pays the *bedel* ultimately allows Kurdish sex workers to understand the value of their work to demand honor and respectability for their identities and labor. This is especially crucial in a context in which their sexualities and labor are deemed immoral or rejected as exploitation, contrary to the direct association of *bedel* with Kurdish honor. The latter involves pride, recognition, and respect, which Kurds attribute to (heteronormative) families and their lost members in the context of the Kurdish struggle.

SURVEILLANCE AND THE SEX WORK ECONOMY

Among sex workers in Amed, *bedel* means the debt one must pay for the right to work. The debt is paid by struggling with the difficulties of sex work and by suffering the violence that is endemic to the sex trade. A culture of *madilik* (Lubunca: "conflict") dominates these sex workers' intimate and daily lives, a culture created in and through their surveillance of the boundaries of *bedel*, the regulations they enforce in the sex

work economy, and the palpable presence of state-sponsored securitization—all of which have often left physical as well as affective residues of suffering and survival. In such a context, these subjects experience the material and affective realities of economic deprivation and of violence, the latter committed by both the state and themselves. Thus, for them, the ethics of surveillance become murky. It is a common and often collective practice, seen as necessary for constituting one's self-discovery, respectability, and belonging in the sex work economy; it allows one to participate in constituting and regulating the relationships that have an impact on one's life and livelihood.

Surveillance in intimate lives can have various consequences—including conspiring with the police, working with the Mafia, and mobilizing others to manage or exclude outsiders from working in the local sex industry. Many of these practices involve adopting or repurposing a word that is commonly associated with the military, police, or guerrillas, such as *baskins* (raids), "explosion," and "living bomb." These practices reveal the complex layers of everyday violence that constitute life in the city.

Violence among sex workers in Amed has skyrocketed in the last decade, during which the city has become an extremely competitive marketplace for sex (among other things); the city has also seen intensified securitization because of the urban warfare that erupted in 2015 between the PKK and the Turkish military, along with other security agencies. The war has almost totally destroyed Sur, the historic central district; just a few kilometers away, the Ofis neighborhood has emerged as a popular center for sex work and political organizing. Hence, Ofis is home to a variety of security apparatuses and attendant socialities.

During my fieldwork, many trans and queer sex workers contextualized their myriad surveillance practices in terms of jealousy, envy, or fear of losing money. Yet, when pressed, they narrated how they were treated not only by other sex workers and customers but also by the Turkish state and society at large—suggesting a resonance with the larger sociopolitical context of *bedel*, which shapes the Kurdish national struggle as well as state-sponsored notions of moral debt (Açıksöz, 2019; Yoltar, 2020). The feeling of indebtedness, which foregrounded their narratives of national struggle, was recalibrated in their intimate lives as they sought both autonomy and respect from their families. Many young queers felt that they should marry one day to fulfill the expectations and hopes of their mothers, who had labored so hard to bring them up. Getting married was a common way to return the "gift" to their mothers; some entered romantic relationships with girls and introduced them or their lesbian friends to their families as potential spouses. Others distanced themselves from the queer community for a while so that they would not "get used to it so much." Those who married often kept their queer lives discreet or eventually came out to their spouses. For trans people, distancing from their families was a way to escape their family's discourse of shame. In contrast, those with strong family ties supported them financially, giving them "hush money," as they jokingly called it.

These practical solutions presented alternative means of attaining (individual) autonomy and negotiating their intimate lives with their families. But it was *bedel* that allowed them to collectively reclaim their sexual rights and work, and that made such reclamations respectable (in the eyes of their families and the broader Kurdish society), often with reference to the Kurdish struggle. In anthropological literature, debt has been analyzed in terms of domination and hierarchy (Dudley, 2000; Graeber, 2011; Stout, 2019; Williams, 2011), and it is sometimes understood as immobilizing the debtor while granting the creditor freedom to move in time and space (Munn, 1986). For debtors, then, redemption means gaining one's freedom amid the growing and devastating effects of global capitalism and financialization (Graeber, 2011, pp. 65, 73–82, 390). In the literature, debt is frequently portrayed as rooted in individualized and monetized exchange, being commodity-oriented and destructive, while sex work is an effect of the commodification of women's bodies and the monetization of human relations (Graeber, 2011, pp. 21, 182–86). In Amed's queer and trans sex work economy, however, debt is an affective force, crafting indebted collectivities whose boundaries and regulations depend on cultivating a talent for adopting and using surveillance. This, in turn, allows sex workers to earn their rights, value, mobility, and access to livelihoods. Debt thus has a productive quality (Roitman, 2003), which facilitates and affirms certain types of socialities (collective and intimate), like appropriating surveillance, that may easily be interpreted as furthering state domination and as ethically questionable. Nonetheless, surveillance remains the only viable means for these subjects to move across time and space, and to lay claims on rights and resources.

Anthropologists have criticized simplistic portrayals of surveillance as top-down measures organized to manipulate and dominate autonomous individuals (Aretxaga, 2003; Goldstein, 2010). For Amed's sex workers, appropriating surveillance allowed them a degree of autonomy to regulate their economy and to constitute belonging within their community. Through surveillance, they determined how others paid *bedel* and recounted their suffering; they collected information about one another's struggles, shared them in their community through *gullîm* and gossip, recognized others' struggles, and had others recognize theirs. These often emotionally charged narratives allowed them to constitute a collective history that often intersected with the broader history of the Kurdish struggle, to which they felt a deep sense of belonging. Their narratives also involved claims of advancing the national cause by transforming society, primarily through their interactions with customers and others they encountered in their everyday lives, people who owed them respect and recognition for how they had paid their *bedel*.

Surveillance, however, had severe implications for their intimate and daily lives; it intensified their suffering and struggle, leading to more debt and greater challenges to pay it. As a result, "freedom" from their obligations became nearly impossible. Affective debt, along with involvement in the securitized logic of the sex work economy and the Kurdish conflict, became a condition for securing their rights and livelihoods. This turned them into the political subjects of the broader Kurdish struggle,

writing their own versions of freedom by embracing and repurposing their debts and obligations (and the surveillance that came along with it). They did this rather than reject their debts, complicating the traditional dichotomy between domination and salvation (Mahmood, 2011).

Boundaries of intimacy

Amed's trans and queer sex workers used *bedel* and the surveillance of outsiders to constitute the boundaries of intimacy. They carried this out by recounting the histories of violence they had experienced. *Bedel* is most visibly enunciated in discussions about who has the right to work in Amed and who does not. In these discussions, which often end in confrontations, sex workers establish a sociospatial boundary that excludes those not from Amed, especially those from non-Kurdish cities. For the insiders, *bedel* implies a temporal boundary through which sex workers link the histories of violence experienced by queer and trans Kurds in Amed to the situation of Kurds in Turkey. They do this through their collective "archive of feelings" (Cvetkovich, 2003), or collections of affective and material scripts that carry feelings and emotions, and embodied residues of violence experienced often in and through intimacy (Zengin, 2024).

Sex workers often travel to Amed because they face economic difficulties and intense competition in major cities. In explaining why they went to Kurdish cities, my non-Kurdish interlocutors sometimes expressed Orientalist perceptions and desires: queer and trans Turks often sexualize and racialize Kurdish customers, perceiving them as rough, simple (hence easily exploited), working class, and more "Middle Eastern" in appearance and cultural background. When a non-Kurdish sex worker travels to and begins working in Amed, she often faces significant backlash from the sex workers who have spent their lives in the city a queer and trans (sex worker) people. A trans sex worker named Derya explained to me the differences between Turkish and Kurdish trans sex workers:

The difference is that [Turkish sex workers take] what someone else has labored to make [*hazıra el koyuyor*], and the [Kurdish sex workers] struggle to earn by paying lots of *bedel*. Those *bedels* give us power, becoming a lifestyle for us. I am becoming stronger as I see wrongdoing, after seeing all those who do villainy behind my back. I take it as a lesson. I say, "Bring it on! I don't give a fuck! I'll fight and won't give up." That is why it all comes down to the struggle.

In discussing *bedel*, Derya pointed to a distinction between outsiders and insiders in the sex work economy: not the kind of work one has been involved in, but the price one has paid for what one has. In this context, the price may be the labor of being in a difficult sex work economy, enduring the violence it involves, and establishing a network of customers, including those who are called *trans kolisi*, or men who want sex or romantic relationships with trans women. These include

working- and middle-class heterosexual men, soldiers, police officers, and drug dealers who are willing to pay for sex work—a network that can be easily appropriated by (Turkish) outsiders who will probably have their own tactics and networks of protection. Their tactics may differ from those in the Kurdish sex work economy, leading to potential conflicts between sex workers and their customers.

To prevent such appropriation and instability, the boundaries of what is and is not *bedel*, how one may or may not pay it, are strictly protected. Sex workers use a set of surveillance strategies against outsiders who must provide evidence of a birthplace in the Kurdish region by showing their state-issued ID card, speak Kurdish or Turkish with a Kurdish accent, and find supporters in the community who will “vouch” for them, or else face a backlash. Those who refuse to leave the city are threatened with the disclosure of their identities and work to their neighbors, and to being informed on to the police about their sex work. For instance, Elis told me about a conflict between two sex workers over who was allowed to work in Amed. The story concerned Baby Ebru, a sex worker infamous for her fights with customers—one of whom ended up burning down an apartment building in Ofis. In Elis’s story, Baby Ebru attacked another trans woman at the airport, leading her to turn around and leave the city.

When I asked how this related to the broader question of *bedel*, Elis compared the incident to her relationship with a Turkish trans woman, Selen, with whom Elis had a conflict in İzmir. When Selen traveled to Amed for work, Elis got very angry. “Now she is working here,” Elis said. “A person who didn’t allow me any space is now in my Diyarbakır [Amed], my birthplace, where I have labored and languished in prison. I was catcalled on this street. My friends were beaten on that street.” Resonating with the idea of collectivity in the broader notion of Kurdish *bedel*, Derya and Elis suggested that Kurdish sex workers have the right to benefit from the sex economy; many of my interviewees, however, revealed that even Kurdish sex workers from Amed who had lived in other cities for a long time face a similar backlash from locals when they return. For Kurdish subjects who have not paid the price of living in this environment of surveillance (especially not in recent years, when it has intensified and gotten more violent), their surveillance is meant to force newcomers to pay the price if they want to stay in the city. For many sex workers, *bedel* links the present and the future to the past, in which some have struggled on behalf of others, from which the latter benefit; they do so by building alternative kinship ties with their trans and queer predecessors, friends, and guerrillas who have experienced state violence, and sometimes died as a result (Weston, 1997).

Sex workers constitute their own collective “archives of feelings” through two main affective practices: *gullüm* (the performative, “fun chats” noted above) and *madilik* (directly or indirectly insulting someone by using metaphors, jokes, comparisons, akin to “shading” and “reading”). Both have different emotionally charged implications, functions, and meanings for sex workers, allowing them to constitute emotional bonds with each other and their predecessors. *Gullüm* culminate in bonding, laughter, and joy among social groups. This kind of talk emerges from and is shaded with tragic events, such as being

tortured in a police station in Istanbul where trans sex workers, on Ecstasy, were making fun of the police officers while their feet were being painfully whipped (Gürsu & Elitemiz, 2012). Through *gullüm*, sex workers shared their (sexual) desires, feelings, sentiments, and fantasies, embracing and enduring the violence they were subjected to and making fun of intimate violence. Contrary to this tragicomic practice, sex workers perform *madilik* in their daily interactions, often shading both their age peers and younger sex workers. *Madilik* teaches others the rules of the game, and it involves strong wit, jokes, and teasing, sometimes extending to refer to real conflicts, fights, and betrayals. These practices, common not only among queer and trans Kurds but also non-Kurdish ones in Turkey, are intricately imbricated with surveillance, and they are saturated with heteropatriarchal assumptions and mechanisms. Among sex workers, they are often transmitted through a “mother-daughter” relationality, or sisterhood, implicating alternative kinship relations and reminding practitioners of their lost kinship relations (and what they earned through these losses), as well as their new obligations (Çalışkan, 2022; Weston, 1997).

For instance, Onur, who is an ex-PKK guerrilla and now a trans sex worker, told me about her political attachment to the cause with pride, joy, and a desire for redemption, as well as sorrow and frustration. She described how she embodied the histories of intimate violence, affective residues of which were often seen by others in her being *madi* (Lubunca: “mean” or “aggressive,” in this context). According to Onur, people called her *madi* because they did not know that she had suffered the material and affective onslaught of the Turkish state’s counterinsurgency regime, along with its gut-level reverberations of fear and violence. From years spent in prison and “in the mountains” (among guerrillas in camps) to the “martyrs I gave to the cause from my family,” Onur would be seen by many to have abundantly paid her *bedel* to the Kurdish cause. She discussed the torture she was subjected to years earlier:

I passed through a severe bodily test for four days, against my will. I remember it vividly. When I think about those moments today, I tell myself that I met the willpower of my body, how much my body could endure, to what extent my body could hold its relation to that kind of violence. For this reason, the fear disappears at that moment, because you know what that pain is, what it means. I differ from all of you because I know where this willpower of my constitution could take me. Because of this torture they used on my body, I know about the willpower stemming from pain. It is what it is. Seriously! Now I look at others who show their weaknesses. That is very irritating. That social weakness, how they are vulnerable to life, I cannot accept that. Now that I went through those moments and am now in this state of mind, others call me *madi*!

Torture became a way for Onur to understand what her body could do and the potentialities of her endurance. Yet Onur believed that she and others kept paying the *bedel* by the risks

they took every day. She had a pink Kalashnikov tattoo on her body that, for her, signified how she continued “to carry forth the cause while still mocking the masculinist associations of guns, with its pink color,” as she put it. Critiquing the mainstream LGBTI movement for its liberal discourse of nonviolence, which usually has little to say about the violent realities of the Kurdish cause, Onur believes in violence as a form of defending autonomy and necessity. Her tattoo’s embodiment of violence immediately became politically charged in her intimate encounters—often with respect, love, and bonding with the Kurdish customers, often with skepticism with Turkish ones. Nevertheless, these embodied and violent intimacies are fundamentally constituted in the language of the Turkish Other. She told me that she kept paying the bedel by being unable to think about desire and practicing sexual intimacy in the Kurdish language:

EMRAH. How do you think bedel works in more intimate settings?

ONUR. For example, Mehmet [one of her customers] is a person who has a map of Kurdistan on his back. Then, when you enter the scene, you see that we are doing and paying the heaviest bedel of sex. Paying through fucking and fucking. The most natural point of having sex. You experience that differently in a different language that does not belong to you. There will be times when we will come to that, we will. We will talk about sex in a different language, the way we desire in a different language, and we will say that we pay the bedel to others. There will be occasions for that too. But the day will come when we will talk about the bedel of our desire in our own language.

E. Can you elaborate on this bedel of desire?

O. Think of this. I cannot still talk about it, about my own culture, that most basic and natural form of sex, which sometimes gets political and in those moments it gets whimsical. I don’t have any feelings toward or any drive for taking it seriously, because it comes to me as a mockery. It feels funny [to speak of sex in Kurdish]. But I should have been obliged to find my desire and passion in my own language. Why shouldn’t this be political? Go and talk about this to others. Would they take it seriously? Then start over from that seriousness part. A language must have a conceptual capacity to tell the problems of this identity.

In this account, Kurds in Turkey pay a bedel of desire because they cannot experience sexual intimacy and think about gender and sexuality in their own language. What makes this bedel of desire unpayable is the collective loss in a continuum that permeates various realms of life. Onur feels that she has been paying the heaviest bedel for being unable to weave the Kurdish language of desire in her intimate moments with lovers in

bed, in convivial *gullüm* sessions with friends, or in the realm of Kurdish LGBTI activism. With her subtle but often-hilarious tirades, Onur taught others about their kinship to other trans and queer people, as well as to the (secular, socialist) Kurdish guerrillas. In doing so, she often used her authority and knowledge about gender and the Kurdish cause learned in prisons, mountain camps, and interviews with guerrillas—including Öcalan and one of her martyred sisters. Her informal teachings were based on the bedel that Kurds have all been paying collectively. She put others in their place, saying, “What you claim to know as your desire is not even yours. It is what society dictates.” This sometimes involved talking about sexual topics in the Kurdish language with a Turkish accent, shifting sorrows over a collective trauma and shame, and replacing them with bursts of laughter and joy.

Value of work and life

How Onur and many others say they pay the bedel over time is fundamentally linked to the value of their work, which they negotiate with sex workers, customers, neighbors, heterosexual friends, lovers, drug dealers, soldiers, and the police, many of whom have gradually become relatively less hostile to trans and queer people. Contesting the usual idea of sex work as an exchange of intimacy for money, Onur, Rojda, Elis, Derya, and many others described their work as “therapeutic help,” “pedagogic work,” or, as they saw it, “affective labor”—work that produces intense emotional responses and attachments (Korkman, 2015; Mitchell, 2016; Wilson, 2004). Sex work and gender performance, with their multiple registers and dimensions, allow customers to envision their selves and the Other, find opportunities to express themselves in relatively safe intimate spaces, tell their stories of violence and years of prison, discuss sexual concerns they might have in their marriage, talk about their scars and tattoos, or express the shame they feel because they cannot fulfill heteronormative expectations and perform hegemonic masculinities. These intimate and intensely emotional experiences help them value erotic desires, achieve bodily and social connection, cross-dress, experience nonheteronormative sexual practices and intimacies, repeatedly fall in love outside enforced heteronormative romance, be taken care of by their trans lovers, have sex with the ones they fall in love with, and use drugs to travel across different intensities of intimacy.

In many studies on sex work and intimacy, monetary exchanges are the foundation of commodified intimacy (Constable, 2009; Zelizer, 2005), which is “masked” under a “performance of love” (Brennan, 2004), extensive care (Allison, 1994), and “the girlfriend experience” that sex workers provide their customers. In these interactions the intimate experience is emotionally and physically constituted, sold, and purchased as “bounded authenticity” (Bernstein, 2007, p. 103). In Amed, sex workers talked about their labor with reference to five recurring themes: (1) the difficulties of the sex work economy, which is saturated with surveillance and heteropatriarchal violence; (2) the unaccounted-for and undervalued time and effort they spend in preparation for sex work; (3) the ephemeral

and sexual intensity of their way of work, which they claim to be “authentic”; (3) the struggle to get paid (more than the agreed amount, if possible); (4) the additional “comfort” they provide to friends, customers, and even other sex workers (any of whom could also betray them), who might provide, for example, a safe place to stay and shower; and (5) talking and listening to their customers about their lives, which, according to sex workers, is therapeutic and helps customers change their lives.

For these efforts, sex workers seek to be compensated with gifts from their customers. Through these gifts, sex workers reclaim a degree of autonomy (Canova, 2020), contrary to how sex work is often characterized as exploitative and oppressive, especially by the socialist, collectivist ethics of the PKK. By renegotiating the price of their services and incorporating the customer into a relationality of debt, sex workers compel the customer to give more in showing his respect to their struggles and recognizing their affective and therapeutic work. As a result, sex workers expand and broaden collective indebtedness, since the customers often feel indebted to them while willingly paying more than just the monetary exchange value of the work.

These negotiations require cultivating a talent not only for adopting and using surveillance, but also for disorienting and short-circuiting it by dissimulating and revealing one’s relations with the state, the police in particular. Sex workers must professionalize themselves; represent themselves as strong and resilient; build ties with other sex workers, despite widespread *madilik* (conflict and betrayal); and even earn fame in the economy so as not to become an easy and vulnerable target. One’s experience of *madilik* is filled with emotions, including fear, frustration, sorrow, loneliness, and the never-ending strain to prove oneself to others, as well as joy, *gullüm* (fun), self-confidence, courage, and the felt power of taking control of ongoing dramas. Moreover, recounting all this allows others to learn the profession, recognize how the narrator has paid the *bedel*, and cultivate a shared and affective history of struggle.

In the stories shared among the queer and trans community, specific personas emerge, protagonists who are admired and whose names are adopted by others as nicknames. These names, often humorous, can spread awe in the community, along with respect for how these characters accumulated money, caused trouble, took revenge, and defended their well-being and income. Wild Woman Arzu, for example, showed “how a woman takes what she wants by ripping off other women,” as she and others often said. Scissor Serpil would personify another character, dangerous yet vulnerable; she was created as part of a theater piece about the 1990s trans subculture in Istanbul. Through these personas, sex workers cultivate their fame in and outside the community, being desired by customers as powerful women.

For the inexperienced, vulnerability can lead to theft, blackmail, and exploitation. Besides the familiar narratives of stolen cell phones, the danger of being marked as “vulnerable” had significant implications, such as the involvement of Mafia groups, which were not much discussed, out of fear, but which haunted my interlocutors. These groups often visit sex workers as customers to gather information about their vulnerabilities and valuables before deciding to “hit their houses” (Turkish:

eve çökmek). Derya, who was being bullied by unknown men appearing at her door demanding money, was trying to show her resilience by telling them about her sphere of influence in the city. For Elis, this meant severe personal danger; she was once kidnapped and robbed, having no one to help her at the time. She recounted that these gangsters came to her house as customers, revealing their guns after sex, opening the door to their partners to discuss her fabricated “misdeeds” against their friends and other sex workers (e.g., a friend of Elis had gossiped about her and complained that Elis had given her necklace to another sex worker as a gift). She lost her savings to these groups and moved to another house with a partner she could trust, now that her apartment had been “exploded.”

Such an “explosion” usually ended with eviction. Sex workers, therefore, tried to buy houses to avoid this, as well as to avoid landlords and neighbors’ constant bullying, and to start processes of juridico-medical gender confirmation (Zengin, 2024). Those without a house had to deal with landlords, agencies, and neighbors, negotiating their gender intelligibility with heteronormative society. Indeed, given that the Ofis district of Amed is known as an already-“exploded” area for its sexual scandals, landlords often do not rent houses to trans and queer people. They often require a reference from a civil servant (teachers, government personnel, doctors, etc.). Sex workers often rent these houses via their (“passing”) gay friends or partners, who may then pressure (blackmail) them to let them stay in their houses by threatening to have their contracts canceled. Without a civil servant or a friend’s help, sex workers make their styles and gender performance more masculine to secure a house, often failing to do both.

Some agencies rent houses to trans and queer sex workers. But shortly after moving in, sex workers sometimes realize that their work and identities have been exposed to neighbors, landlords, or the police. They speculate that these agencies have exposed them in order to have them evicted and to earn broker’s fees from new tenants. The work of documenting “suspicious activities” (Ochs, 2013) and informing the police about sex workers relies on the distrust of neighbors, who surveil sex workers and sometimes ask for sex in exchange for (temporary) silence. Some sex workers limit their daily customers to one or two in order to keep their work discreet, while others prefer apartments whose front doors stay open (allowing customers to avoid waiting outside and drawing attention). These choices show the role of suspicion, paranoia, mistrust, and betrayal in the sex work economy, as well as impression management and risk assessment, since subjects must be on guard constantly while preempting others’ attempts to attack or undermine them.

Surveillance thus plays a vital role in sex workers’ efforts to protect themselves. At the same time, it shapes the narratives of a struggle within and outside the community, allowing sex workers to negotiate the value of their struggle by accounting for how much they pay the *bedel* in transforming society’s attitudes toward LGBTI people. These negotiations occur not only in the community and Kurdish society but also in the Kurdish movement and the Turkish state. Take Onur, for example, who referred to Öcalan’s calls for an autonomous society in which Kurds could culturally, and structurally, transform themselves;

she thought her ethical approach to “pedagogic sex work” contributed to the cause of radical transformation by gradually changing people’s attitudes toward trans people through intimacy. For others, such as Elis, sex work and sex workers’ open existence are transforming society while they embrace and endure the violence they suffer. “When a street peddler harasses me,” she told me, “even that catcalling functions as resistance for the long term, say, five years, despite how much it saddens me. Because we are becoming more visible. It [the *bedel*] is about embracing the violence, knowing about it.” By being visible, enduring transphobic and homophobic violence and surveillance, and allowing their customers and lovers to discover and experience their desires often deemed immoral, these sex workers constituted a shared sense of what they collectively contribute to society.

Just as sex workers’ militant loved ones contributed to the national cause—losing their lives, serving years in prison, and enduring and at times even embracing the violence of the Turkish state—trans and queer sex workers endure and embrace the violence they live through, and understand it as the *bedel* they pay for their right to exist and have a livelihood. Not only do they configure their intimate relations with customers to change their perspectives on gender, sexuality, and nation, but they also inscribe the violence they suffer with new meanings and feelings that help Kurds become accustomed to and value non-normative sexualities. Hence, the very suffering they endure becomes the debt they pay to the Kurdish struggle, broadening the context of indebtedness as the experiences of queer suffering and struggle become valuable and respectable inside and outside their communities.

How sex work is entangled with surveillance is primarily informed by the Turkish state’s presence in the sex work economy. The experience of being surveilled by the state is shared among Kurdish society and the Kurdish political movement, aligning their divergent struggles. The conflicts and even intimate struggles among various actors often land them in the police station because of complaints made by neighbors and rental agencies, false reports made by other sex workers, violent fights or robberies that end up in prosecution, or the tracking of sex workers’ homes by the vice or narcotics units (or several of these). If a home is *mimlenmiş* (figuratively marked by the police), then it comes under surveillance in various ways. The police, often in civilian clothes, stop and search those leaving the apartment and ask about their purposes, relationships, and knowledge of the local scene. Sometimes, police officers may behave kindly to a playful gesture or invitation by the sex worker. On other occasions, the affair ends with the home shut down and prosecution, usually not for sex work itself but for a fabricated scenario of facilitating sex work and drug use. In the face of this major threat, sex workers must interact with customers cautiously, knowing that any information they disclose may be used against them. Discussing responses to police checks, sex workers and customers can often make it seem as if they have known each other for a long time; if their home has been marked, renting a second apartment might allow sex workers to remain under the radar and continue their work.

On some occasions, the police might be responding to complaints made by other sex workers in return for money, leading

to anything from a police raid on a sex worker’s home to the prosecution of trans and queer sex workers or brothel managers. In other cases, sex workers’ homes may be searched not for drugs or sex work but for guns and wanted Kurdish guerrillas. For example, a queer sex worker friend, Serkan, who had just started work as a cross-dresser, said the police had entered his house and detained him, asking him about guns. The police said they didn’t care about his meth pipes; they were looking for the guns and people he was supposedly hiding. After seeing that he was a cross-dresser, however, they decided that it was a false alarm and that they had been misled. In the aftermath, friends gossiped about the incident. One of them speculated that

Scissor Serpil must have conspired against him because he hadn’t returned Serpil’s gift, which was her used bed. Serpil will do anything to get more than she gives, so she probably snitched on him [to the cops], lying that he was helping the guerrillas.

In another incident, the police raided a brothel managed by Alev, who was sentenced to prison while her home was closed. Alev was well known for a viral video shared on social media, which shows her beating up a customer who refused to pay her because he said she wasn’t beautiful enough. When we learned about the house raid, we immediately thought it was because the video might have made her *mimlenmiş* (marked) by the police. Later, one of my interlocutors told Alev and me that another trans sex worker had confessed that she had informed the police about Alev’s home in return for reward money, because Alev did not let her work in Alev’s home. Shortly after her release, Alev was sentenced to 16 years in prison for other crimes involving *çaçalık* (facilitation of sex work) and for assault, which led her to flee the country. Many of my interlocutors talked about their court cases, which included detailed investigations and documentation of social media activities and phone calls for sex work, *çaçalık*, or sharing content on Kurdish rights on social media, some of which dated back as far back as 10 years. These cases were often kept on hold for years without a decision. The delay added to how queer and trans Kurds paid their *bedel*: if not by imprisonment, then by having their lives and livelihoods held in suspense while they were ostensibly “free.”

AFFECTIVE REGIMES OF SECURITY, DEBT, AND INTIMACY

Bedel is an insurgent ethos among those who have sacrificed for the Kurdish cause. For decades, it has been deeply felt and voiced in Amed and elsewhere in Kurdish Turkey, but due to the intensified securitization of the region since 2015, it has been expressed in new ways. Its appearance and use in contexts outside the Kurdish national struggle, including in the sex work economy and the underground drug market, illustrate affective dimensions of survival strategies that involve innovative approaches to livability and valuation. These innovations are deeply implicated in advancing the cause, since those who use them seek to transform society (at the cost of appropriating

surveillance), positing themselves at the heart of the Kurdish struggle's intimate politics.

The limitations of dualistic approaches to power, focusing on domination and resistance, are well known, and we can appreciate that it is not especially helpful or realistic to consider every act of queer folks as already subversive (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Duggan, 2002; Feldman, 2015). In this case, however, Kurdish trans and queer folks are constituting value in and through the violence they suffer. Today, in many parts of the world, securitization and precarity are intensifying, and so studying the intersections of security and intimacy is crucial to understanding how gender minorities are increasingly targeted and how this affects their communities and socialities. Populist leaders in Turkey, Italy, Hungary, and Russia continue to demonize and ostracize LGBTI people and organizations as puppets of the "international gay agenda," which supposedly aims at undermining the moral values of their nations (Kocamaner, 2019; Savcı, 2021); meanwhile, we are seeing the global rise of right-wing and trans-exclusionary feminist ideologies, which push for a disquieting anti-trans and anti-queer agenda, demanding the protection of a cis-heteronormative present and futurity by securitizing queer and trans lives (Bassi & LaFleur, 2022). In contexts of more acute crisis, LGBTI persons are often depicted as suffering subjects or reservoirs of subversion and resistance, as noted in scholarly critiques (e.g., Horton, 2024; Namaste, 2009; Prosser, 1998; Haritaworn & Snorton, 2013; Westbrook, 2020); in such depictions, solidarity work can turn LGBTI persons into "rightful subjects" whose labor and struggles may be valued only through nonviolent resistance. Yet we have seen how important it may be for trans and queer subjects to take up and repurpose the violence inflicted on them to sustain their lives and renegotiate their value.

Globally, the begrudging acceptance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual folks has been accompanied by the "mainstreaming" of these identities (through corporatization and a moderating of demands, etc.). Yet trans folks find themselves excluded from much of this. Their frequent association with sex work (for lack of viable alternatives), together with the overt brutality and more subtle violence involved in this livelihood, seems to exclude them from the mainstreaming and middle-classing of queer lives. Studying trans and queer sex work economies uncovers the multivalence of this violence. Rather than constituting moral worlds with a liberal ethos of individual autonomy and nonviolence (Günay, 2019), or cultivating an ethical subject of subversion and resistance, the lived experiences of securitization in the sex work economy show that the liberal ethos may not always offer the most viable strategies for these subjects' material and affective needs. The indebtedness that sex workers feel in their most intimate and mundane encounters constitutes social relations and an ethical subjectivity imbricated with the violence saturating their lives.

When we take the affective aspects of sex work and debt into consideration, conventional understandings of intimacy, security, debt, and marginalization can be destabilized. Surveillance, as we've seen, can be used by sex workers to secure their own survivability and a livelihood. As queer and trans Kurds reinscribe the meanings of debt and value in their intimate economies and negotiate their existence with broader Kurdish

society and the Turkish state, they feel a sense of belonging with the people they surveil and with Kurdish society, and they formulate alternative forms of respectability, honor, and belonging, in resonance with their lived realities. These realities demonstrate alternative socialities to those of global discourses of gay rights, pride, and queer respectability, which have now become a way to measure the ethos of Western modernity and democracy, feeding into global discourses on security (Amar, 2013; Manalansan, 2003; Puar, 2007; Stout, 2014).

Anthropological work on gender, debt, security, and intimacy shows the limitations of assumptions about the state as the object and purveyor of security, debt as a feature of monetized exchange, and sex work as commodified intimacy, since they may not be adequate to the lived realities of everyday life. Subjects in particular contexts of debt may not seek release from indebtedness through, say, collective refusals of debt or claims for redemption, since their debt is unpayable and may become a source of survival. A critical anthropological perspective would look at how affective debt is organized and connected to larger structures of political economy and security. This could allow us to see the fringe possibilities of life in the ruins of capitalism and militarism (Tsing, 2015), as demonstrated by the lived experiences of queer and trans Kurds in Amed.

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ENDNOTES

¹ All research participants' names are pseudonyms. The interviews and informal conversations informing this article were primarily conducted in Turkish, occasionally transitioning to the Kurmançî dialect of the Kurdish language and to the LGBTI dialect known as Lubunca (Kontovas, 2012).

² In Amed, sex work is broadly defined, since not all sex workers are regularly involved in the profession. Among my research participants, nearly 60 of them were involved in sex work at some point in their lives. While there are no exact numbers on how many sex workers come to Amed for work, my interlocutors often talked about how sex workers uphold the local econ-

omy. During my time with them, my interlocutors narrated the details of over 15 incidents involving house-raiding or preventing outsiders from working in Amed.

³In this article, I use *queer* as a broad term to refer to interlocutors who express ambiguous, fluid, and often strategic identification with (local) categories of gender and sexual orientation. In Amed, how people identify often shifts; the various categories included gay, homosexual, trans (used in adjective and noun forms), *travesti*, cross-dresser (queer men wearing feminine attire for sex work), and *lubunya* (a term in Lubunca that, in some contexts, refers specifically to effeminate gay men or trans women, and in others to all LGBTI persons). How people described themselves changed according to how a particular context shaped a term's specific connotations (e.g., medicalized, homonormative, pejorative, celebratory) and what securitizing implications it might have.

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