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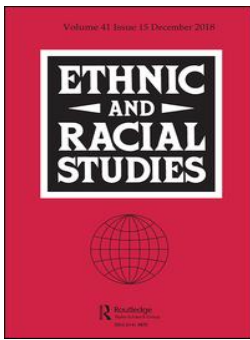


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# Fighting racism in Turkey: Kurdish homeownership as an anti-racist practice

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the housing experiences of Kurdish migrants/working classes in a Turkish-dominated working-class district of Zeytinburnu in Istanbul since the 1990s. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the article argues that Kurds experienced housing discrimination predominantly in the forms of refusal of tenancy and the threat of removal from their homes by their Turkish neighbours and landlords. To struggle against this form of racism, they developed homeownership as a form of everyday anti-racist practice. For them, owned home rather than rented home emerged as a space of resistance where they can restore their dignity and integrity in a place polluted by racialized power relations with a long colonial history. The article also argues that the reproduction of the space in the form of apartmentalization since the 1980s and the crisis of the housing industry in the 2000s played important roles in Kurds' development of homeownership as an anti-racist practice.

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**KEYWORDS** Everyday antiracism; homeownership; working-class neighbourhood; Turkish racism; Kurds; Istanbul

## Introduction

A historical examination demonstrates that as long as there has been racism, there has been anti-racism (O'Brien 2009, 501). However, the concept of "anti-racism" was created in the twentieth century and it has been generally used especially in English-speaking countries since the 1960s (Bonnett 2000, 10). Today, in many parts of the world, anti-racism emerges as "forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/or ameliorate racism" (Bonnett 2000, 3). Through various anti-racist strategies, practices and discourses, subordinated and racialized subjects try to create space to exist independent of the colonial gaze and achieve self-determination (Brown 2017). During this process, the ideological and practical counter-responses to racism might be macro-level and organizational or micro-level

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and individual (Lamont and Fleming 2005; O'Brien 2009); and these micro-level and macro-level responses might also intersect with one another on many levels at the same time.

In parallel to the emergence of counter-reactions to racism, an extensive literature has been developed by various scholars to explore how subordinated and racialized individuals and groups respond to racism especially in white-Christian-dominated regions. The Philippines, Chinese people, Arabs, Blacks, Africans, Muslims or other groups living in the USA, Canada, Britain, France, Australia constitute the focus groups of this literature. While some scholars of this literature have focused on everyday anti-racist practices and discourses (Lamont 2000; Lamont, Morning, and Mooney 2002; Lamont and Fleming 2005; Pon 2005; Gosine 2012; Chiang, Low, and Collins 2013; Aquino 2016), others have mostly concentrated on macro-level organizational anti-racist practices or discourses (Bonnett 2000; O'Brien 2009; Brown 2017). Nevertheless, communities or individuals developing discourses and practices against racism have not only been the subordinated ones. Members of the dominant groups have also developed anti-racist practices and discourses, and parallel to this, some scholars also have examined them (Bonnett 2000; Mathews 2012; Sullivan 2014). Besides, another group of scholars, on the other hand, have examined the anti-racist intellectual theoretical traditions (Bannerji 1995; Dua 1999; Bonnett 2000; Bakan and Dua 2014).

According to the prominent scholars, macro-level organizational or institutional anti-racist strategies and practices of racialized working-class and middle-class groups in the white-Christian-dominated regions comprise organizing socio-political movements, establishing anti-racist institutions or organizing protests (Bonnett 2000; O'Brien 2009; Virdee 2014; Brown 2017). Micro-level everyday anti-racist strategies and practices of racialized middle-class groups, on the other hand, are the following: working hard, gaining educational achievement, social mobility (Aquino 2016), educational and occupational attainment (Gosine 2012) gaining knowledge, demonstrating intelligence and competence (Lamont and Fleming 2005), playing the mainstream card, such as de-ethnicizing a name by adopting an English name, westernizing the decor of a place, etc. (Chiang, Low, and Collins 2013) and supporting anti-racism education and employment equity (Pon 2005). Among these scholars, Lamont and Fleming examine everyday anti-racist discourses of racialized working classes and middle classes. They argue that while explaining the equality and universality of human nature, black working and lower-classes in the USA mainly use religion, Bible (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Fleming 2005) biological/physical universalism, group membership criteria such as American nationality, greater morality of blacks in spirituality and other areas, etc. (Lamont 2000). Lamont, Morning and Mooney, on the other hand, examine the responses of the North African working classes to French racism and argue that in dealing with racism

these groups embrace the moral universalism informed by Islam (Lamont, Morning, and Mooney 2002), and they provide evidence of high personal moral character and moral superiority of their own tradition and values over that of the French. In other words, they perceive their own culture as more humane and richer than French culture (Lamont 2000, 43).

This article is situated in the literature on anti-racism and particularly on everyday anti-racism. It will predominantly focus on homeownership and will argue that homeownership is an important form of everyday anti-racist practice that migrant Kurdish working classes have developed against housing discrimination they experience as a form of everyday racism in a Turkish-dominated working-class district in Istanbul. Since this type of anti-racist practice is not examined by the scholars of the anti-racism literature, this paper will contribute to the existing literature from a region located outside the white-Christian-dominated regions. In line with this goal, three crucial research questions of this article will be as follows: (1) How have Kurdish migrants/working classes experienced housing discrimination in Zeytinburnu, a Turkish-dominated working-class district of Istanbul? (2) How have Kurds struggled against housing exclusion? (3) How have Kurds developed homeownership as an anti-racist practice? By examining these questions, this article will not only demonstrate the particular forms of housing discrimination in this specific locality and how homeownership can be perceived as a form of everyday anti-racist practice but also show the linkages between the spatial reorganization of capital, the reproduction of urban space, the crisis of the housing industry and the agency of subordinated and racialized Kurdish working classes in a specific locality.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding northern Kurdistan<sup>2</sup> located within the official borders of Turkey as a long-established Turkish colony with no official-public colonial status (Yarkin 2019; Beşikci 1990), I will consider Kurdish migrants in Istanbul as colonial migrants whose colonial trajectory in the city goes back to the Ottoman period. Given that the Turkish state still constitutionally denies the existence of non-Turkish Muslims living within the official borders of Turkey, there are no official statistics about the housing, education or employment conditions of Kurds residing in major Turkish cities. Due to this fact, many scholarly works regarding Kurdish migrants in Istanbul still predominantly rely on the methods of ethnography and in-depth interviews. Given these circumstances, this article is based on the data collected through a mixed-methods approach, including archival records, oral histories, open-ended in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions and ethnographic observations. During my fieldwork between June 2014 and March 2017 in Zeytinburnu for my PhD dissertation, I have conducted open-ended in-depth interviews, some of which were focus groups interviews, with eighty Turks, ten Albanians and ninety Kurds from different cultural, economic and political backgrounds. My respondents comprised waged and unwaged male and female workers including

leather apparel and fabric apparel workers, hippodrome, bag and retail workers; retired workers including leather tanning, leather apparel, fabric apparel, fabric and knitted fabric workers; housewives (unwaged home labour), fabric and apparel wholesalers, apparel retailers, students and mukhtars (elected official representatives of neighbourhoods). I reached my respondents through private connections and snowball sampling. I am a Kurdish woman researcher who migrated to one of the working-class neighbourhoods of Istanbul, named Kasımpaşa located in Beyoğlu district, in 1990. Due to my long-term connection with Istanbul, I have many Turkish and Kurdish friends who have relatives or friends living in Istanbul's different districts. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I reached the Turkish respondents mostly through my Turkish friends and the Kurdish respondents mostly through my Kurdish friends. Later, I reached my respondents through snowball sampling.

The article is composed of three parts. Firstly, I will layout the historical trajectory of Zeytinburnu's urban development between the 1950s and the 1980s as a squatter district, and will demonstrate how the urban space has socially been reproduced and how the capitalist production relations have been reorganized since the 1980s. Afterwards in the second part of the paper, I will analyze the emergence of housing discrimination against Kurds as a form of everyday racism and its relation to the urban transformation of the district since the 1980s. In the third part of the article, I will show how Kurdish homeownership has emerged as a resistance and an everyday anti-racist practice. Throughout these three parts, I will decipher how Kurdish homeownership is related to the spatial reorganization of capital and the urban transformation of Zeytinburnu since the 1980s.

### **Spatial reorganization of capital and the reproduction of urban space in Zeytinburnu**

In the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, most of the Kurdish migrants in Istanbul were incorporated to the city's labour market from a subordinate position by occupying the low-wage unwanted jobs. Most of them were porters living in poverty and working in very bad conditions (Alakom 2011). Kurdish migration to Istanbul continued throughout the twentieth century and it has significantly increased following the outbreak of a war between the Turkish state and the PKK (Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan: Kurdistan Workers Party). Since the 1980s, the Turkish state has forcefully displaced around 3,000,000 Kurds many of whom migrated to Turkish cities including Istanbul (Barut 2001). Esenler, Esenyurt, Bağcılar, Sultangazi, Ümraniye, Zeytinburnu, Sultanbeyli and Beyoğlu are some of the working-class districts located in Istanbul where most of these Kurds have migrated to.

Having been one of the oldest working-class districts of Istanbul, Zeytinburnu is located in the European part of the city and it is composed of thirteen

neighbourhoods. Beginning from the 1950s until the late 1980s, the district witnessed the construction of many medium and small-scale industries. Between 1955 and 1973, 325 factories (Akbulut 2006, 384) including cotton mills, woollen mills, yarn, food, metal and paper factories were constructed (Akçay 1974, 304–327). While industrialization was taking place, the labour needs of these industries attracted rural migration from different regions to Zeytinburnu by leading to an increase in its population (Hart 1969). Between 1950 and 1980, the district's population increased from 17,000 to 124,543 (Kaya 2004; İBB 2005).

In the 1960s and the 1970s, housing shortage arose as one of the most serious problems of Istanbul. Nevertheless, the state neither regulated the urban processes nor met the housing needs of the rural migrants by leaving this field mostly into informal forces. Consequently, with the goal of solving the housing problems, most of the rural migrants in major cities occupied state-owned territories by building their own single-storey houses by themselves near the factories in unused lands of newly established working-class districts including Zeytinburnu. These houses are called *gecekondu* (literally translated as: built at night) in Turkish (Aslan and Erman 2014, 97–98).

According to Hart's survey, in 1963 51.8 per cent of Zeytinburnu's population consisted primarily of Turkish migrants from Greece, Yugoslavia, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria and a minority from Turkistan, specifically Kirghiz, Kazakh, and Uighur Turks. A minority of Albanians from the Balkans also migrated to the district. The rest of the population originated from within the official borders of Turkey and most of them were Turks. In 1963, Kurdish migrants from northern Kurdistan, officially referred to as "migrants from Eastern and Southeast Anatolia" by the state- comprised a small minority (7.4 per cent) (Hart 1969, 126, 138; Kaya 2004, 98; Çakırer 2012, 90–122).<sup>3</sup> According to my Kurdish respondents, between the 1950s and the 1980s, most of the Kurdish workers were largely incorporated to the labour market of the district from the most subordinate positions as porters, leather tanning workers and hippodrome workers.

Since the 1980s, Istanbul has undergone a significant urban transformation. Starting from the late 1980s, the leather tanning industry and other large-scale industries in Zeytinburnu decentralized to other areas near Istanbul (Akbulut 2006, 385). One of the important developments of the new period was the passing of several laws allowing the construction of up to four-storey apartment buildings on *gecekondu* lands by private building contractors. These laws legally started the apartmentalization process of the *gecekondu* districts in the 1980s (Aslan and Erman 2014, 95). *Gecekondu* owners, many of whom were previously blue collar workers working at the large-scale industrial factories, gave their *gecekondus* to private building contractors in return for apartments or shops. In other words, rather than in return for

money, they gave their *gecekondus* in return for multiple apartments or shops that the contractors will construct on their *gecekondu* lands (Erman 2001). Newly built apartment buildings have been shared by these parts and the number of apartments or shops taken by building contractors and *gecekondu* owners depended on their negotiation power and the size of the lands. The primary economic beneficiaries of this transformation were the building contractors and those who could previously appropriate a large proportion of land in “valuable” areas. According to the *mukhtars* in Zeytinburnu, a majority of the private building contractors in the district have been Turks from the Black Sea region especially from the cities of Trabzon, Kastamonu and Giresun. Given that the majority of *gecekondu* owners consisted of Turks, Turkish working classes highly benefited from this new form of space production since they received multiple apartments in return for one *gecekondu*. Yet, the minority of Kurdish *gecekondu* and land owners also economically benefited from the capitalist reproduction of the space.

The social reproduction of the space has profoundly affected the organization of production processes as well. The spatial reorganization of capital in Zeytinburnu has been reshaped together with the social reproduction of the urban space. For instance, the spatial organization of the textile, leather and apparel industry has been reshaped in accordance with the capitalist rules and the demands of the national and international capital. The post-1980 era has witnessed the restructuring of the forms of labour in major cities according to the concepts of flexibilization and informalization. During this period, small- and medium-sized enterprises employing informal labour have become dominant in the Turkish economy (Yücesan-Özdemir 2003, 188–191).

In the new period textile, apparel and leather production have comprised the main export sectors of Istanbul and the basic production sectors of Zeytinburnu. The textile industry in the district has predominantly been composed of fabric and leather apparel production, and fabric, leather, and apparel trade. As the apartmentalization and the removal of the large-scale factories progressed, in line with the needs of the construction and apparel industry, basements or the first floors of these apartment buildings turned into apparel, leather or bag manufacturing sweatshops demanding cheap and informal labour and the first or the second floors of many apartment buildings located in the main streets turned into apparel, fabric, leather or knitted fabric wholesale and retail trading stores (İBB 2005, 19). Therefore, while the large-scale factories were leaving Zeytinburnu, *gecekondus* turned not only into high-rise residential buildings, but also into trading stores and sweatshops employing unwaged or informal wage labour.

These socio-economic developments were very crucial for the new Kurdish migrants since Zeytinburnu was undergoing a massive social transformation when they arrived. Since their arrival, most of the Kurdish migrants have



incorporated to the labour market of the district from the most subordinate positions. Many Kurdish migrants, including men, women, children and youth, work as waged and unwaged apparel sweatshop workers for family-owned or other apparel sweatshops most of which generally employ two to twenty workers. These sweatshops constitute the bottom layer of the production relations in the district and they are generally located in the dark and humid basements of the newly built apartment buildings. The report of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality does not identify the ethnic identity of those working in the basements, but it acknowledges that low-income people work in the apparel sweatshops. The same report also adds that the workers are mostly women and children and the profit rate of these sweatshops is very low that it is just enough to make a living (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2005, 22–23).

### **Housing discrimination as a form of everyday racism in Zeytinburnu**

Since the 1940s, after the defeat of the Kurdish armed uprisings between the 1920s and the 1930s, the Turkish colonial regime in northern Kurdistan has deepened and continued without any major interruption. Nevertheless, when it comes to the 1970s, various Kurdish organizations employing Marxist–Leninist national liberationist discourses were established. Among them, the PKK has inaugurated guerilla warfare against the Turkish state since 1984 and it has mobilized thousands of Kurdish peasants, sharecroppers, landless peasants, working classes, students and Kurdish urban poor as armed guerillas through an anti-colonial national liberationist ideology. In this period, by identifying the PKK simply as a terrorist organization, the Turkish state ruthlessly responded to the PKK and its civilian supporters. Along with many colonialist activities including torture, rape, mass killings, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and mass imprisonments (İHD 1994; Keskin and Yurtsever 2006; Aras 2014) the state forces evacuated and burned thousands of Kurdish villages, and forcefully displaced thousands of Kurdish peasants. Many of these displaced Kurds have been the ones not accepting to work as village guards against the Kurdish guerillas (McDowall 2007). However, as one of the prominent founders and the leaders of the PKK clearly explains in his book, the PKK cadres also committed many crimes and human rights violations including extrajudicial executions and murder of civilians (Karayilan 2014). Thus, the historical trajectory of the new wave of Kurdish migration to Zeytinburnu since the 1990s is embedded in these historical developments.

Since the 1990s, according to my respondents, the reasons of the new wave of Kurdish migrants to Zeytinburnu have been many. Many of them rejected to be paid village guards for the Turkish state, and thus their houses were burned down and they were forcefully displaced by the

Turkish army. Some of my respondents stated that they experienced physical torture by the state forces while they were in their villages. Some others, on the other hand, said that they experienced PKK's violence and accepted to be paid village guards but could not survive economically that they had to leave their villages.<sup>4</sup> All in all, the Turkish colonial regime, fear of death, torture, violence, war and extreme poverty were the main reasons why Kurdish migrants left their hometowns.

Grosfoguel et al. state that "Migrants do not arrive in an empty or neutral space, but in metropolitan spaces that are already 'polluted' by racial power relations with a long colonial history, colonial imaginary, colonial knowledge and racial/ethnic hierarchies ... " In metropolises, migrants arrive in a space of power relations informed by coloniality (2015, 641). Similarly, when Kurdish migrants arrived in Zeytinburnu, the district had already been "polluted" by racial power relations embedded in a long-term colonial history. Since their arrival, Kurdish migrants have been subjected to Turkish racism in multiple forms. They have been criminalized and racialized by the police, and the Turkish media portrayed them as muggers, criminals, terrorists, suspects and the supporters of the terrorist organization (Gönen 2011). Migrant Kurds in various Turkish regions have been subjected to numerous racially motivated mob attacks (Baki 2013) and one of these violent mob attacks took seven days and happened in Zeytinburnu in 2011. In addition to racist mob attacks, Kurdish migrants in Zeytinburnu also experienced various forms of racism including racist-slurs, police violence, everyday violence, and labour discrimination. Among these, housing discrimination also emerged as an important form of racism. These new Kurdish migrants migrated to the district during the apartment era so that it was no longer possible for them to build *gecekondu*. Thus, they had to rent or buy apartments in newly constructed apartment buildings belonging to past *gecekondu* owners or to contractors. However, this would not be easy in a space polluted by racialized and colonial power relations.

There are no available statistical data on the rate of Turks, who do not want to have a Kurdish neighbour in Zeytinburnu. Nevertheless, it is known that the sentiment of "not wanting a Kurdish neighbour" has been prevalent in other Turkish-dominated cities and towns. For example, according to the research conducted in different parts of Turkey in 2010 by KONDA, a survey company, 62.2 per cent of Turks do not want to have a Kurdish work partner, 47.4 per cent of Turks do not want to have a Kurdish neighbour, and 57.6 per cent of Turks do not want to have a Kurdish bride/wife (KONDA 2011, 88). Similar to other regions, the sentiment of "not wanting a Kurdish neighbour" is prevalent in Zeytinburnu as well. Under these circumstances, Kurdish migrants in Zeytinburnu have experienced housing discrimination as a type of everyday racism predominantly in the forms of refusal of tenancy and the threat of removal from their homes by their neighbours or landlords.

Especially during their initial arrival, since Kurdish migrants were very poor or they were refused as tenants, two, three or sometimes even four families had to live together in the same apartments that somehow they could rent or buy. In other cases, numerous Kurdish families both worked and lived in the apparel sweatshops located mostly in the basements of apartment buildings in very poor conditions. Besides, in comparison to Turkish families, Kurdish families have relatively more children.<sup>5</sup> This fact has led to some Turkish racist stereotypes and insults, such as “They breed quickly” or “Every year Kurds give birth to bastards”.

In this period, one of the most important factors affecting the lives of the Kurds has emerged as the capitalist reproduction of the space that I have briefly summarized in the previous part. The three leading actors directing this process have been the following: the Turkish state, gecekondu owner working classes, most of whom are Turks, and contractors, most of whom are Turks. Unlike the past gecekondu owners receiving multiple apartments during the apartmentalization period, private building contractors do not rent their apartments; rather their goal is to sell their apartments. In addition, unlike the past gecekondu owners, the building contractors do not live in the apartment buildings that they build. Thus, they do not mind who is taken into the apartment buildings as homeowners as much as the past gecekondu owners who generally live in these apartment buildings. Due to these reasons, for Kurds, it appeared relatively easy to buy homes from private building contractors who do not live in these apartment buildings.

In addition to capitalist reproduction of the space, the crisis of the housing industry erupting after the 1999 Marmara earthquake played an important role in Kurds’ development of homeownership as an anti-racist practice. In August 1999, a devastating earthquake measuring 7.4 on the Richter scale hit Golcuk, a district around 100 km far away from Istanbul. This earthquake has led to a major economic crisis in the housing industry of Istanbul in the 2000s (Gülhan 2014). Zeytinburnu was one of the important districts which were negatively affected both by the earthquake and by the crisis of the housing industry that resulted in the significant decrease in the housing prices in the district. Because some of the buildings were damaged and it became apparent that most of them are not able to withstand a strong earthquake. The report of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality on Zeytinburnu contends that starting from the 2000s housing and basement prices significantly decreased and in parallel to this decrease, the migration of low-income people to the district increased (İBB 2005, 99). In other words, these low-income people moved to poorly constructed relatively cheaper apartment buildings, which cannot withstand a strong earthquake. Most of these “low-income people” were Kurdish migrants. According to my respondents, Kurdish migration to Zeytinburnu increased in the 2000s and not all Kurds, but many of them have become homeowners since the 2000s.<sup>6</sup> Consequently,

the capitalist reproduction of the urban space and the crisis of the housing industry emerging in the 2000s created the convenient conditions for Kurds to develop homeownership as an anti-racist practice.

The entrance of the Kurdish migrants to newly built apartment buildings as home owners created disputes between the contactors and the residents of the apartment buildings most of whom were previously gecekondü owners. In many examples, past gecekondü dwellers could not control who is being taken to their building by their contractors. Similar to many other Turkish respondents, this driving instructor and his siblings tell their contractor that they do not want Kurds in their apartment building. However, their contractor does not listen to them. This person was born in 1968 in Zeytinburnu. He identifies himself as a Turk from the Balkans. His father was a factory worker and his mother was a housewife and they lived in a gecekondü until the 2000s. Similar to other gecekondü owners, they receive the title deed of their gecekondü in 1984 and give their gecekondü to a building contractor in return for new apartments in the end of the 1990s. He lives in Yeşiltepe neighbourhood.

Q: Your apartment building is on your past gecekondü land, is not it? Did you have a chance to choose your neighbours?

– Yes it is. We told our contractor that “Do not allow {them}”, but one entered and then in time ... .

Q: Did you tell your contractor that you do not want Kurds in your apartment building?

– Yes we said it. We do not want them.

Q: Didn't he accept it?

– He took one by saying he is a good person but that one bred. You know they breed quickly.

Similar to many other Turkish respondents, this Turkish respondent resents his private building contractor for the reason that he allowed Kurds into their apartment buildings without their permission. Various Turkish respondents, who don't want a Kurdish neighbour in their apartment buildings, describe private building contractors as those ruining the cultural fabric of the district by allowing Kurds to enter Zeytinburnu because of their greed. Therefore, racist practices and ideologies of Turkish inhabitants of the district contradicted the profit demands of the Turkish housing industry.

### **Owning a home as a resistance**

According to Bowser, anti-racism emerges when racially oppressed people demonstrate agency to achieve self-determination (Bowser 1995). To end the racialized violence targeting them, to abolish racism as a structure and to achieve self-determination, Kurds in Zeytinburnu have challenged the racialized structure and Turkish supremacy by establishing their own political

organizations and by organizing various rallies and demonstrations.<sup>7</sup> Many of their non-violent political activities were criminalized and were hindered by the Turkish police and the judiciary. For example, as in northern Kurdistan and other Turkish cities, the local branches of the pro-Kurdish parties in Zeytinburnu have been attacked many times and Kurdish activists have been humiliated, harassed and beaten by the police (TİHV 2002, 220; İHD 2003, 32, 41).

Kurdish inhabitants in Zeytinburnu have been subjected to many racist slurs, such as “dirty Kurds”, “bigot Kurds”, “terrorists”, “Armenians”, “kırö”<sup>8</sup>, “keko”, “Go back to where you came from!”, “Don’t speak Kurdish here!” and “The best Kurd is a dead Kurd”. These anti-Kurdish and anti-Armenian racist slurs are profoundly related to the Armenian Genocide that took place in 1915<sup>9</sup> and the long-term Turkish colonial domination in Kurdistan. In some instances, because of these racist slurs and oppression, some tenant Kurds could not continue living in their homes and they were forced to leave by their landlords and neighbours. Through these practices reproducing racism, coloniality and colonial ethnic hierarchies, Kurds’ right to housing has been violated. Forcefully displaced Kurds did experience homelessness not only in their hometowns in northern Kurdistan but also in a Turkish metro-pole due to the same reasons.

The following remarks of a Kurdish female respondent represent a common experience demonstrating the everyday racism experienced by Kurds and its impacts on their lives. She is born in 1985 in one of the villages of a Kurdish city, Şirnex. After being forced to become village guards, her family rejects it and they are forced to leave their town and they move to Zeytinburnu in the 1990s. For a long time, she works as an unwaged child worker in her family’s apparel sweatshop and currently, she works as a sale assistant for her family’s small-scale wholesale apparel shop targeting domestic open markets in Istanbul. They live and work in Beştelsiz neighbourhood. Concerning her childhood years in the district, she stated the following:

– We could not speak Turkish. My older brother had come couple of months before us. He was staying in a sweatshop. We did not have a home to stay. We started staying in my brother’s workplace. We used to stay right next to the sewing machines in the entrance of the sweatshop. It was a sweatshop of a guy from Malatya. My older brother and my older sister were working for him. There was a guy, a supporter of the Welfare Party *{Refah Partisi}*. There was a gecekondu in that neighbourhood. He rented that gecekondu for us.

Q: How were your relations with your neighbours there?

– At that time, we were child, we used to go out, they used to call us dirty Armenians ... I remember, {as if we were} kids infested with lice, {they used to call us} dirty Kurd, Armenian Kurd, stuff like that. For some time we were ashamed of saying that we are Kurdish. When I was a kid, I hated my parents. Why are our parents like that? Why our mother and father cannot speak {Turkish}? Why

they are not modern? For some time I was ashamed of being a Kurd ...

Q: How did you survive at that time?

– We opened a place for ourselves by working. It was a small place with two {sewing} machines. My older brother, the other brother and my two sisters worked there. Later when my older brother left home for the military service, my mother compulsorily started to work. My sister and I also had to work. We had to leave the school ... The sweatshop continued for couple of years. At that time we bought an apartment through installments. We stayed in that gecekondu for three years. My mother had relatives in Van. Our *kirves*<sup>10</sup> were in Germany. We borrowed {money} from them. As Kurds we were oppressed in that neighbourhood. They wanted us to leave that home. My mother collected money from different places {and bought an apartment} through installments ... He {the private contractor} sold us the apartment while it was under construction. There were no windows. We moved there like that. There were many people from Kastamonu in that neighbourhood. They have never accepted us there. Neither the people in the apartment building, nor the people in that neighbourhood. Constant oppression.

This quote is a good example to show how profoundly racialized structure of the district, racist slurs and housing discrimination as a form of everyday racism have affected Kurds' lives and their survival strategies. Since many Kurds were frequently refused as tenants or they were threatened to be removed from their homes, homeownership emerged as a strategy for survival and empowerment. In addition to their political mobilization in the public space of the district or in northern Kurdistan, homeownership appeared as one of the other crucial resistance practices of Kurds to achieve self-determination and escape from racist colonial gaze of Turks in their everyday lives. With regard to the importance of home for black people in the USA, bell hooks states that for African-American people and particularly for black women, a homeplace has a radical political dimension. For them home is a place where they can restore to themselves the dignity that denied them on the outside in the public world. At home they do not directly encounter white racist aggressions and "they heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination". Therefore, in the midst of oppression, domination and racism, homeplace emerges as a site of resistance and liberation struggle for black people (Hooks 1990, 42–43). Similarly, for Kurdish migrants in Zeytinburnu rather than "rented home", "owned home" emerges as a space of resistance where they can escape from Turkish racist aggression. For Kurds, constructing a relatively safe homeplace becomes possible through homeownership rather than tenancy. Nevertheless, this has not been an easy process. As the following respondents put it eloquently, in order to own a home, Kurdish migrants work for long hours, they reduce their spending and remain hungry for the sake of saving money. The following story is typical for many Kurdish working classes in Zeytinburnu. This man is a thirty-five-year-old Kurdish apparel worker from a village of Mêrdîn, and he works for

his family-owned sweatshop located in the basement of an apartment building. He works and lives in Çırpıcı neighbourhood.

I remember during those times there was this problem of not renting home to Kurds. You go to ten places, nine of them used to tell you no. One of them gives it to you and somehow you get {a home}. People's anger, by saying "What does that mean? How come they do not give a home? Does not it come with money?" When they initially started working, they used to save things that they could eat or they could spend for their children. The first job was to buy a home. Home was more essential than eating and drinking, because of the oppression and anger, the first thing is home. For instance, borrowing money, if someone has ten liras, if the home is twenty, he/she finds money and somehow buys a home for himself/herself.

The importance of the goal of owning a home has influenced Kurds' consumption habits to such an extent that they significantly limited for their daily livelihood expenditures such as food, education and healthcare. Some Turkish respondents observe that in comparison to Turkish inhabitants, Kurds in Zeytinburnu spend less money or no money for daily livelihood needs or leisure activities, such as eating out, drinking out, going to cinema and concerts or for buying fashionable clothing. A thirty-seven-year-old Turkish woman from the Balkans, who has worked in the apparel sweatshop in Zeytinburnu for twenty-seven years as a precarious wage-worker since her childhood, had many things to say about Kurdish homeownership and Kurds' consumption habits. She lives in Telsiz neighbourhood.

– They have many relatives, their sisters worked, their siblings worked. All of them bought homes in two to three years. They all settled in Zeytinburnu. Now they have become natives of Zeytinburnu. We are still tenants but they are natives ... They eat less than what we eat. For instance, they go to public bread store {to buy bread}, sometimes they eat pasta. They save all the money. For example, when we receive our wages, although we give {some part of} it to home {to our family}, we take some part of it to ourselves, but they do not do it like that. For example, they don't give money to girls. Whatever he earns, he does not give wages. All the money accumulate in a moneybox. Later they buy a home. We don't do like that. If we get one thousand we give four hundred of it to home {to our family}, and take the rest to ourselves. We meet our needs. We go out. On the one hand we try to live our youth. You need to be self sacrificing to save {money} ... You know we both want to own goods and properties but we cannot be self-sacrificing. I cannot give all my money to the home {to my family} and borrow money for years.

Q: Why do you think they are like that?

– They are like that because it's their structure. They live together. For example, our friends, they are six siblings, the brides also live with them. The sons join the army. The brides stay there. The sons come {back} they live together. You know we cannot do it. They are very crowded.

To accomplish the goal of owning a home, Kurdish migrants had to work very hard for long hours; in fact, Kurdish workers have to work harder than

Turkish workers not experiencing racism. Home insecurity pushed Kurds into working beyond acceptable limits. In addition to working beyond acceptable limits, self-exploitation and remaining hungry for the sake of owning a home emerged as forms of struggle in the context of racism, coloniality and capitalism. These forms of resistance signify the Kurdish agency. However, Kurdish agency has not eliminated racism as a social regime and structure, and, in fact, it has led to further racist stereotypes among Turks in the district. Some other remarks made by the Turkish working classes about the Kurdish homeownership in Zeytinburnu are the following: “They don’t give wages to their kids”, “They don’t send their kids to school”, “They make their kids work”, “They are obsessed with property”, “They are greedy”, “They want to get this place, and later that place” and “Their only goal is to make more properties”. These remarks demonstrate that Kurds’ struggle against housing discrimination, their agency and their homeownership have led to the emergence of further racialized stereotypes.

## Conclusion

In her well-known book, *Understanding Everyday Racism*, Philomena Essed contends that from a macro-perspective, racism is “a system of structural inequalities and a historical process”. From a micro-perspective, some specific practices are consistent with existing macro-structures of racial inequality in the system and these practices, which are realized by agents, become racist when they activate existing structural inequality in the system (Essed 1991, 39). She identifies these practices as everyday racism. In line with Essed’s definition of everyday racism, this article has demonstrated that Kurdish migrants/working classes in Zeytinburnu have experienced housing discrimination as everyday racism in the form of refusal of tenancy and the threat of removal from their homes. When they arrived in the district, many of them were rejected as tenants, or they were threatened to be removed from their homes once they rented a home. Besides, they were subjected to various racist slurs in their everyday lives. Under these circumstances, owning a home has emerged as a way of resistance and survival for Kurds. Similar to blacks in the USA, for Kurds in Zeytinburnu, home has become a place where they can restore their dignity and integrity. In these conditions, where being a tenant turned into an everyday violence, owning a home has emerged as a way of eliminating this violence and regaining strength to a certain extent. This article has demonstrated that to create space to exist independent of the Turkish colonial gaze and achieve self-determination, Kurdish working classes have developed homeownership as an everyday anti-racist practice. Thus, homeownership can also be perceived as an anti-racist practice of subordinated racialized subjects.



This article has also demonstrated that both racialization of Kurds and Kurds' resistance against racism in Zeytinburnu are deeply linked to the spatial reorganization of capital and the reproduction of the urban space. On the one hand, Kurdish migrants incorporated into the labour market of the district from a racialized and subordinate position; on the other hand, they utilized the "opportunities" created by the crisis of the housing industry after the Marmara earthquake in the 2000s. By working beyond acceptable limits, remaining hungry and limiting their consumption Kurds developed homeownership as a resistance. Thus Kurdish agency and structure of the urban space of Zeytinburnu are linked to one another in Kurds' development of homeownership as a form of anti-racist practice.

Bonnett argues that "anti-racism cannot be adequately understood as the inverse of racism" (Bonnett 2000, 2). Because, one entity might practise anti-racism in a way that it might perpetuate racism by another definition (O'Brien 2009, 502). Similarly, Kurdish homeownership might also perpetuate racism by another definition. Thus, this type of counter hegemonic challenge of Kurdish inhabitants should not be perceived as a practice aiming to fight racism for all Kurds or abolish the racist structure and coloniality as a whole. However, in the case of Zeytinburnu, Kurdish homeownership emerges as a challenge to Turkish racism trying to keep Kurds in their subordinate position and strengthen Turkish supremacy.

## Notes

1. Since 2011 as in many working-class districts in Istanbul, Zeytinburnu has also received hundreds of migrants from Syria. These migrants have experienced different forms of racism from Turks and Kurds carrying Turkish citizenship. Nevertheless, this article will not attempt to examine their experiences.
2. This paper assumes that the category of "northern Kurdistan" does not negate the category of "Western Armenia". The use of the concept of "northern Kurdistan" should not be understood such that this paper ignores or denies the history of Armenians, Assyrians and other non-Muslim communities in these regions and the racist crimes of Kurds and Turks against them.
3. While a small number of Christians, including Greeks and Armenians, also lived in the district, according to my respondents, many of them left Zeytinburnu after the 1955 pogroms committed against them by Muslim groups.
4. Between 1990 and 2000, around 81,000 people most of whom were peasants migrated to Zeytinburnu and its population reached 287,897 in 2016 (TÜİK 2017). Data from the TÜİK (*Turkish Statistical Institute*) survey reveal that forging around 32.2 per cent of the district's population, almost 92,891 people come from northern Kurdistan. However, not everyone born in northern Kurdistan is ethnically Kurdish and there are many Kurds living in Anatolian cities, such as Konya and Ankara, as well.
5. According to KONDA's research in Turkey and northern Kurdistan in 2010, 18.5 per cent of Kurds live in more than nine-member families. Yet, this rate is only 2.3 per cent among Turks. The rate of Kurds living in six to eight-members of

families is 35.8 per cent and this rate is 15.4 per cent for Turks. Kurds living in three to four members of families is 41.3 per cent and this rate is 66.3 per cent for Turks (KONDA 2011, 94).

6. There are no data on the rate of Kurds who own home.
7. Although many of their activities involve in anti-racism and they use anti-racist discourses without identifying them anti-racist, neither the PKK nor the legal pro-Kurdish parties have been identified as “anti-racist movements”. They have generally been called Kurdish movements. However, two well-known Istanbul-based activist groups have identified themselves as anti-racists. These are the Committee against Racism and Discrimination working under the Human Rights Association and founded in 1994, and the Platform of Say Stop to Racism and Nationalism which was founded in 2007. Rather than in these small-scale movements identifying themselves as “anti-racists”, Kurds in Zeytinburnu have mobilized and organized in the pro-Kurdish political parties which mobilize thousands of Kurds. Besides, the concept of “anti-racism” is not used by large circles in Turkey and academic debates on this subject are absent. While there are numerous publications on nationalism, there are very few publications on racism in Turkey. The inadequacy of intellectual debates on anti-racism also affects both Turks’ and Kurds’ understandings of racism and anti-racism. For instance, none of my Kurdish respondents identified their struggle against housing exclusion as anti-racism.
8. The racialization of Kurdish men has had a deep impact on the Turkish language and Turkish culture, such that many racist insults used against Kurds have become ordinary Turkish daily swear and humiliation words used not only against Kurds but also against Turks by Turks themselves. Today, “kırō” which is formed from the Kurdish word “kuro” which means “son” in Kurdish and which is used like the word “mate” in British English or “bro” in American English while speaking Kurdish has become a very prevalent Turkish insult word to indicate someone who does not know how to behave properly or someone who is rude, mannerless and uncivilized. Moreover, the Kurdish word “keko”, which is used as brother in Kurdish, has begun to be used by Turks to insult some men especially Kurdish men.
9. In 1915, during the First World War, by using telegraph lines, the Ottoman state officials secretly ordered the state forces that the massacre and deportation of all Armenians from the Ottoman-ruled territories. After these secret orders, more than one million Armenians faced genocide in their ancient lands. They were massacred, raped, tortured and their individual and collective properties were seized by the Turkish state. Numerous Kurds also participated in the genocide and committed these crimes (Kevorkian 2006).
10. Kirve: A man who acts as a sort of godfather to a boy during his circumcision.

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