



Neyzi, L. (2019) National education meets critical pedagogy: teaching oral history in Turkey. *Oral History Review*, 46(2), pp. 380-400.

(doi: [10.1093/ohr/ohz010](https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohz010))

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Deposited on: 15 October 2021

TITLE: National Education Meets Critical Pedagogy: Teaching Oral History in Turkey

ABSTRACT: In this article, I reflect on teaching oral history in a society with a centralized education system that inculcates a hegemonic national(ist) history. I suggest that the commitment to academic freedom and liberal arts education at Sabanci University, a private university in Turkey, encourages the teaching of interdisciplinary and research-oriented courses that critical pedagogy inspires. I show that while oral history is relatively new and weakly institutionalized in Turkey, recent interest in and growing debates about the past have led to growing demand for oral history. Using examples from the classroom, I argue that oral history teaching has enormous potential for addressing the silences and controversies in Turkey's past. I show that the practice of oral history allows students to rethink the learning process, debate public history, reconsider their relations with others, and reflect on their own past and current subjectivities. Describing the contraction of the public sphere in Turkey in the last two years, I discuss the limits of the oral history classroom as a microcosm of society. I suggest that despite (or because of) these limitations, oral historians may develop creative new ways to continue teaching and collaborating with their students.

KEYWORDS: Turkey, education, oral history, memory, pedagogy, youth

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I would like to thank my students at Sabanci University for making teaching oral history a pleasurable challenge over the years.

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Introduction

In this article, I address the tremendous potential for, as well as the limits of, teaching oral history in Turkey—a country characterized by populist authoritarianism, long-standing low-intensity conflict, contestation over a violent past, and a strong legacy of nationalist history.¹ I began teaching oral history to university students around 2000. At the time, oral history was relatively new to Turkey. History, on the other hand, is a required subject, with textbooks the Ministry of National Education centrally produces.² Still taught by rote, the official narrative aims to inculcate pride in the glories of the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, with a focus on Turkishness: the constructed national identity of Turkish-speaking Sunni Muslims represented as a homogeneous majority with a shared past.³ Teaching oral history through the framework of critical pedagogy opens up a space for the discussion of the silences and contradictions of public history, including its lack of fit with subjective experience and intergenerational transmission.⁴

Introducing students to oral history is a radical process that necessitates destabilizing many concepts and beliefs taken for granted. I begin with deconstructing the concept of History with a capital H, combined with a critical discussion of historiography. This paves the way for a discussion of the oral narratives of ordinary people viewed as legitimate sources of knowledge about the past (and present).⁵ In Turkey's particular context, the consequences of introducing the basic tenets of oral history can be momentous, turning the classroom into a debating arena, if not a battleground. To give an example, the experiences of Armenians in

¹ The Editors, "Confronting the New Turkey," *Middle East Report* 288, 48, no. 3 (Fall 2018).

² Jennifer Dixon, "Education and National Narratives: Changing Representations of the Armenian Genocide in History Textbooks in Turkey," *International Journal for Education Law and Policy* Special Issue, no.1 (2010): 102-126.

³ Soner Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Turkey: Who is a Turk?* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ For more on critical pedagogy, see Anna Sheftel's introduction to this special section; see also Kristina Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, ed., *Oral History and Education: Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁵ *Oral History Theory* is very useful for teaching. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Turkey have long been publicly silenced.⁶ When mentioned in history textbooks, Armenians tend to be referred to as “traitors” who were “relocated” during wartime for *raison d’état*.⁷ The prevalent view is that the (“so-called”) Armenian Genocide is a myth Turkey’s internal and external “enemies” fabricated. Given that young people are raised with this public narrative (which masks an “open secret” only discussed in private⁸), what are the implications of introducing the Armenian genocide as a historical event into the classroom, along with the memories of survivors as recorded by oral historians? It is only very recently that the experiences and memories of Armenians have begun to be debated publicly in Turkey.⁹ Introducing the subject in an oral history class tends to produce surprise, hesitation, and everything between total silence and heated discussion. The views of students tend to vary by ethnic/religious background, political belief, and degree of exposure to alternate narratives (including through travel abroad). For example, while the rare Armenian student in the classroom will necessarily hold different views, she may remain silent in class. Students who identify with Turkishness due to their familial background, among other reasons, may reproduce the official/national narrative. Students who come from more diverse cultural backgrounds, or who identify with the political left, may be more open to debating (representations of) the past. This is thus both a tremendously exciting and highly volatile pedagogical environment: teaching oral history at Sabanci University in Turkey is not only an “academic” endeavor situated in a democratic liberal arts institution, its consequences are personal and political in ways that extend beyond the classroom. Potentially, the experience may be personally and politically transformative for participants, including the instructor. At

⁶ Talin Suciyan, *Armenians in Modern Turkey: Post-Genocide Society, Politics and History* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2017).

⁷ Jennifer Dixon, *Dark Pasts: Changing the State’s Story in Turkey and Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁸ For an attempt to broach this gray area, see Leyla Neyzi, “Wish They Hadn’t Left’: The Burden of Armenian Memory in Turkey,” in Leyla Neyzi and Hranush Kharatyan-Araqelyan, *Speaking to One Another: Personal Memories of the Past in Armenia and Turkey* (Bonn: DVV International, 2010), 13-74.

⁹ Lerna Ekmekçioğlu, *Recovering Armenians: The Limits of Belonging in Post-Genocide Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

the same time, discussing such contentious political issues, which are not only about the past, raises the spectre of deleterious consequences, including the possibility of prosecution.¹⁰

In order to put the oral history classroom in context, I first discuss national education in Turkey. I describe the creation of Sabanci University, which converged with the emergence of new publics and the rediscovery of the past. I then reflect on two decades of teaching oral history with extensive examples from the classroom and student work. I suggest that political changes in the last two years have produced a surveilled classroom, exemplifying the limits of oral history in authoritarian, divided, and violent societies where an unresolved past continues to bear on the present. Today, the teaching and practice of oral history may be perceived as “subversive” in Turkey. Despite the obvious challenges this poses for oral historians, I suggest that one of the unintended consequences is a sense of empowerment in so far as this demonstrates that what happens in the classroom can have a tangible and potentially transformative effect on society.

National Education

Eğitim şart! (“Education is a must!”) is a common platitude demonstrating the importance attributed to schooling in Turkey. Education is historically associated with modernity and public service jobs.¹¹ Families sacrifice to put their children through school in the hopes that a diploma will pave the way for a better life for the next generation. Education is also a means of inculcating a sense of national identity. The demise of the Ottoman empire at the end of World War One was a protracted, violent, and traumatic affair. Key

¹⁰ For example, the state prosecuted Barış Ünlü, a professor who lost his job at Ankara University (and the freedom to travel abroad), for political reasons: he asked a question on an exam about the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party). See Associated Press, “Turkish lecturer found not guilty over exam question on Kurdish leader,” *The Guardian* (February 3, 2016), accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/turkish-lecturer-found-not-guilty-over-exam-question-on-kurdish-leader>.

¹¹ Benjamin Fortna, *The Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

communities—including Ottoman Christians such as Armenians, Greeks, and Syrians—were destroyed through genocide, ethnic cleansing, and massacres.¹² The state mobilized Autochthonous Kurds¹³ against Christians as part of an attempt to fend off their own nationalist claims.¹⁴ Muslim immigrants displaced from lost territories in the Balkans and elsewhere inundated the Anatolian mainland. With the establishment of the Turkish republic and the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923, the country was faced with the challenge of creating a sense of belonging among a diverse population ravaged by decades of war and displacement.¹⁵

Education was a key instrument in this process, with the goal of producing citizens to serve the new state.¹⁶ Early attempts at an ideological and institutional break with the past included the introduction of a Latin script, co-educational schooling, the closure of Islamic schools, and centralization under the Ministry of National Education.¹⁷ The new nation required a new history. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, military hero and first president, narrated his definitive version of Turkey's "War of Independence" (*Nutuk* or "the Speech") for six consecutive days in the second congress of the Republican People's Party in 1927.¹⁸ A passionate amateur historian, Kemal convened the first History Congress in 1932, establishing the basis for Turkish national history and textbooks. According to this narrative, the population of modern Turkey shared a common history, language, ethnicity, and religion.

¹² Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011).

¹³ Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Janet Klein, *Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Aslı İğsız, *Humanism in Ruins: Entangled Legacies of the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Kenan Çayır and İpek Gürkaynak, "The State of Citizenship Education in Turkey: Past and Present," *Journal of Social Science Education* 6, no. 2 (December 2007): 50-58.

¹⁷ Yeşim Bayar, *Formation of the Turkish Nation-State, 1920-1938* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁸ Hülya Adak, "National Myths and Self-Narrations: Mustafa Kemal's *Nutuk* and Halide Edib's Memoirs and The Turkish Ordeal," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2003): 509-527.

Citizens who did not fit this mold had to assimilate, perform Turkishness in public, or remain excluded.¹⁹

In order to integrate and “civilize” peasants and nomads, including Kurds and Alevis, the Turkish state created boarding schools in rural areas.²⁰ New national holidays were celebrated in schools, linking youth and the nation.²¹ Özge Samancı’s cartoon memoir illustrates humorously how a child becomes (or ought to become) a dutiful Turk. According to this vision, beginning in first grade, a child must revere the Turkish nation and its modernist project in the persona of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, “father of the Turks.”²²

Over time, young people who benefited from public education joined the urban middle class that supported the ruling Republican People’s Party and the values of modern Turkey—referred to as Atatürkism or Kemalism.²³ However, much of the rural population remained outside this circle.²⁴ In villages, families continued to transmit Islamic mores to the next generation informally. As population and rural to urban migration expanded, demand strained the capacity and weakened the quality of public education. With the introduction of a multi-party system in the 1950s, support for religious (Islamic) education increased. Private foundations (religious and secular) entered the growing market in education.²⁵

Since Ottoman times, educated youth have been the backbone of the system as well as its greatest critics—the “Young Turks” who plotted to overthrow the Sultan bequeathed this

¹⁹ Soner Çağaptay, “Reconfiguring the Turkish nation in the 1930s,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 8, no. 2 (2002): 67-82.

²⁰ Alevis are a minority with a syncretic and heterodox belief system close to Shia Islam and historically opposed to Sunni Islam due to the competition between the Ottoman and Safavid empires. Paul White and Joost Jongerden, eds. *Turkey’s Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

²¹ Hale Yılmaz, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey, 1923–1945* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013).

²² Özge Samancı, *Dare to Disappoint: Growing Up in Turkey* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2015).

²³ Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁴ In his ethnography of schooling in a rural backwater, Sam Kaplan suggests that students actively critique the education system. *The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

²⁵ For example, the preacher Fethullah Gülen would create the international Hizmet Movement by educating the children of the poor. Duygun Göktürk, “Ethnographic account of a pedagogical project: sisterhood institution in the Hizmet Movement,” *British Journal of the Sociology of Education* 39, no. 5 (2017): 654-668.

term to the world.²⁶ During the 1960s and 1970s, high schools and universities became scenes of increasingly violent altercations between “leftists” and “rightists.” The notorious military coup of September 12, 1980 dealt with student activism through repression.²⁷ After the coup, the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) brought the university system under its command. As part of its attempt to repress the left, the military regime introduced compulsory religious education in schools. This was the beginning of an increasingly Islamized slant on Turkish nationalism.²⁸

The civilian government that replaced the military in the mid-1980s liberalized the economy following global trends. Growing demand resulted in the establishment of new public universities in the provinces; a change in law enabled the creation of private universities.²⁹ The new era, which began with AKP (Justice and Development Party) rule in 2002, had significant consequences for the educational system. Initially, the state introduced structural reforms, ostensibly to comply with European Union (EU) requirements. These included revision of the curriculum and textbooks and further privatization.³⁰ In the course of a contentious and divisive debate, the AKP moved to abolish laws restricting religious education.³¹ As it consolidated its power, the AKP—and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—increasingly espoused an openly Islamist ideology. In an unprecedented attempt to undermine

²⁶ As an example, “Young Turk” is in the dictionary. See “Young Turk,” *Merriam-Webster.com*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/young%20Turk>.

²⁷ Elifcan Karacan, *Remembering the 1980 Turkish Military Coup d'état: Memory, Violence, and Trauma* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016).

²⁸ Buket Türkmen, “A Transformed Kemalist Islam or a New Islamic Civic Morality? A Study of ‘Religious Culture and Morality’ Textbooks in the Turkish High School Curricula,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29, no. 3 (2009): 381-397.

²⁹ Forty percent of the country’s population of over 81 million people is under the age of 24. See Indexmundi, “Turkey Demographics Profile 2018,” updated January 20, 2018, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.indexmundi.com/turkey/demographics_profile.html.

³⁰ Ömür Birlir, “Neoliberalization and Foundation Universities in Turkey,” in Kemal İnal and Güliz Akkaymak, eds., *Neoliberal Transformation of Education in Turkey: Political and Ideological Analysis of Educational Reforms in the Age of the AKP* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 139-150.

³¹ Kemal İnal and Güliz Akkaymak, eds., *Neoliberal Transformation of Education in Turkey: Political and Ideological Analysis of Educational Reforms in the Age of the AKP* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

the cult of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, national history would increasingly focus on continuities between the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkish (Muslim) identity.³²

An Educational Experiment

The creation of private universities led to a great deal of controversy. As critics of private universities argue, privatization exacerbates existing inequalities in the educational system. Private universities have a number of advantages over public universities: they can access public lands and subsidies and retain financial independence and greater internal autonomy despite being under the auspices of the Council of Higher Education.³³ However, the establishment of private universities by leading business families as prestige projects had unprecedented consequences, contributing to the expansion of civil society and public critique of taboo issues.³⁴

Sabancı University is among the first private universities in Turkey. It was founded by Sakıp Sabancı, who was the leader of one of the most powerful industrial family firms in Turkey.³⁵ Classes began in Fall 1999. Today, with around 4,000 undergraduates, 1,000 graduate students, and 400 faculty members, Sabancı is one of the top universities in Turkey. With English as the language of instruction, it attracts faculty and students from around the world. What made the Sabancı project distinctive is that before the campus was built and students recruited, newly hired faculty (including myself) participated in a “virtual

³² Hakan Övünç Ongur, “Identifying Ottomanisms: The Discursive Evolution of Ottoman Pasts in the Turkish Presents,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 3 (2015): 416-432.

³³ İnal and Akkaymak, eds., *Neoliberal Transformation of Education in Turkey*.

³⁴ Ioannis N. Grigoriadis and Antonis Kamaras, “Reform Paradoxes: Academic Freedom and Governance in Greek and Turkish Higher Education,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 12, no.1 (March 2012): 135-152.

³⁵ For more information, see the university’s website. Available at: <https://www.sabanciuniv.edu/en> (accessed April 4, 2019). See also Stale Knudsen, “Corporate Social Responsibility in Local Context: International Capital, Charitable Giving and the Politics of Education in Turkey,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 15, no. 3 (2015): 369-390.

university,” creating an experimental educational program based on a liberal arts model.³⁶ This also meant challenging traditional pedagogy: the emphasis on critical pedagogy, particularly in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, results in a very different classroom experience compared to other schools.

In Turkey, high school graduates take a highly competitive exam to gain admission to university.³⁷ Sabancı is the first university to allow students to choose their major in their sophomore year. Unlike other schools, an engineering student can switch to cultural studies and vice versa. In their first year, all students take the same classes, becoming familiar with various fields in preparation for selecting their interdisciplinary degree program. In a bold move for a conservative yet practical society that values professional and technical education, Sabancı’s curriculum emphasizes exposure to the humanities, the arts, and the social sciences for all students. Faculties include the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (which brings together the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences), the Faculty of Engineering (which brings together the sciences and engineering), and the Faculty of Management. There are no conventional departments. For example, at its inception, the undergraduate degree programs of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences included Cultural Studies, Social and Political Sciences, Visual Arts, and Visual Communication Design.³⁸ Sabancı offered generous scholarships to attract the most competitive students and avoid the stereotype of the “private university for rich kids.”³⁹ The university was a pioneer in introducing civic involvement

³⁶ For more information about the founding of the university, see the university’s website. Available at: <https://www.sabanciuniv.edu/en/about> (accessed April 4, 2019).

³⁷ “Three Hours” is a documentary on the three-hour-long central university examination that determines the future of high school graduates. See Can Candan, *3 Saat (3 Hours)* (Turkey, Surela Film, 2008). Available at: <https://www.d-word.com/documentary/1056-3-Saat-3-Hours-> (accessed April 4, 2019).

³⁸ The name “Political Economy” was considered for the fourth program, which remained conventional in name: “Economics.” Over time, the SPS major evolved into three more-conventionally named majors: Political Science, Psychology, and International Studies.

³⁹ Inevitably, inequalities remain, as scholarships require high scores on the university exam whereas paying students are able to enter with lower scores.

projects for undergraduates.⁴⁰ Sabancı supports various projects that link the academy and civil society such as the Education Reform Initiative⁴¹ and the Istanbul Policy Center.⁴²

The Emergence of New Publics and Rediscovery of the Past

The “red lines” (bolstered by law) of Turkish society are familiar to everyone raised and schooled there. Dissent is routinely suppressed.⁴³ Statements or behavior interpreted as “insulting” the Turkish nation, flag, military, national hero (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), and current president can result in prosecution and imprisonment.⁴⁴ Taboos include mentioning: genocide; ethnic cleansing and massacres of Christians, Kurds, and Alevis; the history of the left; the ongoing war in Turkey’s Kurdistan (the word itself being taboo); and Kurdish identity. The experienced past—a contentious, violent, and unfinished past extending into the present—is thus a veritable Pandora’s box.⁴⁵

The repression that followed the 1980 military coup led to public silence while sowing the seeds of further dissent. For example, human rights violations in Diyarbakir prison contributed to the popularity of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party, the Kurdish guerilla movement), which initiated an armed revolt in 1984.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, political refugees

⁴⁰ For examples of such projects, see the university’s website. Available at:

<https://cip.sabanciuniv.edu/en/projects> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁴¹ For more information about this initiative, see EgiTiM REFORMU GiRiSiMi’s website. Available at:

<http://en.egitimreformugirisimi.org/> (accessed on April 4, 2019).

⁴² For more information about the policy center, see the university’s website. Available at:

<http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/?lang=en> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁴³ It takes great courage in such an environment to publicly challenge the status quo. Legendary individuals who paid for dissent with their lives, years in prison and/or exile include the writer Sabahattin Ali, the poet Nazım Hikmet, the revolutionary Deniz Gezmiş, the filmmaker Yılmaz Güney, the academic İsmail Beşikçi, and the journalist Hrant Dink. Leonidas Karakatsanis and Nikolaos Papadogiannis, ed., *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece & Cyprus: Performing the Left* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁴⁴ “Turkey: End Prosecutions for ‘Insulting President’,” Human Rights Watch, October 17, 2018, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/17/turkey-end-prosecutions-insulting-president>.

⁴⁵ Bedross Der Matossian, “Venturing into the Minefield: Turkish Liberal Historiography and the Armenian Genocide,” in *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, Richard Hovannisian, ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 369-388.

⁴⁶ Mesut Yeğen, “Armed Struggle to Peace Negotiations: Independent Kurdistan to Democratic Autonomy, or The PKK in Context,” *Middle East Critique* 25, no. 4 (2016): 365-383.

recouped in exile, exporting their ideas and organizations to Turkey.⁴⁷ Significantly, as elsewhere in the world, a new interest in history, memory, and identity emerged in the 1990s.⁴⁸ Whereas nationalists and leftists had struggled over the future, the new struggle would be over the past.⁴⁹ This meant an increasingly public debate about the narrative of Turkish nationalism based on the myth of a single ethnic group, a single language, and a single religious tradition.⁵⁰

Activists, often educated youth who came from the communities whose advocates they became (particularly Kurdish Alevis, many of whom come from a leftist tradition), used conventional media and later the Internet to offer a multiplicity of voices and narratives from/about the past to their chosen audience.⁵¹ Despite their differences, those on the left and those on the right—with the emerging new Islamism—shared an increasingly vocalized critique of Turkey’s Kemalist heritage. During the 1990s and 2000s, a veritable cultural flowering ensued, both in Turkey and its diaspora, with books, magazines, newspapers, film, music, performance, and art exploring previously silenced aspects of the country’s diverse cultural heritage.⁵² Private foundations and NGOs emerged, such as the History Foundation, the Mesopotamian Cultural Center, the Istanbul Kurdish Institute, and the Truth Justice Memory Center. A key event was the conference on Turkey’s Armenians in 2005. This controversial conference was an important step in initiating public discussion of a taboo

⁴⁷ Bilgin Ayata, “Kurdish Transnational Politics and Turkey’s Changing Kurdish Policy: The Journey of Kurdish Broadcasting from Europe to Turkey,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 19, no. 4 (December 2011): 523-533.

⁴⁸ Clémence Scalbert Yücel, “Common Ground or Battlefield?: Deconstructing the Politics of Recognition in Turkey,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 22, no. 1 (2016): 71-93.

⁴⁹ Eray Çaylı, “Accidental” Encounters with the Ottoman Armenians in Contemporary Turkey,” *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 6 (2015): 257-270.

⁵⁰ Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁵¹ Leyla Neyzi, “Embodied Elders: Space and Subjectivity in the Music of Metin-Kemal Kahraman,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 1 (January 2002): 89-109.

⁵² For example, *On the Way to School* (Bulut Film, 2008), a film by Özgür Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy, addresses the taboos surrounding the Kurdish language through the experiences of a Turkish schoolteacher in a Kurdish village.

subject. A group of critical historians emerged who are mostly younger academics educated abroad, teaching abroad, or in the new private universities.⁵³

In hindsight, it is ironic that Justice and Development Party rule from 2002 coincided with a seeming atmosphere of greater freedom and expansion of the public. While AKP's Islamism unsettled the secular elite, its neoliberal economic policies, support for accession to the EU, and democratic rhetoric were reassuring. The accession process necessitated legal changes that contributed to democratization.⁵⁴ The AKP portrayed itself as different from its predecessors, particularly Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the party he established, the secular CHP (Republican People's Party). It used the language of victimization, pitting the conservative majority of rural origin against the established elite.⁵⁵ AKP's strategy of widening its electoral base by appealing to diverse groups paid off. In his speeches, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan celebrated the multicultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire and announced a Kurdish and an Alevi "opening." Albeit behind closed doors, the government initiated talks with the PKK, raising hopes of a lasting peace, recognition of the rights of minorities, and the redress of historical wrongs. Formerly taboo subjects were debated in public, as history and memory moved to the forefront of political and subjective interest.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, AKP rhetoric and policies were political fodder aimed at securing power.⁵⁷

Teaching Oral History

⁵³ Yaşar Tolga Cora, Dzovinar Derderian, and Ali Sipahi, eds., *The Ottoman East in the Nineteenth Century: Societies, Identities and Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

⁵⁴ Gamze Avcı, "The Justice and Development Party and the EU: Political Pragmatism in A Changing Environment," *South European Society and Politics* 16, no. 3 (2011): 409-421.

⁵⁵ Zafer Yılmaz, "The AKP and the spirit of the 'new' Turkey: Imagined victim, reactionary mood, and resentful sovereign," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 18, no. 3 (2017): 482-513.

⁵⁶ Onur Bakiner, "Is Turkey coming to terms with its past? Politics of memory and majoritarian conservatism," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 41, no. 5 (2013): 691-708; Enno Maessen, "Reassessing Turkish National Memory: An Analysis of the Representation of Turkish National Memory by the AKP," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 2 (2014): 309-324.

⁵⁷ Bilgin Ayata and Serra Hakyemez, "The AKP's engagement with Turkey's past crimes: an analysis of PM Erdoğan's 'Dersim apology'," *Dialectical Anthropology* 37 (2013): 131-143.

The new interest in the past resulted in the discovery of oral history, viewed as an alternative to methodologically conservative national(ist) history.⁵⁸ Activists and academics began to practice oral history at the same time as individuals who considered themselves society's "others" became more willing to share their stories. Oral history projects emerged in universities, NGOs, museums, cultural centers, and even municipalities.⁵⁹ A few academics began to offer courses in oral history and to use oral sources in their research.⁶⁰ These were mostly younger women⁶¹ trained abroad in fields such as folklore, anthropology, gender studies, and cultural studies—I myself was one of them. However, given the lack of public funding and weak institutionalization of the field, the few courses available (which included informal workshops NGOs organized) failed to fulfill the growing demand from all sectors of society. (Demand from below has been central to the development of oral history in Turkey.) At the same time, the dearth of professional training (and the unavailability of oral history classics in Turkish translation) is reflected in the uneven quality of popular publications in Turkish glossed as oral history.⁶² Much work remains to be done to institutionalize oral history further, including the teaching of oral history theory, methodology, and ethics.

I have been teaching a course on oral history at Sabancı University since the early 2000s. Trained in the United States in anthropology and developmental sociology, I developed an interest in oral history while researching the local history of pastoral nomads

⁵⁸ The folklorist and oral historian Arzu Öztürkmen, who played a key role bringing the International Oral History Association Meeting to Istanbul in 2000, was a pioneer. Arzu Öztürkmen, "The Irresistible Charm of the Interview: Politics of Doing Oral History in Turkey," *Proceedings of the Xth International Oral History Conference*, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2 (1998): 1138-1144.

⁵⁹ The Economic and Social History Foundation was one of the first NGOs to develop oral history projects in the early 1990s. For more information, see the Foundation's website. Available at: <http://tarihvakfi.org.tr/Proje/tarihvakfindasozlutarih/1027> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁶⁰ Metin Yüksel, "On the borders of the Turkish and Iranian nation-states: the story of Ferzende and Besra," *Middle Eastern Studies* 52, no. 4 (2016): 656-676; Wendelmoet Hamelink and Hanifi Barış, "Dengbêjs on borderlands: Borders and the state as seen through the eyes of Kurdish singer-poets," *Kurdish Studies* 2, no.1 (May 2014): 34-60.

⁶¹ It is not a coincidence that it was younger women from interdisciplinary backgrounds than older men in the more traditional discipline of history who readily embraced oral history.

⁶² It is common for books composed of transcripts of journalistic interviews to be referred to as oral history.

(*Yörük*) in southern Turkey for my dissertation.⁶³ CULT 361/561: Oral History, taught regularly in the fall semester, is an elective course open to undergraduate and graduate students from all faculties and degree programs.⁶⁴ It is popular among undergraduates, master's students in Cultural Studies, Conflict Analysis & Resolution, and Turkish Studies, and doctoral students in Gender Studies. Students from other universities or non-students interested in oral history also attend. Over the years, class size has increased from a few students to around thirty-five—a limit I now struggle to maintain. Sabancı's commitment to liberal arts education and academic freedom—in so far as is possible in Turkey—encourages critical and alternative approaches to teaching.⁶⁵ Without conventional departments, it is easier for faculty at Sabancı University to design elective courses. It is no coincidence that oral history is taught within the rubric of Cultural Studies, an interdisciplinary program that critical pedagogy inspired.⁶⁶ The goal of the class is to introduce students to theory and method in oral history through readings, class discussion, and hands-on research experience.⁶⁷ Many students go on to take CULT 362/562: Memory Studies, which I teach in the spring.

In teaching this class, I need to accommodate undergraduate and graduate students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds without prior knowledge of oral history. At the

⁶³ My dissertation, *Beyond "Tradition" and "Resistance": Kinship and Economic Development in Mediterranean Turkey*, received the Malcolm H. Kerr Dissertation Award of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in 1992. See MESA's website for more information. Available at: <https://mesana.org/awards/awardee/malcolm-h-kerr-dissertation-awards/leyla-neyzi> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁶⁴ Details about the course are available on the university's website. Available at: <https://www.sabanciuniv.edu/syllabus/courses.cfm?term=01&year=2018&subject=CULT&code=361> (accessed April 4, 2019). The syllabus for the course can be viewed here: <https://www.sabanciuniv.edu/syllabus/?crn=10313&term=201801> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁶⁵ See the university's website for its statement on academic freedom. Available at: <https://www.sabanciuniv.edu/en/statement-academic-freedom> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁶⁶ Antonia Darder, Peter Mayo, and João Paraskeva, eds., *International Critical Pedagogy Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2016). The Department of Cultural Studies's website is available at: <https://cult.sabanciuniv.edu/en> (accessed April 4, 2019). Writing in 2002, Annedith Schneider suggested that the institutionalization of a field like Cultural Studies may "reinject some politics back into academia" in Turkey. This has definitely been the case at Sabancı. Given recent developments, there is some pathos in re-reading this article in 2018. Annedith Schneider, "The institutional Revolutionary Major? Questions and Contradictions on the Way to Designing a Cultural Studies Program in a New Turkish University," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 5, no. 4 (2002): 393-404.

⁶⁷ For other examples, see Abigail Perkiss, "Staring Out to Sea and the Transformative Power of Oral History for Undergraduate Interviewers," *Oral History Review* 43, no. 2 (2016): 392-407; Howard Levin, "Authentic Doing: Student-Produced Web-Based Digital Video Oral Histories," *Oral History Review* 38, no. 1 (2011): 6-33.

beginning of the semester, I half-jokingly suggest that it would be best if students forget everything they learned in high school, particularly since “history” evokes the boring pages they had to memorize and regurgitate in exams. The class includes a critical discussion of history, particularly Turkish national(ist) history and historiography. The goal is to introduce the notion of ordinary people as storytellers and history makers—albeit without romanticizing them or forgetting the complex ways history and memory are intertwined in life stories.⁶⁸ A student wrote in his final paper: “History is a subject that most people find boring. But oral history is different because it concerns first-hand testimony. Given that the media is under control, it is useful to listen to direct witnesses. Oral history allows us access to experiences that may never see the light of day.”⁶⁹ As oral history is best learned through practice, each student completes a project, engaging with a unique individual and recording her or his life story.⁷⁰ Given the dearth of oral history research in Turkey, the research Sabancı students conducted over the years constitutes an important contribution to the wider field. At the beginning of the semester, I invite students to brainstorm about a collective research topic. Even this seemingly neutral academic activity creates heated debate, as many events in recent history remain outside the canon or are interpreted differently by different groups. The particular composition of each class (as well as issues being discussed in public at the time) make for a different dynamic, resulting in different choices each year. Some of the events or themes students studied over the years can be glimpsed on the Sabancı University oral history website.⁷¹ Collaborating on research projects, an archive, and oral history website creates a

⁶⁸ Rebecca Bryant, “Writing the Catastrophe: Nostalgia and its histories in Cyprus,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 26 (2008): 399-422.

⁶⁹ All anecdotes, paraphrases, and quotes are from classroom experiences and student work for my oral history class in the last twenty years. This material is housed in the Sabancı University oral history archive. Some of these quotes have been published on the Sabancı University oral history website. I have communicated with former students whose work I used, asking permission and stating that for reasons of privacy and security I refrain from using any identifying information of their interviewees’ or their own names.

⁷⁰ Students conducting research for a class do not have to apply to an ethics review board. But they must submit information to the instructor demonstrating they have received consent.

⁷¹ See <https://oralhistory.sabanciuniv.edu/> (accessed April 4, 2019).

sense of community engagement.⁷² Events students studied include the Gezi Park protests of summer 2013, the September 12, 1980 military coup, and the August 1999 Adapazarı earthquake. Themes investigated include youth, migration, ethnic/religious identity, gender/sexuality, generation, the city (Istanbul), and diaspora. Students also conducted interviews for internationally funded research projects I directed, such as “Adult Education and Oral History Contributing to Armenian-Turkish Reconciliation”⁷³ and “Young People Speak Out: The Contribution of Oral History to Facing the Past, Reconciliation and Democratization in Turkey.”⁷⁴

Once a common topic is agreed upon, each student is responsible for finding an interviewee.⁷⁵ This is not easy, as students are not accustomed to self-directed learning. Also, they need convincing that “ordinary people” have something to offer academics, having been taught that historical knowledge is accessed through written documents and the mediation of “experts.” Ironically, most ordinary people tend to share this view, unsure about what they can offer university students. I encourage students to reach potential interviewees through informal contacts and mutual acquaintances. As in my own practice, I suggest students make an oral contract; requiring an interviewee to sign a release form can elicit anxiety and result in rejection in the Turkish context.⁷⁶ Given the value attributed to education, interviewees often give their consent by saying, as one student wrote in her interview notes, “it is a duty to help students with their assignments.” Another student commented further, reflecting on power relations in the interview: “Just as I expected, she accepted the interview by saying, ‘of course

⁷² Charlotte Nunes, “‘Connecting to the Ideologies That Surround Us’: Oral History Stewardship as an Entry Point to Critical Theory in the Undergraduate Classroom,” *Oral History Review* 44, no. 2 (2017): 348-362.

⁷³ See <https://oralhistory.sabanciuniv.edu/interviews/speakingtooneanother> (accessed April 4, 2019); Leyla Neyzi and Hranush Kharatyan-Araqelyan, “Speaking to One Another: Personal Memories of the Past in Armenia and Turkey,” 2010, accessed April 4, 2019, <http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/16024/1/neyzi2010.ENG.pdf>.

⁷⁴ See <https://oralhistory.sabanciuniv.edu/interviews/young-people-speak-out> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁷⁵ During the course of the semester, students submit the following: interviewee information form, interview questions, interview notes, transcript, paper, audio/video file of interview, and summary information for posting on website.

⁷⁶ According to the Oral History Association’s recently revised best practices, informed consent can be given verbally or in writing. See <https://www.oralhistory.org/informed-consent/> (accessed April 4, 2019).

I would like to help you.’ This term, ‘helping’ had an effect on me. For even though I did not openly acknowledge this, I thought that it was I who would be helping her by doing the interview.” Although we practice preparing interview questions in class, I encourage students not to take questions to the interview so that they focus on listening, using silences strategically, and spontaneously respond to the emerging narrative.⁷⁷ Given that people are highly sensitized to context in Turkey, I encourage students to conduct interviews in a private setting. This is not always possible, as a student wrote in her interview notes: “The place of the interview is a cafe. He wanted to sit next to me. Although the cafe was rather quiet, he wanted to be close not to be heard. His body language made me think he is a quite kind man but at the same time he was a bit anxious.” Recording has its own challenges. For example, a student reflected in her interview notes that her interviewee used implicit and coded language and looked at the voice recorder while voicing critique of the government. At the end of the interview, she asked that only her first name be used. Prior to writing her or his final paper, each student makes a class presentation. This allows students to experiment with ways to present their aural, visual, and other materials. The class presentations result in lively debates. The process of interpretation required in preparing the class presentation and final paper can prove challenging. The interview experience and the transcript provide no easy answers, only ambiguities, uncertainties, contradictions, and gray areas. I emphasize that this is not a mistake, but rich material to be mined during the writing process. I encourage students not to expect coherence but to analyze these ambiguities, contradictions, and silences, and to think reflexively about how their own positionality and the dialogical relationship created during the interview influences the products. In contrast to the neutral and objective tone expected in most term papers, I suggest to students that they write in the first person singular and reflect on their subjective experiences and feelings.

⁷⁷ Martha Norkunas, “Teaching to Listen: Listening Exercises and Self-Reflexive Journals,” *Oral History Review* 38, no.1 (2011): 63-108.

The education system tends to lead students to look for the “right” answer and to judge what their interviewees say according to what they themselves believe is true. Doing oral history allows students to rethink the learning process, one of the goals of critical pedagogy. For example, a student wrote in her paper: “I was not very happy at the end of the interview, for I thought that I hadn’t gotten to hear ‘what I wanted to hear’. The transcript showed me that I should focus during the interview on *what the person is saying* rather than on *what I want to hear* [emphasis in original].” A student who interviewed a retired officer commented in his paper on the following quote from the interview:

“First of all, I am pleased to satisfy your curiosity. Secondly, I am glad to give you correct information. I am happy to express the truth to you.” As this example demonstrates, even though oral history is concerned with subjectivity, given my interviewee’s occupation and the fact that our society overemphasizes the notion of objectivity and might be prejudiced towards or not knowledgeable about oral history, the concept of truth remains something everyone still searches for and tries to transmit to others.

Students also reflected on the differences between history and oral history. A student wrote: “What I understood about oral history prior to this class was that it was a way of getting the views of people who could have important knowledge on an issue. But during the semester, I realized that oral history is much more important in expanding the diversity of voices that make history, as well as the resources that could be used for writing (or ‘rewriting’) history.”

The issues that repeatedly came up in class discussion and student papers included silences, intergenerational transmission (or lack thereof), and the emotions that the dialogical relationship between interviewer and interviewee generated. Not surprisingly, the most difficult subjects were taboos: the genocide of Ottoman Christians, the massacres of Kurds and/or Alevis, military coups, Kurdish, Alevi, and LGBTI+ experiences.⁷⁸ For example, a student who conducted an interview about the 1980 military coup wrote: “The greatest

⁷⁸ Many students in the Sabanci University master’s program in Cultural Studies and doctoral program in Gender Studies conduct research on gender and sexuality, including LGBTI+ issues. Çağlar Özbek, ed., *LGBTI+ Studies in Turkey* (London: Transnational Press, 2019).

contribution of this interview concerns not what was narrated, but that it gave me the opportunity to pinpoint the tragic realities that lie behind that which was not narrated.”

Many young people in Turkey who were politically active in the 1970s chose not to share their experiences with the next generation.⁷⁹ As a student wrote: “I thought this project would make it possible for me to listen to many traumatic stories about his past that my father had not told (or could not tell) me. This period was silenced, covered up.” A silenced past and conflict between generations also came up in an interview a student conducted with a young Armenian woman: “as I listened and saw how, in her words, ‘events waaayy back in the 1800s’ affected her, I realized the importance of trying to understand how different generations interact with one another. The assassination of Hrant Dink was the beginning of a period that was painful, but eventually she was able to talk more frankly with her family.”⁸⁰ A Kurdish student who interviewed a student from another university, wrote in her paper: “There is an issue that I found of interest during the interview and that I thought about after the interview: Where her mother’s side came from, how she knew about this story, how she shared it with me, and how she narrated it to me.” She then quoted from the transcript:

Interviewee: “My great-grandfather or some such forebear comes from one of the eastern districts. Actually in the village, they call us ‘the Kurds’.”

Interviewer: “Do you know where they came from?”

Interviewee: “Some time before the republic. I have no idea. They just say ‘Kurdistan,’ but then there is no such place (laughs).”

The student reflected further:

“I am curious about why she told it in this way: Why did I have to ask several questions for her to say ‘someplace called Kurdistan’? Why did she feel the need to

⁷⁹ Leyla Neyzi, “Object or Subject? The Paradox of ‘Youth’ in Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 3 (August 2001): 411-432.

⁸⁰ The Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was assassinated in Istanbul on January 19, 2007, leading to public soul-searching as never before both among Turks, and, in a very different way, within the Armenian community. Lorenzo D’Orsi, “Moral thresholds of outrage: The March for Hrant Dink and new ways of mobilization in Turkey,” *Conflict and Society* 5 (2018): 40-57.

smile/laugh while saying ‘there is no such place’? Was she wondering what I thought at that moment? After the interview, will she ask her family where her mother’s side really comes from? Will she wonder where Kurdistan really is? To whom and how do we talk about the existence of Kurdistan; how does this find its place in our dialogues with people we know or trust? I am curious about the answer to many questions like this. On the other hand, why am I so curious? What does the fact that I have so many questions about something she mentioned in a part of our conversation say about me and what I have understood from the interview?”

This example demonstrates the taboos surrounding public discussion of Kurdishness, the way the positionalities of interviewee and interviewer influences the interview, and how oral history generates questions for the student about others’ as well as her own family’s past and its articulation in the present. Doing oral history sparks students’ interest in their own lives. As a student wrote: “This interview taught me not only how to conduct an oral history interview, but also to look into my own past. After the interview, I started to think about my ancestors, their everyday life, and my family’s stories about them.”

An exceptionally reflexive and insightful paper in which a Turkish student reflects on the dialogic relationship that structures—and limits—the interview reveals much about Turkey’s violent and unequal past (and present). She interviewed a cleaner in the university dormitory, an Alevi Kurd from Dersim.⁸¹ Her paper begins with this ironic comment: “The dilemma at the heart of this research is as follows: The fact that X is completely silenced on campus as a cleaner in the dormitories while she is made to speak with the help of the same university’s ‘free’ academic environment.”⁸² At the same time, the student argues that the interviewee used her positionality as victim (in the past and in the present) to turn the tables on her (the interviewer) during the course of the interview: “As the subject of an oral history research she took part in with a Turk, X was henceforth a powerholder. Now the roles were

⁸¹ During the events known as “38,” taking local dissent as a pretext, the Turkish military massacred the population of the region of Dersim in eastern Turkey, renaming the region Tunceli and exiling the surviving Alevi Kurds to other parts of the country. Özlem Göner, *Turkish National Identity and its Outsiders: Memories of State Violence in Dersim* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁸² As in many corporations, cleaning services at Sabanci University are outsourced to subcontractors who forbid workers from communicating with students and staff.

reversed; a Kurd had things to tell a Turk, and the Turk was in need of this narrative. Our oral history project heralded a counter-narrative.” The interviewee declared: “There is so much I want to tell! The fate of Kurds is hard and they have much to tell. But you are a Turk after all, and no matter how you probe, your family would not have the kind of past Kurds have.” The student reflected on the silence of the perpetrator: “X’s emphasis on the deaths in the past made me think that while the ones killed were Kurds, the ones responsible for the deaths were Turks. Perhaps it was just this point that made X believe that it would not be possible for Turks to delve into their past. For it would not be easy for the one who caused death to speak or to remember.” The experience allowed the student to think about her own subjectivity: “Her narrative made it possible for me to go on a journey within myself, thinking sometimes about our similar downtroddenness in terms of gender and class background, sometimes about the fact that our ethnic and cultural differences would make it impossible for me to ever share her experiences. Beyond an academic research project, oral history was transformed into an intersubjective sharing, friendship and experience, leaving important traces in my own life.”

The Surveilled Classroom: The Limits of Oral History

Hopes for a more participatory democracy were shattered during the AKP’s second decade in power. The Gezi Park events, which began as an environmentalist and a right-to-the-city protest in Istanbul on May 27, 2013, culminated in nation-wide protests against the AKP government.⁸³ In a totally unprecedented and spontaneous manner, millions of ordinary people flooded the streets of Istanbul (and other cities) day and night for weeks. Tragically, the police and army violently suppressed these peaceful protests and the carnivalesque occupation of the center city by young people, leading to deaths, mass arrests, and

⁸³ Sinan Erensü and Ozan Karaman, “The Work of a Few Trees? Gezi, Politics and Space,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, no.1 (January 2017): 19-36.

imprisonment.⁸⁴ Internationally, the Syrian war, the refugee issue, the war against ISIS, the Kurdish experiment with autonomy in Northern Iraq, and the stalling of the EU accession process were developments with important consequences for Turkey's foreign and domestic policy and rhetoric.⁸⁵ Following the success of the pro-Kurdish HDP (The People's Democratic Party) in the elections of June 7, 2015, the AKP government escalated the war against the PKK, resulting in huge civilian losses in Kurdish cities.⁸⁶ On July 15, 2016, there was a mysterious coup attempt.⁸⁷ It will likely take years for the backstory of this event to be written.⁸⁸ Blaming a former ally, the preacher Fethullah Gülen's international Hizmet movement, President Erdoğan used the coup attempt as a means to eliminate all dissent.⁸⁹ Emergency rule, the suspension of democracy, and the rule of law resulted in the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of people. Those targeted include journalists, activists, publishers, public intellectuals, and academics.⁹⁰ As executive president, Erdoğan has consolidated all power, despite the veneer of democracy. The monopolization of media ensured the silencing of opposition. Authoritarian rule and economic crisis has triggered an exodus, particularly of young professionals.

⁸⁴ On February 20, 2019, the state requested life imprisonment for civil society figure Osman Kavala, held in prison for 477 days, and 15 others, charged with financing and organizing the Gezi protests in order to "overthrow the Turkish state." BIA News Desk, "Osman Kavala, 15 Rights Defenders Facing Life Sentence Over Gezi Park Protests," *Bianet* (20 February 2019). Available at:

<https://bianet.org/english/law/205683-osman-kavala-and-15-rights-defenders-facing-aggravated-life-imprisonment-for-organizing-gezi-park-protests> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁸⁵ Cenk Saraçoğlu and Özhan Demirkol, "Nationalism and Foreign Policy Discourse in Turkey under AKP Rule: Geography, History, and National Identity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2015): 301-319.

⁸⁶ Harun Ercan, "Is Hope More Precious than Victory? The Failed Peace Process and Urban Warfare in the Kurdish Region of Turkey," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 1 (January 2019): 111-127.

⁸⁷ Hakkı Taş, "The 15 July abortive coup and post-truth politics in Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 1-19.

⁸⁸ Bülent Küçük and Ceren Özselçuk, "Fragments of the Emerging Regime in Turkey: Limits of Knowledge, Transgression of Law, and Failed Imaginaries," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 1 (2019): 1-21.

⁸⁹ Orhan Gazi Ertekin, "The Rise of Caesarism, or Erdoğan's Way," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 1 (2019): 61-80.

⁹⁰ Yaman Akdeniz and Kerem Altıparmak, "Freedom of Expression in Jeopardy: Violation of the Rights of Authors, Publishers and Academics under the State of Emergency." Report by English PEN, 29 March 2018. Available at: <https://stockholmcf.org/report-by-english-pen-shows-freedom-of-expression-in-jeopardy-in-turkey/> (accessed April 4, 2019).

The repression and surveillance of society has dire consequences for universities. Over 2,200 academics signed what became known as the “Academics for Peace” Declaration of January 11, 2016, demanding a return to peace talks and an end to the killing of civilians in the southeast.⁹¹ Since then, and particularly after the coup attempt, a witch hunt is in operation to purge universities of so-called “traitors.” Thousands of academics are being fired, taken to court, imprisoned, or forced into exile.⁹² I myself am currently in the process of challenging a twenty-five month prison sentence in an appeals court.⁹³

The classroom at Sabancı University is a privileged space where we feel relatively free to engage in and encourage critical thinking, debate, and research. While Turkey could never be characterized as a democracy, the experience of teaching oral history in the last two decades was part of the wider debate beginning to happen in the public sphere about the past. Since 2016, on the other hand, personal rule and disregard for law have reintroduced fear, dissimulation, and silence, always well known in these lands.⁹⁴ What are the consequences for teaching oral history? For example, in doing oral history, students learn to mimic seemingly intimate relations and create “safe” spaces in a society highly sensitive to context and performance. Is this ethical, given that oral history is inherently public (“unsafe”)? The seduction resulting from an unexpected situation in which a young student is interested in their story can lull interviewees into weaving a narrative the sharing of which may be potentially dangerous. Oral historians advocate teaching oral history as a counterpart to legal

⁹¹ See <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/English> (accessed April 4, 2019) for the declaration. Ömer Tekdemir, Mari Toivanen, and Bahar Başer, “Peace Profile: Academics for Peace in Turkey,” *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 30, no. 1 (2018): 103-111.

⁹² Seçkin Serdemir Özdemir, Nil Mutluer and Esra Özyürek, “Exile and Plurality in Neoliberal Times: Turkey’s Academics for Peace,” *Public Culture* 31, no. 2 (2019).

⁹³ See BIA News Desk, “25-Month Prison Sentence for One Academic, Arrest Warrant for Another,” *Bianet* (5 March 2019). Available at: <http://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/206126-25-month-prison-sentence-for-one-academic-arrest-warrant-for-another> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁹⁴ Leyla Neyzi, “Remembering to Forget: Sabbateanism, National Identity and Subjectivity in Turkey,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 1 (January 2002): 137-158.

and political efforts to redress historical wrongs and contribute to the work of reconciliation.⁹⁵ But what about societies like Turkey with on-going conflict where the past remains divisive and the process of achieving legal and political redress is stalled? Can the classroom substitute for the legal and political sphere, and what kinds of responsibilities and moral and ethical issues does this conundrum raise for academics? With the advent of digital media, oral historians aspire to make their archives available to diverse audiences on multiple platforms.⁹⁶ On the other hand, in places like Turkey, we need first and foremost to collaborate with digital media experts, journalists, and activists to ensure the security and safety of our archives. In directing student research, we need to be flexible, developing alternatives in cases where oral history methodologies prove unsafe. For example, we may experiment with ethnographic methods in situations where recording and archiving are risky.

In fall 2013, Sabanci students, many of whom took part in the Gezi Park protests, enthusiastically filled the classroom when they heard that the class project might involve Gezi. Since then, not only have students been more reluctant to broach this topic but potential interviewees are increasingly reluctant to be interviewed. Currently, it is increasingly difficult for students to get potential interviewees to consent to a recorded interview. Most reject the use of video recording and photographs and consent to voice recording with the proviso that they remain anonymous. Deciding what materials to share on our oral history website is increasingly fraught, and recent examples tend to exclude interviewees' names or photographs. Directing student research may necessitate encouraging self-censorship for the student's own protection. The atmosphere of the classroom has also changed in a society that

⁹⁵ Nicholas Ng-A-Fook and Bryan Smith, "Doing Oral History Education Toward Reconciliation," in Kristina Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, eds., *Oral History and Education: Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 65-86.

⁹⁶ Douglas Boyd and Mary Larson, eds., *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, Engagement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

is ever more divided within and where individuals are encouraged to inform upon others.⁹⁷ Students are more reluctant to discuss contentious issues, or, if they do, are more prone to argue in favor of “their side” (and against “others”). The role of the instructor is ever more challenging, as it is difficult to decide whether and how to approach difficult subjects, to mediate class discussion, and to introduce one’s own views.⁹⁸

Recent work in oral history engages with the silences in the oral history literature and the methodological and ethical challenges of applying oral history’s “best practices” in difficult settings.⁹⁹ Oral historians are also experimenting with creative ways to conduct, write about, and share oral history in the present.¹⁰⁰ The case of Turkey demonstrates both the potential and the limits of oral history teaching. The potential of oral history teaching in Turkey is tremendous as it makes it possible to challenge traditional pedagogy and national(ist) history and engage with taboos about the past (and the present) that can lead students to think and feel in new ways about their relations with others in society as well as their own subjectivities. On the other hand, given that the classroom is a microcosm of society, it is informed and circumscribed by the public sphere. Currently, teaching and practicing oral history in Turkey is limited by the political context: authoritarianism, personal rule, and the fear and silence they engender. Nevertheless, the classroom remains a public

⁹⁷ For example, Professor Zeynep Sayın was fired from Bilgi University after a student recorded her comments during class. See BIA News Desk, “Bilgi University Lays Off Academic over ‘Insulting President,’” *Bianet* (16 June 2016). Available at: <http://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/175905-bilgi-university-lays-off-academic-over-insulting-president> (accessed April 4, 2019).

⁹⁸ Nicoletta Christodoulou, “Pedagogical Approaches to oral history in schools,” in Kristina Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, eds., *Oral History and Education: Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 43-63.

⁹⁹ Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, eds. *Oral History off the Record: Towards and Ethnography of Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, “Only Human: A Reflection on the Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Working with ‘Difficult’ Stories,” *Oral History Review* 37, no. 2 (2010): 191-214; Erin Jessee, “Managing Danger in Oral Historical Fieldwork,” *Oral History Review* 44, no. 2 (2011): 322-347; Erin Jessee, “The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings,” *Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 287-307; Tracy E. K’Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers, “‘If I See Some of This in Writing, I’m Going to Shoot You’: Reluctant Narrators, Taboo Topics, and the Ethical Dilemmas of the Oral Historian,” *Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2007): 71-93.

¹⁰⁰ The work of Steven High and the oral historians he has taught and inspired is a case in point. Steven High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Histories of Survival and Displacement* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

space that we can use in a creative way to continue the urgent debate on the past (and the present), including conducting and sharing oral history research with our students. After all, the debates on history, memory, and identity in the 1990s and 2000s did have an impact, particularly on the younger generation. While some of these young people may leave the country, the ubiquitousness of repression demonstrates the continuing significance of the past for the present, and if they can be aired, current conflicts, controversies, and diversity of views may take society in quite a different direction in the future.