

## ARTICLE

# The space of encounter and the making of difference: The entangled lives of Alevi and Sunni neighbours in Turkey

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## Abstract

The concept of encounter has long been central to a cosmopolitan ethos in which coming together in urban public space is expected to yield tolerance and pluralism. More recently scholars have reworked this concept to account for not only what is potentially transformative in encounters but also how encounters are conditioned by and productive of relations of power and inequality. Our study contributes to this reworking, and to feminist critiques of space and politics, by centring the spatiality of encounter in the entanglement of neighbours. Drawing on our focus group research (2013–2016) with Alevis and Sunnis in Istanbul and Malatya, we argue that difficult questions of difference, responsibility, and power come to the fore in neighbour relations. While our study underlines how Sunni supremacism and Alevi precarity are constituted in the everyday lives of neighbours, we also find that there is a transformational potential in these encounters that is not fully (re)absorbed into structures of Alevi–Sunni difference. We argue that, across the blurry boundaries of home and neighbourhood spaces, the unbidden intimacies of living in proximity (the drift of smells and sounds, the lines of sight that connect balconies and windows, the presence of neighbours at the thresholds and in the spaces of each other's homes) mean that encounters between neighbours both fuel and trouble the marking out of what is shared and what is separate, what is tolerable and what crosses a line. Our study thereby advances an understanding of the space of encounter, the making of difference, and the political and ethical significance of this entanglement.

## KEYWORDS

Alevis, difference, encounter, feminist political geography, neighbours, Turkey

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The diverse public spaces of city life have long been considered the informal locus for a liberal-democratic politics and ethics sustained by encounters with others different from oneself (e.g., Berman, 1986). In contrast, neighbourhoods are frequently cast as spaces of sameness and social cohesion (e.g., Forrest & Kearns, 2001). And yet, who more than neighbours face a reckoning with difference? Neighbours' privacy and intimacy are not bound by the walls of apartments. They see each other on balconies and through windows, smell each other's food, and hear the noises of each other's lives. They encounter each other at doorways and in hallways, in living rooms, and on the streets of the neighbourhood. They share and keep secrets. As neighbours find themselves living with a proliferation of marked and hidden differences, they face the questions of which differences are knowable, which ones they can live with, and which ones become unbearable. As much or more than in the 'public' spaces of city life, we argue, it is in these intermeshed spaces of living (where 'public' and 'private' reveal their indistinction) that difference is produced and gives rise to both political and ethical possibilities.

In the entanglement of neighbourhood dwelling, there can be much at stake. This is the case for Alevis, a 'stigmatized and ethnically heterogeneous belief group' living in Sunni-dominated Turkey (Yonucu, 2022, p. 1). Alevis (who are ethnically Turkish, Kurdish, and Turkmen) comprise about 20% of the population. Characterising Alevism has been controversial in Turkey (see Es, 2013; Karakaya-Stump, 2018; Mutlu, 1995), but common elements of practice and belief include the profession of faith in both the Twelve Imams (including Ali) and the Prophet Muhammad, the centrality of *cemevis* (houses of gathering) as places of communal worship (*cem*), practising the *semah* ceremony, and fasting 10–12 days during the holy month of Muharram. Alevis live throughout Turkey, with strong concentrations in certain provinces in the eastern region and, due to massive rural–urban migration and forced displacement over the past 70 years, in major cities throughout the country. In many cities, well-known 'Alevi' neighbourhoods are spaces where working-class Alevi and Kurdish identities (and struggles) intersect (Yonucu, 2022). At the same time, Alevi migrants to cities have also moved into more mixed urban areas and many Alevis dwell in neighbourhoods where Sunni populations are dominant.

Ali Kenanoğlu, a founder of two Alevi organisations and two-term Member of Parliament representing the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), describes the dynamics of mixed neighbourhoods in his 2005 blog, 'Being an Alevi during Ramadan'. Kenanoğlu reflects on the uneasiness Alevi migrants moving into Sunni-dominated areas felt during the holy month of Ramadan, a time of fasting for Sunni Muslims but not necessarily for Alevis. He writes:

When we came to the city [Istanbul], our neighbourhood was a squatter settlement with majority Alevis and people from the same village and relatives lived in this area. But not everyone did. I cannot forget how my sister had to appear to her neighbours as if she were fasting during Ramadan in her neighbourhood. Waking up in the middle of sweet sleep with the piercing sound of drumming just to turn on the lights in the kitchen and the dining room [as if up for *sahur* meal before fasting starts] and going back to bed. To do all this when you did not believe. Then in the morning, listening to neighbours' *sahur* stories and making up convincing *sahur* stories to share. Eating lunch in hiding, afraid that a neighbour would show up. Hiding the lunch tray under a bed or in a bedroom when the doorbell rings. Those who have lived through this know what a torture it is. Going to *iftar* (end of fasting) dinners and inviting neighbours for *iftar*. These and much more are the things we had to suffer through.<sup>1</sup>

Kenanoğlu's reflection raises questions about the boundaries of domestic spaces and how differences emerge and become threatening in everyday encounters between neighbours. Living among Sunnis in Istanbul, Kenanoğlu recounts how some Alevi migrants to the city feel compelled to make sure that their home appears from the outside to be a pious Sunni household during Ramadan: the lights turn on as expected to indicate eating before dawn, lunch dishes are hidden, fasts are performatively broken after sunset. The neighbourhood is a site where difference is taking place, being hidden, and revealed in what traverses the permeable enclosure of the home—practices that are bound up with broader dynamics of national belonging and state power. Kenanoğlu is reflecting on a past moment, the time of his family's migration to Istanbul. But after two decades of the right-wing Adalet and Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, AKP) rule that has placed a growing emphasis on 'national unity' and reinforced a conservative Sunni Muslim normativity, these tensions remain pertinent (if not deepened) in Turkey today. As we will show, Alevis feel the tense intimacy of the mixed (Sunni–Alevi) neighbourhoods, the question of who is marked as 'different', of whose practices are displayed and whose must be hidden.

When Kenanoğlu refers to ‘the things we had to suffer through’, he is referring to the anxiety of moving into Sunni-dominated neighbourhoods as a migrant, but the history that underpins Alevis’ fear of being known to their neighbours opens onto much greater suffering still. This suffering dates to at least the 16th century, when Alevis, branded as heretics and deviants and condemned as internal enemies, were massacred by Ottoman forces (Karakaya-Stump, 2019). Violence against Alevis has continued in the Republic of Turkey, with massacres taking place in the 1930s, 1970s, and the 1990s, and with targeted state and civilian violence against Alevis continuing to this day (Sinclair-Webb, 2003; Yonucu, 2022). Moreover, at the same time as they have been folklorised in the discourse of Turkish national identity, Alevis have continued to be treated with suspicion, subjected to dehumanising prejudice, and systematically discriminated against (Tambar, 2014; Mutluer, 2016). As the AKP has tightened its grip on power, its authoritarian policies and violent suppression of dissent has exacerbated the precarity of Alevis, Kurds, LGBTQ people, leftists, and other dissident populations (Baser et al., 2017; Savcı, 2021; Özkul, 2015). In this repressive political context, our study brings to the fore how the power dynamics of ‘Sunni supremacism’ (Akyıldız, 2022) and Alevi precarity are constituted and contested in the everyday lives of neighbours dwelling with difference in dense urban neighbourhoods.

The neighbourhood dynamics that Kenanoğlu discusses in the context of earlier rural–urban migration continue to shape daily life but in ever evolving ways. This paper draws on our focus group research (2013–2016) with Alevis and Sunnis in Istanbul and Malatya to bring to light how difference is made and comes to matter in the entanglement of neighbours and neighbourhood spaces, the fluid edges of the home, and the ordinary affects and experiences of daily life. While the neighbourhood is a well-established scale of analysis in geography, we hope to bring fresh energy to this field by illustrating how the spatiality of neighbourhood life—that is, the blurry boundaries and unbidden entanglements of proximate dwelling—matters for thinking about encounter and the lived, affective politics of difference.

By examining how encounters between neighbours can at once foster peaceful coexistence and devolve into anxious antagonisms, our work makes both empirical and theoretical contributions to the rethinking of urban space, politics, and difference in the field of feminist political geography (Faria et al., 2020). Feminist political geographers have developed an analytic perspective that has important implications for questions of politics and identity in the Middle East, where too often ‘sectarianism’ has been treated as the preordained outcome of the territorial overlap or proximity of essentially discordant groups. For example, feminist political geographers have provided fresh insight into the gendered and intimate dimensions of war, nationalism, and religion in the region (e.g., Falah & Nagel, 2005; Fluri, 2014; Marshall, 2014; Militz, 2020; see Clark, 2017 for a review). Likewise, feminist scholarship in anthropology has broken ground by showing the political significance of the practices and discourses of everyday life across a range of contexts (e.g., Deeb & Harb, 2013; Korkman, 2016; Mahmood, 2015; Navaro, 2012; Özyürek, 2006). And yet, despite this rich, interdisciplinary vein of scholarship, we still find that the constitutive role of everyday practices, spaces, and discourses is overlooked in dominant treatments of what is deemed to be (geo)politically significant in the region (for a recent example, see Ahram, 2020). We therefore bring a feminist political-geographic lens to bear on an emergent critical question in Middle East Studies: that is, how is the dominance of some groups over others (re)produced and contested in and through the spaces of everyday life? Insight into these dynamics is key to unsettling the sectarian narratives that serve to ballast state power and naturalise dominant geopolitical mappings in the region.

We begin with a discussion of how encounter has been rethought in geography as an event that is at once potentially ‘surprising’ and shaped by relations of power and domination. We draw on the idea of ‘difficult interrelatedness’, a phrase that Katherine McKittrick (2011, p. 948) uses to indicate how a history of struggle against domination is also a history of entanglement and co-constitution. ‘Entanglement’, for our study, refers to how the lives and spaces of neighbours are intertwined with one another and how entities (individuals or identities) are constituted in and through their interactions (Barad, 2007). These ideas frame our argument that the entangled spatiality of neighbourhood life underpins the ambivalence of neighbouring itself and the potential that inheres in encounters between neighbours for both politics (contestations of power) and ethics (relations of responsibility). Following this conceptual grounding, we present our methodology, laying out the parameters of the larger qualitative study from which this paper arises. The following three sections (‘Sensorial entanglements’, ‘Edges’, and ‘Blurry boundaries’) delve into the stories and dialogues that emerged among our focus group participants. These sections work through the liminal spaces of neighbourhood life (from balconies to thresholds to living rooms) in which there is no clear boundary between interior and exterior, public and private, the home and its environs. In the stories told to us by our focus group participants, the blurred and breached boundaries of neighbourhood life are the material support for the ambiguity of the neighbour as a figure of both familiarity and estrangement. We argue that, navigating this ‘difficult interrelatedness’ in the encounter, neighbours are confronted with an unbidden intimacy that calls forth questions of what boundaries can or should be defended (of the self, the home, and the community) and of what responsibility they might have to one another. Finally, we suggest the significance of these

dynamics for an understanding of how difference is made and comes to matter in the interplay between historical and ongoing relations of power and the lived entanglement of encounter.

## 2 | RETHINKING ENCOUNTER: 'DIFFICULT INTERRELATEDNESS' IN THE SPACE OF NEIGHBOURS

By asking how difference arises and becomes significant in relations between neighbours, we situate this study as part of a broader reworking of difference and encounter that has been taken up by geographers and others in recent years (see Darling & Wilson, 2016; Wilson, 2017). While the concept of encounter has long been central to a cosmopolitan ethos in which coming together in urban public space is expected to yield democratic and ethical 'goods' such as tolerance and pluralism, more recently attention has turned to the affects and politics of 'bad encounters' (Ahmed, 2000; Leitner, 2012; Ruez, 2017; Valentine, 2008). Such work has shown, both theoretically and empirically, that valorising encounter as a source of peaceful co-existence obscures the relations of inequality and vulnerability that are reproduced in and through encounters.

More than simply toggling the valence of encounter from 'good' to 'bad', these critical perspectives have fuelled a powerful reworking of the concept of encounter as an event in which conditions of inequality and structures of domination are very much at stake (Cockayne et al., 2020; Gilmore, 2002; McKittrick, 2006, 2011). In this renewed conception, encounters are asymmetrical and open onto an 'unfinished, unheard history' that is neither fully present nor absent in the immediacy of the event (Ahmed, 2000, p. 156). For Katherine McKittrick, in her work on plantation space, the encounter is not to be understood in terms of colonial narratives of contact between discrete categories (blackness, whiteness), but rather as an event of 'difficult interrelatedness' producing 'entangled and common histories' (2011, p. 950, 948). As part of an 'ethical analytics of race', difficult interrelatedness signifies an approach to encounter as taking place on a terrain of struggle and ongoing co-constitution (McKittrick, 2011, p. 948). Likewise, in her theorisation of the encounter, Helen Wilson argues for an understanding of encounter that is not tethered to binary spatial and colonial logics but instead is attuned to 'the momentary enactments and rhythms of difference that undermine and contradict essentialist thought' (2017, p. 464). Encounters in this sense are at once emergent and mediated: they are affective events in which what happens in the moment has the potential to surprise, even as this potential is conditioned by what came before and what will come after (Anderson, 2014; Askins & Pain, 2011).

Delving into the difficult interrelatedness of encounter—that is, attending to what happens in the encounter in relation to both the past and the future—thus becomes a way of both observing and unsettling the (re)inscription of difference, of at once apprehending how asymmetrical relations are (re)produced and finding the openings through which relations can emerge otherwise. This paper puts to work this renewed understanding of encounter as difficult interrelatedness and furthers its development in two main ways: first, by developing the potential of this approach for a critique of how difference is (re)produced in everyday life in the context of sectarian scriptings in Turkey, and second, by bringing the spatiality of the difficult encounter to the fore with a focus on the ambivalent figure of the neighbour.

In the context of our study, conceptualising encounter as difficult interrelatedness draws attention to how Alevi-Sunni difference is *made*—that is, given substantive content and marked out as difference—in the entangled spaces of neighbourhood dwelling. The marking and 'knowing' of this difference is conditioned by historically sedimented relations of power and domination that have worked to 'other' Alevi populations and to privilege a particular image of Sunni-Turkishness—an indeed 'unfinished, unheard' history that continues to haunt everyday life in Turkey today (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2022; Tambar, 2014). Asking questions about how Sunni and Alevi difference circulates and becomes significant in encounters between neighbours therefore also means engaging with and making a contribution to recent critical work on sectarianism that has moved beyond traditional framings of Sunni-Shi'a antagonism to question how these lines of differentiation have been drawn and how 'sectarianism' as a paradigm reproduces a framework that has been used to sow division and create the conditions for violent repression (Deeb, 2020; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2022; Haddad, 2017; Hurd, 2015; Makdisi, 2000; Nucho, 2016; Yonucu, 2022). In other words, our project is to bring into a single frame geopolitical structures of domination and the 'embodied geosocial constructions' of neighbouring through which these are at once manifest and contested (Mitchell & Sparke, 2020, p. 1047).

Disrupting assumptions about the space of politics and the public/private binary, our work builds on feminist scholarship that has shown neighbourhoods to be important sites of gendered social, religious, and political practice (Gökarıksel, 2012; Mills, 2007; Secor, 2001; Vaiou & Lykogianni, 2006). While neighbourhoods have long been granted political significance as sites of cohesive communities and thick social bonds (Allport 1954), feminist interventions in the



field have tended to subvert assumptions about neighbourhoods being bounded, homogeneous, or necessarily congenial spaces (Ahmed, 2000; Massey, 1994). Instead, feminist scholarship has shown neighbourhoods to be dynamic and variegated sites where difference is made, encountered, and negotiated in ways that 'acquire salience and validity during different moments and in different spaces of everyday life' (Datta, 2012, p. 747). From this perspective, the neighbourhood is not an idealised site of 'good neighbours', but a paradoxical space that includes, along with the potential for care and reciprocity, the potential for oppression, precarity, and violence (Rosenblum, 2016). This duality is evident in scholarship on neighbourhoods in Turkey, where what emerges is at once the recognition of *komşuluk* (neighbourliness) as an ideal of belonging and connectivity and a critique of *mahalle baskısı* (neighbourhood pressure), the dynamics of social control in neighbourhoods that enact uneven power relations across positionalities of gender, sexuality, youth, religiosity, and other identities and orientations (Mills, 2010; Toprak, 2009; Turam, 2013).

From our perspective, the co-presence of these alternative scriptings of neighbour relations as beneficial or oppressive is not incidental, but rather reflective of the ambivalence of neighbouring itself. Neighbours have no choice but to become entangled (sensorially, materially, and affectively) within the liminal spaces of their dwelling. These socio-spatial practices of neighbourhood life are connected to the uncanny figure of the *Nebenmensch*, the figure of the neighbour as it has arisen in psychoanalytical and ethical thought (Critchley, 1999; Freud, 1950 [1895]). In the figure of the neighbour, what is familiar and proximate mixes with what is different and unknown. The *Nebenmensch*/neighbour is thus a figure of both ethical obligation and monstrosity—that is, an 'other' capable of evoking feelings of both responsibility and repulsion (Žižek et al. 2013). As Biddle writes, the neighbour combines the 'possibility of ethical friendship [and] the probability of hostility in equal measure' (Biddle, 2007: para. 18; quoted in Painter; see also Vollebergh, 2016). In short, the neighbour (in theory as well as in practice) can be imbued with both threat and promise—in other words, with the difficult interrelatedness of the encounter. It is thus with this combination of conceptual tools—a feminist critique of the space of politics, a renewed conception of encounter between the geopolitical and the geosocial, a wager regarding the ambivalence that inheres in neighbour relations, and a critical perspective on sectarian difference—that we aim to advance our study of the politics of difference onto fresh ground.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

The research presented here is part of a larger project that examines the role of religion in public life under AKP rule. We conducted intensive fieldwork between June 2013 and September 2016, a period bookmarked by two crucial events: the mass protests of May–June 2013 at Gezi Park in Istanbul and nationwide that criticised the AKP regime and demanded civil rights and freedoms and the coup attempt of 15 July 2016 where a faction of the military aimed to remove President Erdoğan from power. During this tumultuous political period, the AKP amassed more power and increased its control over the media, judiciary, police, and military; bolstered its rightist Turkish-Sunni rhetoric; called into being a range of threats and others; and attempted to silence and punish its critics. It is within this context that we sought to investigate how difference comes into play in everyday life in urban Turkey.

In this paper, we draw on 24 focus groups: 16 (eight with Sunnis; eight with Alevis) in the metropolitan centre of Istanbul (population about 15 million) in the west of Turkey and 8 (four with Sunnis and four with Alevis) in the eastern city of Malatya (population about half a million). Each focus group lasted two to two-and-a-half hours. In each group there were 8–10 participants who did not know each other and who came from different parts of the city to a rented hotel conference room in Malatya and to a meeting room operated by Sosyal Araştırmalar Merkezi (SAM) in Istanbul. We recruited participants through initial surveys and phone interviews, in which information about the research was given and basic demographic information (age, gender, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, and area of living—all based on self-identification) collected. We formed groups based on a matrix of gender (women- and men-identifying), age (younger [18–34] and older [35–65]), socio-economic status (based on education and income level), and as either Sunni- or Alevi-identified in Istanbul and Malatya. During the focus groups, in addition to ourselves, two members of SAM were present in the room: one as the moderator and the other attending to the audio recording and taking notes about who was speaking to aid with the challenging task of focus group transcription. Groups with women were moderated by a woman from the team, while the groups with men were moderated by a man. Like the two of us, members of the locally based research team would have been understood by our research subjects to be neither Alevi nor pious Sunnis, but rather 'secular' and members of the professional class.

We found focus groups to be effective and productive for exploring the question of difference in Turkey. The strength of focus group methodology is to tap into common discourses, rather than individual life stories, and to explore the

co-constitution of narrative and interpretation (Wilkinson, 1998). Focus groups are therefore useful for exploring controversial or debated topics and understanding the range of viewpoints on those topics (Smithson, 2000). In focus groups, participants share as much as they are comfortable sharing, tell their stories or keep silent, position themselves within the discussion, express their opinions, and exchange ideas with others in the same group. The discussion often develops to enable participants to go deeper in explaining their views and sometimes generates new ideas. At times, participants change their positions as well. We have witnessed more than once a participant pointing out the shifting position or contradictions within the narrative of another participant. Our analysis also pays attention to those things left unsaid and how other participants react to them (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Indeed, the focus groups themselves are sites of encounter, spaces where commonalities are found, differences erupt, care is expressed, and sometimes offence taken. In our focus groups, too, there were moments of unease, discomfort, and contention when a participant interjected her/his dissenting point of view or called on someone's perceived hypocrisy or prejudice.

Our study originally set out to capture how religion was lived in the shifting political landscape of the 2010s under the AKP rule. Our focus group guiding questions touched on three themes: encounters with difference in urban social life, experiences of religion and piety, and widely debated government policies and practices of the time regarding religion (such as mandatory religion classes in schools, the budget of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and government-sponsored lavish Ramadan dinners). Our early focus groups in 2013 provided two important insights that have redirected the study and form the basis of our argument in this paper. First, our initial focus groups were only with those who identified as devout Sunni women and men. However, it quickly became clear that our participants identified Alevis as a central axis of identity in response to our open-ended questions about their experiences of encountering others 'different from themselves'. To learn the perspectives of a cross-section of the Alevi-identifying population, we added focus groups with Alevis to our study. Second, when we asked our research participants about where they encounter people different from themselves (*Değişik insanların bulunduğu yerler nereleri?*), without defining what we meant by diverse or indicating what kind of places these might be, our research participants kept bringing the conversation back home, to their spaces of dwelling and to their neighbourhoods. While participants might encounter people unknown to themselves across a wide range of urban spaces, they often focused on their neighbours whose difference appeared to be of utmost importance and interest to them. Their stories were often set in the neighbourhoods where they lived, in the liminal spaces of everyday life and inside their homes.

Reflecting the gendered construction of the home and urban neighbourhoods in Turkey (Mills, 2007), relations with neighbours appeared to be especially important for our women participants. Most of our women participants did not work in paid employment outside of the home and spent most of their time at home and in neighbourhood spaces daily, but even those who did work outside of the home spoke mostly, with great detail and emotion, about their neighbours who lived in their apartment buildings, across the street, or nearby in their neighbourhoods. When men talked about their residential neighbours, it was often associated with family life or relations that mainly concerned their wives, as we will discuss below. As a result, in this paper we foreground women's experiences (that also impact men's) of encountering difference in the space of the home and the neighbourhood and join with feminist critiques that have challenged the structured opposition between public and private space (Benhabib, 1996; Hill-Collins, 2000).

In the sections that follow, we analyse how neighbours appear in the stories and conversations of our focus groups participants. We focus on where interactions with neighbours take place and how these spaces affect how differences come to be known and matter. Our analysis of the space of encounter, based as it is on focus group conversations, is necessarily discursive; the material spaces that we refer to are, in the context of our analysis, *represented* material spaces, appearing as they do in our focus group participants' stories. In keeping with the strengths and limitations of our methodology, our analysis does not aim to 'report' on neighbourhood conditions but instead unpicks the narration of experience, the circulation of stories, and the give and take of conversation around questions of difference and encounter in the specific context of our study. While grounded in this context and illuminating the everyday politics of difference in the lives of our participants, this paper offers more broadly significant insight into the study and theorisation of 'difficult interrelatedness' in the space of encounter.

#### 4 | SENSORIAL ENTANGLEMENTS: BALCONIES

Encounters with neighbours are enmeshed within the spaces of the home and neighbourhoods. Many of the people we talked with live in medium-rise apartment buildings in densely populated neighbourhoods. In the early Republic, apartment living centred around a nuclear heterosexual family became integral to a modern urban lifestyle (Bozdoğan, 2002).

In the 1950s–60s ideals of the modern housewife focused on apartments decorated to display and build middle-class status (Gürel, 2009). Since then, with rapid urbanisation and city development projects, apartment buildings have come to dominate urban life across Turkey. The typical urban dwelling today is a 5- to 8-storey apartment building with 2–4 apartments on each floor. More recently built apartment buildings often soar to higher heights. In most low-income neighbourhoods, apartment buildings have small gardens, if any, and line up closely along narrow streets, whereas those in middle- and upper-class areas have larger gardens, more space between buildings, and might be in gated communities. Apartment-living places neighbours in proximity. In contrast to single-family housing, neighbours who live in multi-unit apartments share staircases and elevators (when available). They therefore experience the sounds and smells that travel through walls, ceilings, and windows, and through cracks and pipes. Further, their windows and balconies open to those of their neighbours in the same building and neighbouring buildings or across the street. Home visits for morning coffee, afternoon tea, or meals are valued social interactions, central to traditional women's homosocial life but also important for the whole family—and to the making of neighbourhood spaces as articulated in and through the spaces of the home.

Around the porous 'edges' of the home, balconies figured in stories of neighbourhood life as places where people dry their clothes, air their carpets, eat meals in hot weather, nurture house plants, smoke, or just relax, interact with neighbours, and watch life as it unfolds in the neighbourhood. On balconies, neighbours are exposed to one another, and sometimes also to the street or the park next door. Revealed in this way, ordinary practices—such as what one wears to lounge, or whether one is taking a meal—can become charged with the politics of difference. Alevi women, for example, often mentioned how they did not feel comfortable stepping onto their balconies wearing shorts or smoking on the balcony, things they felt comfortable doing inside their homes and in Alevi-dominant areas but not on their own balconies where they would be seen and judged by their Sunni neighbours. Likewise, our participants talked about seeing what others were doing on their balconies, or seeing the goings on in a park next door, from their own windows and balconies, and sometimes becoming upset; in the words of one older woman in Malatya: 'My neighbour's children do all sorts of things in their balcony. I mean that should not happen. No one in this society would tolerate that'. Similarly, the activities taking place in overlooked parks (such as lovers kissing or people drinking) were sources of frustration and outrage (see also Öz & Eder, 2018; Turam, 2013). In this sense, balconies become spaces of surveillance, where the most intimate of habits can be taken as marking out differences that carry significant political and cultural meaning.

One has no choice but to see, hear, and smell the lives of one's neighbours. While this can be a source of tension for many, Alevi participants emphasised the effort and care that go into managing the uncertain, fluid boundaries of their homes, whether in an effort to keep their Aleviness private or simply to be respectful of their Sunni neighbours' religious observance or moral boundaries. This was especially pronounced during Ramadan. Alevi participants told us that they sometimes refrained from cooking during the day during Ramadan to be respectful of their fasting Sunni neighbours and to avoid making them hungry with the smells of their cooking, but also because some were afraid that the smells, pieced together with other hints about their lives, would arouse suspicions and reveal that they were Alevis. The role of kitchen smells in an everyday politics of difference resonates with other contexts as well (e.g., Fiore, 2016). What slips beyond the containment of a house (the glimpses, smells, and sounds) is thus the spatial and material substance of an unbidden encounter—a difficult interrelatedness arising in the most intimate spaces of daily life.

Relations of power are thus threaded through the sensorial entanglement of living in proximity to one another. In a focus group with older women in Istanbul, Rahmiye (a 52-year-old single mother of two who lived in the lower income neighbourhood of Gültepe among Sunni neighbours and worked as a housekeeper at a small establishment in the same neighbourhood) described how a double standard regulated her own balcony-dwelling:

Our neighbours are a little conservative, but we do not have many problems. It may be because I grew up in that neighbourhood. They accepted us as we are. Or maybe they do not say anything because of how we would react. When it's Ramadan, if I have visitors and they drink tea on the balcony, my neighbours get angry. But during Muharram, our [Sunni] neighbours visit us, we serve them tea. Even if we are fasting, we serve them tea, food, and they do not feel disturbed at all. There is a double standard.

While situating her story in the context of long-time neighbourhood residence and acceptance, Rahmiye nonetheless feels that, during Ramadan, she cannot serve her (non-fasting) visitors food on her balcony, which puts them within the field of vision of the neighbours, because her Sunni neighbours get upset. But during Muharram, even when she is fasting, she fulfils the expectation to serve her Sunni neighbours tea when they come to visit. In either case, she feels the burden of regulating her behaviour, and managing the boundaries of her home so as not to offend or anger her Sunni

neighbours, while they do not reciprocate. A similar perspective was expressed by Gülnur, a 38-year-old housewife and mother of one who lived in the lower income neighbourhood of Gülbağ, in the same focus group:

Most of my neighbourhood is composed of Sunnis. They stare at me in a strange way when I wear a tank top. We adjusted our dinnertime according to their fasting time. [...] I have a table on the balcony, I always eat there, I want to have my breakfast there, but I cannot because they are fasting. Because we respect them. But they do not respect us.

In the context of unavoidable entanglement, our research participants often invoked respect (*saygı*) as the crux of what they saw as being a proper relationship to 'others' different from oneself. We heard many stories of respect as a means of living together, a way to manage the close-but-at-a-distance relationship between neighbours (Gökarişel & Secor, 2015). Articulating an idea of responsibility to an other, the call for respect thus expresses the presence of an ethical relation inherent in encounters between neighbours—a question of mutuality, regard, and acknowledgment (Sennett, 2003). Yet, as Gülnur expresses it in the quote above, the practice of respect may not be mutual: 'We respect them. But they don't respect us'. By pointing out the asymmetry of who is respected and who is called on to be respectful, Gülnur echoes critiques of the politics of tolerance and recognition that have shown these relations to depend on the subordination of those who are cast as the bearers of difference (Brown, 2009; Oliver, 2001). The asymmetry that Gülnur points out thus illustrates what Richard Sennett refers to as the 'difficulty of showing mutual respect across the boundaries of inequality' (2003, p. 23).

That the asymmetry of respect or accommodation is part of how Sunni dominance is expressed in social life was apparent to our participants, who connected what they experienced as a lack of respect to the absence of attention to Muharram more broadly in Turkey. For example, in another Istanbul focus group with middle to higher income younger Alevi women, 34-year-old Iclal (an interior decorator who lived in the higher income part of Kağıthane) and 29-year-old Fatma (who used to work as a secretary and lived in middle class 4. Levent), put it like this:

**Iclal:** The whole world knows of Ramadan, the whole system, all the commercials are about fasting, they start 10 days before Ramadan. But nobody knows about Muharram. We die of hunger and thirst until 9 pm while everyone eats and drinks in the street, they smoke, drink water. Nobody is aware of our fasting.

**Fatma:** We are not respected.

The ethics of neighbouring (that is, questions of respect and responsibility between neighbours) are thus inscribed within a broader social and political context in which Sunni Islam is recognised, celebrated, and state funded, while Alevism is treated as a 'sectarian' threat to be pushed out of view. But it is not only that relations between neighbours mirror this wider milieu. Our point is that difference—and particularly, in our analysis, the difficult interrelatedness of Alevi–Sunni difference—is given its specific power-laden content in and through the entanglement of neighbourhood spaces, the liminal, enmeshed spaces of dwelling in proximity. When the 'whole system' of Sunni cultural and political dominance elevates Ramadan (through the allocation of funds, publicity, and cultural clout), this structure of power conditions what unfolds in the daily spaces of living together; it imbues the entangled sensory milieu of the neighbourhood, where the sounds, sights, and smells of the day set neighbours apart from one another and call forth demands for respect and reciprocity, whether these entanglements are chosen or not.

## 5 | EDGES: DOORWAYS AND THRESHOLDS

Neighbours are waiting for Aşure from you. With Aşure, the symbol of our sharing culture, we strengthen our bonds of neighbourliness, friendship and love.

(2018 Muharram message<sup>2</sup>)

Neighbours are entwined not only by what travels uncontained between them. They also approach one another at points of more purposive proximity: the thresholds of their homes. Ringing a neighbour's doorbell or opening the door to a neighbour can be part of an established, ongoing relationship of neighbouring (borrowing, sharing, taking care), can herald an unplanned visit, or even be part of a ritualised act of neighbouring. One tradition that regularly brings Alevis to the doorways of their Sunni neighbours is the sharing of *aşure*, a sweet dish made of fruit, grain, and nuts, on the tenth



day of Muharram, the day of Husayn's martyrdom. As the Muharram message above suggests, delivering *aşure* to the doors of one's neighbours, whatever their religion, is considered an act of neighbourliness that expresses Alevi culture and religious values (on neighbourliness as part of sacred understandings of coexistence, see also Zaman, 2020). It is conceived as an act that traverses differences and strengthens neighbourly bonds: 'neighbours are waiting for *aşure*'. In the encouraging words of an Alevi newspaper columnist on the fourth day of Muharram: 'No one, whether secular, irreligious, Sunni, Alevi or Shiite, even Jewish or Christian, will be disturbed by this beautiful tradition that our community will once again keep alive'.<sup>3</sup>

But what if what happens in the doorway of the neighbour is something else? What if the offering is treated with disdain, suspicion, or disgust? In the mixed neighbourhoods where many of our research participants lived, the sharing of *aşure* did indeed bring neighbours to one another's doorsteps, but what happens at this threshold does not necessarily follow the script of neighbourliness. The following dialogue from 2015 among Alevi women traces out some of what happens on the threshold of the home and what is at stake in taking in or keeping out the offering of a neighbour. The three main speakers, Melis, Aleyna, and Gülten, are all Istanbul-born but from families originally from Malatya. In what follows, they discuss their relations with neighbours in the mixed lower middle class Istanbul neighbourhoods (Okmeydanı, Kağıthane, Alibeyköy, and Kartal) where they live:

**Melis:** But so far we have only [spoken of] the bad side. But there are good people too. We have Sunni neighbours, for instance, they used to visit us during the 12 days that my husband fasted [during Muharram] and bring us food for dinner. There are various kinds of people. There are some who eat the food we send them. There are also some who say, 'The Alevis are actually very good people.'

**Özlem:** And some who take [the food] and throw it out.

**Aleyna:** For example, when we cook *aşure*, we have many neighbours who refuse to take the dish we offer them, or those who refuse the sacrificial meat that we offer them.

**Moderator:** Why take the food and throw it out?

**Sezen:** She would take it not to offend you.

**Tuba:** Then throw it in the garbage bin.

**Moderator:** How do you know about this? Does she tell you this is what she does, for example?

**Gülten:** There are some who talk about it. There is this neighbour of mine, she says the woman just sneered, and threw it out even before she closed the door. She says, 'I wish she had not accepted my *aşure*.' Let a bird have it, at least. Why throw it in the garbage? I put so much effort into it and I do it by way of worship, do not I? You could put it out for a bird to eat, a bird would eat it, a cat would eat it, some living creature would eat it, right? But what did you do? You threw it in the garbage. If you do not wish to take it...

**Seldağ:** They consider it unclean.

What happens at the threshold—food offered, food accepted (if only not to offend), or a sneer and a show of throwing it away—makes doorways significant spaces of encounter where the question of how one responds to one's neighbour (that is, the ethical question) becomes unavoidable. Melis intervenes to highlight the goodness of her Sunni neighbours, but her statement also demonstrates a difference. While there appears to be no question of Melis' family appreciating the dinners that her Sunni neighbours bring to them during Muharram, that *some* Sunni families accept food brought to them by Alevis is taken as a mark of their exceptional goodness. The asymmetry of tolerance and recognition is manifest in the differential that appears between those who are in the position to extend acceptance and those who are in need of it (Brown, 2009). When a Sunni neighbour either accepts or offers food, they are cast as exceptionally good, while the question of whether Alevi food will be accepted at all cuts to the heart of what happens at the threshold.

While light, sound, and smell sensorially enmesh the spaces of neighbourhood living, such entanglements become even more visceral in the question of whether one ingests or wastes a neighbours' offering of food. The throwing away or refusal of food made by Alevi neighbours was something we heard of many times, in conversations both with Sunnis and Alevis (Gökarişel & Secor, 2015). The rejection of Alevi food based on perceived 'uncleanliness' activates discourses of purity and abjection that are called on to secure the precarious boundaries of the home, the body, and the self (Kristeva, 1982; Oliver, 2001). Abjection expresses a 'border anxiety' about the encroachment of something that is 'contaminating'; when directed at others, this anxiety has been associated with the formation of racism (Hook, 2004). In short, the threshold is fractured across scale, and the encounter between neighbours—an offering of food on the doorstep—provokes anxiety about the boundaries of the home, the community, and the self all at once. The pain that comes through in Gülten's plea for what might be taken as a minimal admission of the goodness of her offering ('Some

living creature would eat it, right?') suggests how much is at stake in the response to the other that is enacted in the intermingled spaces of neighbourhood dwelling.

## 6 | BLURRY BOUNDARIES: HOME SPACES

The uncertain boundaries of neighbourhood spaces are not limited to windows, doorways, and balconies that constitute the porous borders of apartment living. Embroiled in the interactivity of the neighbourhood space, the home figures ambivalently in our participants' stories as a space of intimacy and distance, trust and betrayal, safety and violence (see also Blunt, 2005; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012). At the same time as neighbours may take care to arrange what is visible to visitors that breach the threshold of the home, they are fully aware that they do not have complete control over what is exposed about them when a neighbour comes to visit. Some home visits might be invited and staged, but with deepening intimacy visits may no longer require an invitation and take the form of unannounced drop-ins for morning coffee or afternoon tea. Neighbours might further travel into the interior spaces of homes, to kitchens for cooking or cleaning up together, catching glimpses of private life in kitchen cupboards or bathroom cabinets, or through bedroom doors left ajar. Their lives might become entangled as they celebrate holidays together and take care of each other's children. Thus, rather than marking out a clearly bounded, private space, homes are instead experienced as spaces of indeterminate, unstable, and ambiguous boundaries.

The home is not only a key site of encounters between neighbours, but also an arena that foregrounds the significance of relations between women. The entanglement of home spaces with streets and neighbourhood living in Turkey more broadly, and the traditional importance of women's roles in the practices of neighbouring that transect these spaces, is captured by Amy Mills, who writes:

In Turkey, the traditional urban neighbourhood is a space which extends the interior space of the family to the residential street; it is a space of belonging and collectivity. The most important practice for creating and sustaining the familiar spaces of *mahalle* [neighbourhood] life is neighbouring (*komşuluk*), which makes home spaces open to neighbours. The cultural practice of neighbouring is gendered, relying in part on traditional gender roles for women as wives and mothers which place them at home during the day.

(2007, p. 336)

While such gendered expectations and practices are not universal, our focus group participants did reflect specifically on women's practices of neighbouring. Even in our focus groups with men, their stories about neighbourhood relations foregrounded women's practices such as daytime visiting for tea. For example, in a focus group with older Alevi men in Malatya in March 2016, Kartal shared a story in which discrimination against his family is painfully exposed when his wife is excluded from a gathering at the home of a neighbour:

In our apartment building, we are the only Alevis, the rest are Sunni. There was a gathering a few weeks ago, women having tea. The only person not invited was my wife. I ran into my neighbour and asked him if we did something wrong, if something happened. He said no. I told him you invited everyone except us. He responded: 'well, we forgot.' How can you forget? There are 10 apartments in the building and it's only us who was not invited. That's what happened. He does not talk to me anymore. There's discrimination (*ayırım-cılık*) against Alevis.

In the expectation that all women in the building would be invited to this informal social event, and in the exclusion of Kartal's wife, the blurring of public and private in the space of the home becomes evident. Kartal takes the exclusion of his wife not as an interpersonal matter between the individual women, but as an insult to him and his family. When Kartal confronts the neighbour, the divisions only deepen, and the men stop speaking to one another. Kartal concludes not only that his neighbours are prejudiced, but that what happened in this encounter indicates the reality of widespread discrimination against Alevis. Kartal's story and his interpretation of it demonstrate how the space of a neighbour's home can become contested territory, marked out by an exclusion that underlines a difference—Aleviness—that until that moment might have gone unremarked, but from that point becomes inscribed as inadmissible beyond the threshold of the home.

As neighbours navigate the provisional boundaries of the home, trying to manage risks of exposure while investing in neighbourly relations of varying degrees of closeness, they form ethical expectations of one another and test the limits

of their tolerance and mutual respect. While Kartal's story is one of unmet expectations and closed doors, the proximate dwelling of neighbours also provides many opportunities for developing intimate, long-lasting, and even kin-like relationships that go beyond surface-level neighbourly civility and pleasantness. Women and men become passionately devoted to some of their neighbours. We heard stories of Alevis keeping a prayer rug for their Sunni neighbour's convenience, of Sunnis defending Alevi neighbours with whom they became close against the slander of others, and of Sunnis and Alevi neighbours alike trusting one another with their children.

However, even in the closest of relationships secrets are kept and moments of tension throw relations into question (see also Gökarişel & Secor, 2022). In the following story that was shared in a focus group with higher income Sunni women in Istanbul, Kamile, a 43-year-old woman who works as a secretary, describes how her closeness with an Alevi neighbour gives rise to a painful recognition of anti-Alevi prejudice during a women's home gathering:

**Kamile:** My Alevi neighbour raised my daughter and we still see each other. My daughter is a sophomore in university now. Our neighbour took care of her. She calls her 'grandma' even now. So many years have passed. My daughter was born in 1996; we have been seeing each other since then. [...] My neighbour was a very good woman. Her private things do not concern me. I never felt the need to ask her if she was performing *namaz* or fasting. Because she would not be performing them for me ... That's between her and God. I saw something once though; we had gathered for a women's day at home (*altın günü*). While we were performing folk dances, you know like *damat halayı*. One [of the Sunni women] did not hold my neighbour's hand. She said that she was revolted by her. And then she moved somewhere else on the dance line. I was so disturbed. I mean how could you ... How can you know her intentions, maybe she is more...

**Asena:** Prejudice.

**Kamile:** Maybe she is more faithful than you, you cannot know. The [Alevi] neighbour understood it was because of her. The woman came to me and said, 'I was disgusted, I didn't hold her hand, she probably didn't perform ablutions.' But I did hold her hand.

In this dialogue, Kamile describes an established relationship with an Alevi neighbour that dates to more than two decades ago. She expresses the closeness of this relation in terms of kin, presenting the fact that her teenage daughter (19 years old at the time of this focus group) still calls this woman 'grandma' as further evidence of the significance of this very special relationship. Kamile's story arc peaks when she becomes a witness to the mistreatment of her Alevi neighbour by another Sunni woman at her own house. This woman refuses to hold the Alevi woman's hand and openly tells Kamile that she was revolted by the Alevi woman, presumably referring to the perception among some Sunnis that because Alevis do not perform the ritual cleaning (ablutions) required before each Sunni prayer that takes place five times a day, they are dirty. Kamile objects to this discriminatory act against her neighbour and expresses how this act disturbed her, suggesting that in fact her Alevi friend might be 'more faithful' than the Sunni woman who acted in this way. Kamile also points out that her Alevi neighbour understood that she was being discriminated against because of her Aleviness.

If the moment of the dropped hand is a moment of encounter within the porous space of the home—of the emergence of difference, surprise, and affective entanglement in the living room—it is an ambivalent one. For at the same time as one woman refuses the neighbour's hand, another one reaches out for it. It is not clear if Kamile confronts the woman in defence of her Alevi neighbour, but she does make a point of holding the very hand that was rejected. In this moment, she not only performs an ethical act (that is, one of responsibility to another) but also becomes herself affected by what was painful and unexpected in the encounter between the two women. Even this willingness to be affected sets this neighbour relation apart, for as the conversation went on, others in this group (as in others) shared that they have Alevi neighbours that they like as well, but with whom they avoid talk about religion. This silence surrounding Alevi difference is less dramatic than a rejection of a hand or a dish, but it is equally revealing. By not talking about religion, neighbours attempt to draw a firm boundary, to maintain a distance—even when home-spaces cannot be secured against the presence of the neighbour—by creating a barrier carved from things unsaid and questions unasked. In short, they attempt to keep at bay the difficult interrelatedness of the encounter.

## 7 | CONCLUSION: THE SPACES OF DIFFICULT INTERRELATEDNESS

In densely populated urban neighbourhoods, apartment dwelling and liminal spaces such as balconies and doorways compose the material architecture of encounters between neighbours. These spaces of proximate dwelling are defined

by a fluidity and uncertainty that defies complete control over them and sets the stage for ambivalent entanglements between neighbours who cannot fully shore up their boundaries—materially or figuratively—against the rhythms of each other's lives. Thus we find that the paradoxical structure of the neighbour relation, in which what is familiar is also strange, is not an abstraction but rather an expression of the spatiality of encounters between neighbours. That is, the disconcerting blurring of boundaries that makes the neighbour both familiar and strange arises in and through the entanglement of the spaces of neighbourhood dwelling, the balconies, windows, doorways, and home spaces of daily life. This entanglement, we suggest, consists of multi-sensorial encounters between neighbours that are sometimes purposeful but at other times unbidden, arising as an effect of the spatial entanglement of neighbourhood life: the drift of the smell of cooking, the lines of sight that connect balconies and windows, an uninvited arrival at the door.

In the space of the encounter between neighbours, ethical relations of responsibility and care coexist with relations marked by anxiety, censure, and rejection. Participants in our focus groups discussed how daily entanglements of neighbours both fuel and trouble the marking out of what is shared and what is separate, what is tolerable and what crosses a line. Even neighbour relations that had been marked by reciprocity can end abruptly (see Gökarişel & Secor, 2022). These stories of disappointment, frustration, and heartbreak reveal the persistent demand of and from the neighbour to act not only civilly but also morally, respectfully, and humanely. These terms do not need specification because they reflect a shared understanding, a common ethics. They invoke deep emotions. This was palpable in focus groups where participants talked passionately about their neighbours, trying to enlist others in the emotions they felt towards their neighbours and to enrol participants' support and approval for their own role in the difficult interrelations of neighbourhood life. Some declared unwavering loyalty and commitment to their neighbours regardless of who they are or who they might reveal themselves to be. Some appeared to shrug off responsibilities to a neighbour whom they portrayed as undeserving of being treated well but tried hard to convince other participants that this was the right thing to do. Others remained determined to stay civil despite ill treatment, to continue bringing food over to neighbours despite knowing very well that the neighbour will throw it away uneaten.

Our aim has been to show how (geo)political formations are at once propped up and challenged within the spaces and relations of everyday life, and not least within those domains that have traditionally been excluded from consideration, such as homes and neighbourhoods. Encounters between neighbours are unmistakably a site where Sunni supremacy and Alevi precarity are reiterated. This is apparent in how, in their neighbourhoods and homes, Alevis are pushed to hide or mask their practices (and identities) while simultaneously demonstrating respect for Sunni practices and beliefs. Encounters between neighbours can also cut to the bone in the visceral experience of dehumanising prejudice, such as when food is rejected, an invitation withheld, or a hand refused. At the same time, there is a transformational potential in these encounters between neighbours that is not fully (re)absorbed into structures of Alevi–Sunni difference and power. In even the least redeemed encounters, the fact that there was and remains an expectation or a hope, a call or a demand, for a different kind of response—mostly among Alevis, but also among Sunnis who defend Alevi neighbours without prejudice—is testimony to what is possible. This is inarguably a difficult interrelatedness, but one whose future is necessarily not fully determined, but instead might still unfold differently in the emergence of what is also possible: *Aşure* is still brought to the door. The hand of an Alevi neighbour is taken up.

The resolution of what is troubling in the encounter with the difference of one's neighbour is not thicker walls or more solid boundaries (even if that were possible), but instead is to be found in the entanglement itself and the responsibility that it calls forth to both the difference and the humanity of one's neighbour. This is what is at stake in an encounter of difficult interrelatedness—that is, an encounter that takes place in the context of historical and ongoing struggles against domination and the co-constitution of communal identities. Demonstrating both the risks and the positive potential of living together has immediate importance for the situation of Alevis living in Turkey today, but also speaks to the question of living with difference more broadly. For example, our emphasis on the ambivalence of neighbouring resonates with recent work that has called attention to the 'spectrum of intermediate experiences' between belonging and rejection that complicate assumptions about how everyday practices are linked up with dominant structures (Sparke, 2017, 2018, p. 215). Our hope is that our work might provide insight into the political and ethical significance that inheres in such difficult encounters.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Anna J. Secor, on reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Translated by the authors from Turkish: <https://www.alikenanoglu.net/ramazanda-alevi-olmak/>

<sup>2</sup> From <https://m.gidagundemi.com/sektorden/sektorden/komsular-sizden-asure-bekliyor-iste-tarifi-h18017.html>, translated by the authors.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmet Örs, 'Komşular aşure bekler,' *Sabah*, 13 January 2008 ([https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/pazar/ors/2008/01/13/komsular\\_asure\\_bekler](https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/pazar/ors/2008/01/13/komsular_asure_bekler)) Accessed October 2022.

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