

**BECOMING HUMAN AT THE REPTILE CENTER: AN  
ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF CONSERVATION**

by  
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ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF CONSERVATION**

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## ABSTRACT

### BECOMING HUMAN AT THE REPTILE CENTER: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF CONSERVATION

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Keywords: environmental ethics, conservation, Lacanian theory, fantasy, alienation

This thesis is an ethnography of a reptile conservation center employing a Lacanian-Zizekian theoretical stance to study the narrative frames through which conservation workers relate to the environment, reptiles, conservation, in addition to their articulation of environmental ethics. Focusing on Lacanian concepts of alienation and fantasy, this thesis problematizes how the conservation narratives of green fantasy and conservation fantasy structure the workers' meaning-making processes. It argues that while the direct contact with the reptiles they seek to protect enables the workers to feel themselves to be ethical and agentive, the neoliberal ordering of the conservation context challenges these beliefs. The resulting tension enables us to observe the layered and situational articulation of environmental ethics at the intersection of fantasy and desire.

## ÖZET

### SÜRÜNGEN MERKEZİNDE İNSAN OLMAK: KORUMANIN PSIKİK YAŞAMINA DAIR BİR ETNOGRAFI

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Anahtar Kelimeler: çevre etiği, doğa koruma, Lacancı teori, fantazi,  
yabancılaşma

Bu tez, bir sürüngen koruma merkezinde yürütülen etnografiye dayanmaktadır. Çalışma, çalışanların çevreye, sürüngenlere ve koruma pratiklerine dair kurdukları anlatıları ve çevre etiğini ifade ediş biçimlerini Lacancı-Žižekçi bir yaklaşımla inceler. Lacan'ın yabancılaşma ve fantazi kavramları üzerinden, “yeşil fantazi” ve “koruma fantazisi”nin çalışanların anlam kurma süreçlerini nasıl şekillendirdiği tartışılır. Bulgular, sürüngenlerle kurulan doğrudan temasın çalışanlara etik ve etkin bir özne olma duygusu verdiğini, ancak koruma bağlamının neoliberal düzenlenişinin bu inancı aynı anda sarsmakta olduğunu gösterir. Bu gerilim, çevre etiğinin fantazi ve arzu kesişiminde katmanlı ve durumsal olarak ortaya çıkışını görünür kılar.

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*To my mom and dad*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Prologue

*“I’m your lover, even though I can’t be by your side/I’m your lover, even though I can’t touch you/Even though there’s no returning/I’m your lover, forever!” Cries Fedon out of the 24 year old vet technician Miray’s phone from a 1992 recording. The drama mounts as the bass line swells to the beat of the drums. Miray quietly hums along while absentmindedly fondling the slimy esophagus lying in front of her in a heap of bloody viscera. Her thin, disposable scrubs are covered in curdled blood and stale digestive juices. In front of us lies the massive carcass of a marine reptile, flipped on its back like a cursed ring box, its plastron (bottom shell) is severed open from three sides, hinged to the rest of the body only at the tail.*

*Miray doesn’t seem to mind the revolting smell or the oppressive heat. She looks calm, happy even. She gently instructs the vet technician interns Şule and Doğuş with no hint of patronization. “Look how the liver is wrecked” she squeezes a pancake of black play dough that she lifts out of the bowl of blood that used to be a marine reptile. What did this corpse of 60 yrs old succumb to? That’s what we are looking for that day.*

*We are in what is possibly the world’s most beautiful, least ventilated marine reptile necropsy room in the world: It is but a trailer containing a large table fitted with a drain. The trailer is parked under the glorious baking May sun, overlooking the beautiful Göldeniz lake—or rather, would overlook had it any windows. As it was, the stench of rotting marine reptile is diluted only when a draft graces us through the open back of the trailer, which frames the woods where we would later dispose of the gutted carcass for the wild boars to feast on at night.*

*I’m in the trailer necropsy room taking pictures of the process for documentation, and for Şule and Doğuş to put in their internship report. “How much time have you had to learn how to perform a necropsy?” I ask in astonishment. They had 3*

*semesters of vet technician college, the rest they learned by watching Miray in the four months they lived here. “And I learned by watching somebody else,” Miray comments, mindlessly swatting away one of the flies.*

*Miray hooks a finger through one end of the knotted, swollen, bulbous small intestine and starts ripping along its length. Fetid liquid excrement and digestive juices ooze and spray out, depending on the amount of trapped gas at the coils. We’re all mouth-breathing, trying to ignore the fact that we have olfactory organs. Miray shows not a sliver of disgust as she rummages the juices on the table with her free hand, picking up hard objects. “Is this a crab shell or a man-made object?” “Crab.” replies Doğuş. Miray keeps ripping the odoriferous ribbon. Her face darkens: “How empty the intestines! Poor thing must not have fed for days!”. Finally, her thumb reaches a tangle of fishing line. With a flash of red fury in her eyes, she looks up at the similarly enraged Doğuş. “I’m so glad we did the thing!” he exclaims.*

*That morning, on their trek back from beach monitoring duty, Doğuş and Miray spotted fishermen in the distance and came across their fishing lines in shallow waters. They stole the lines and ran away.*

*Miray keeps ripping intestines. Two metal fishing hooks fall on the table. “Imagine how much it hurt, I’m so sorry!” she exclaims with genuine anguish. “I wish we had beaten up those fishermen.” she comments. “I’m down for getting beaten up in return, as long as I don’t get reported.”*

*“Loving you from afar/is the best that love can be/I’m so used to the longing/I wouldn’t come even if you called me” Sings Yaşar Güvenir dolefully in the back-ground.*

The spectacular beauty of the protected beach where I would be doing my field-work took me by surprise. On the minibus descending down a mountain the scenic final kilometer to the beach through woods, I watched the magnificent purple blue Mediterranean gradient into turquoise and merge with the 4km stretch of the world-famous marine reptile nesting beach. The beach gave way to azure and sable wetlands glistening in the distance like wet paint. This was the kind of beauty that filled one with a sense of melancholy.

I was going into my field thinking I would write about the Anthropocene, about the people who were on the ground doing hands-on work that recognized the individuality and value and preciousness of other species, fighting the good fight against the abuses of human-exceptionalism, getting down and dirty in the cause to uphold the the environment’s right to life. At this conservation center, I told myself, I would be initiated into the mystical wisdom that was more-than-human worlding. Immersing

myself into the life of another species, I would learn to see the world as the reptile saw it, so that I could contribute to development of new radical imaginaries against the Anthropocene, articulate for myself and for the scientific community what it means to belong to a multi-species earth family, demonstrate how our psyches and lives and futures were intimately connected together in this moment of global friction and planetary undoing. All this would happen once I had learned the ways of the reptile.

By the last day of my fieldwork, I resented marine reptiles and wouldn't have minded if they went extinct.

This thesis is not about the Anthropocene, neither is it about marine reptiles. It is about fantasy and alienation. What had I experienced on the field that had alienated me so from the reptile, from my methodology, and from my theoretical orientation? In this chapter I will tell my story of my own alienation, from its inception before I ever set foot at the conservation center, to its negotiation on the field, and then to its aftermath as I processed it in writing. In the following chapters, I will recount the story of the conservation workers I met at the isolated beach: How various facets of alienation they had experienced culminated in their arrival at the center, how they negotiated their alienation there through fantasies, and how, like I was, they have been transformed by the particular experience of alienation engendered at a conservation center in this moment in history.

### **1.1.1 What This Thesis Is About**

This thesis is an application Lacanian psychoanalytics to an ethnography of environmental conservation. It is about the meaning making processes of the people who are working in direct contact with an endangered environment, laboring every day to counter the violence of our times on vulnerable others (Marine reptiles in this case). In writing this thesis, my goal was to lay bare the psychic dimensions of our efforts to protect non-humans. I was trying to understand how we related to other species in a conservation, what stories we told ourselves about being human in this moment of planetary undoing.

This thesis engages with a literature at the intersection of Lacanian psychoanalytics and politics. At first glance, the subjective nature of the individual psyche might raise doubt as a point of departure for political analysis. But the works of scholars like Todd McGowan, Slavoj Žižek, and Mari Ruti show us that since the objects of our desire are socio-cultural, the stories we tell ourselves about our desire are open to politics. This is the approach that informs my thesis. Here in the introduction,

I look at how alienation is problematized as an existential or social phenomenon engendered by capitalism, only to distance myself from this approach in the first chapter by introducing alienation as the distance between subjectivity and social intelligibility, after McGowan.

Then in the second chapter, I study fantasies, not as delusions that distract and trick us, but as ethical motors that organize our desires—in our case, the desire to protect endangered reptiles. I conceive of certain environmental ideologies as jacked-up fantasies that reveal political imaginaries of a world in crisis and analyze how these fantasies/ideologies interact with the self-fashionings of my interlocutors in relation to reptiles. I engage with literature that looks at the social construction of nature in this chapter, as well as Lacanian/Zizekian theorizing.

Lastly in the third chapter, I return to alienation. I iterate that fantasies transform to alienate my interlocutors from their old beliefs, and micro-political stances, and result in the articulation of new visions. How does the experience of reptile conservation, with all the fantasmatic narratives attached to it, transform the ethical positioning of my interlocutors? This penultimate chapter enables us to understand the cyclical nature alienation, and celebrate the political potential of fantasies.

Before diving into these chapters, let us look at how I arrived at alienation and psychoanalytical in the first place, through an overview of what I took alienation to be before I encountered Lacanian thought.

### **1.1.2 Alienation Before I Turned Lacanian**

Alienation is one of the core concepts of social theory. Indeed, my first encounter with it had been during my undergraduate education, in the form of Marx's labor theory of alienation.

I remember being fascinated the first time I read Lukacs's theory of reification, feeling extremely validated: It was not that I was temperamental and dramatic, the reason why things seemed bleak and wrong was because they were!

Emboldened with the backing of sociological theory, I had taken up in college the noble cause of teaching my techno-fascist boyfriend that the solution the world's problems wasn't to eliminate culture and run the world according to rules of efficiency. I would parrot to him the Frankfurt School's critique of modern rationality and instrumental reason: Sure, instrumental logic had given us technology and the tools that made our lives easier, but it had also created weapons of mass destruction. Humanity had mastered *how* at the expense of *why*. Reason tells you how to get

from a to b, but it doesn't philosophize about why one must make the journey. Its attendant institution of science is pragmatics without ethics. Then I would challenge his fanatic atheism and try to resurrect his dead spiritual core under the auspices of Weberian thought: "Don't you see that the rational thinking and instrumental logic you so champion have robbed the world of its enchantment? The very reason you hold on to atheism is because you're trying to fill the void that God would have filled had you been born a few centuries earlier". (Spoiler: we broke up).

At that moment, I was adhering to a conservative view of alienation that dated its genesis as a social malaise with the advent of Enlightenment.

Richard Tarnas summarizes that we're experiencing a triple bind: Copernican cosmological estrangement/Cartesian ontological estrangement/Kantian epistemological estrangement. He argues the triple bind locks us in the prison of modern alienation (Tarnas 1991).

Part of what pulled me to posthumanities was their nuanced explanation of how it had come to be that we lived in a spiritually vacuous world where the domination of women and nature were intertwined and tied to the enlightenment reason. Their criticism of the Enlightenment reason went thus: The Cartesian championing of Reason as opposed to other ways of making sense of the world (like imagination, sensation common with non-western peoples of the world, etc.) had ended up legitimizing colonial thinking and paved way for capitalism with all its excesses. Reason made masculine, with its overarching drive to order, categorize and dominate the external world, provided the epistemological basis upon which the Capitalocene would eventually rise with all its excesses (Moore 2017).

What of the peoples to whom Enlightenment reason was not endogenous? Anthropology gave me a way to explore how the world could be thought of in different terms: Sensory, affective, imaginative worlds not strangled by enlightenment reason. By their modalities thought, the world could still be thought of as enchanted; reality could be a contested terrain still. The world affording multiple ontologies, and the multiple epistemologies that enabled such knowledge of the world (sensory, affective, storied) were very much valid, and held infinite promise.

My own salvation was hidden in there: perhaps if I could insinuate myself into a society with a completely different way of being in the world, immerse and learn to see the world as they see, I'd be able to finally fill the aching void caused by (as I thought back then) the mode of worlding (Haraway 2016) heralded by enlightenment reason and intensified by late stage capitalism.

What would it feel like to encounter a mode of living and thinking so utterly alien

that you feel yourself not just at a minor loss but completely out of element, fully alienated? Therein lied freedom to choose one's world rather than be held in chains by it. How does one go from being at a loss to understanding? This was a question of epistemology: the process through which one comes to know and adopt tools for making sense of the world in a certain way. Anthropology would give me the tools to choose, negotiate, contest, and even make the world I lived in.

This is what brought me to my degree and eventually to the marine reptile research center. I was searching for a remedy for my alienation. I wanted my fieldwork to utterly shatter my worldview, with a research subject as alien as can be, so that I would learn to wield anthropology to appropriate any world at will. Unfortunately, Turkey lacked hunter gatherer societies, so I figured I would try to understand something truly alien: Marine reptiles.

## 1.2 What *About* the Marine Reptiles? The Field and Its Work

*Marine reptiles don't really lead an amphibian life. The only time our living spaces overlap is when a mother reptile's stomach is full of eggs, and she's pressured to expel them out. Most of the time this entails a scouting phase during which she'll come out 4-5 times in the span of a few nights, test the sand until she feels content with the location. She lays her eggs in two batches—15 days after she lays the first batch, she repeats the scouting and the egg laying process before returning to the sea for the following three years or so. This she does periodically from when she reaches sexual maturity around 30 years of age till she dies at around 100. The males don't come ashore ever. We, the scientific community, only know that they traverse a certain distance after they depart from the nesting beach. What their lives are like is a mystery. Our opportunity to observe marine reptiles is when they first hatch on the beach, mate in shallow waters, come ashore to nest, or when they're found injured or dead—the injured and dead reptiles are brought to the center for treatment and autopsies.*

*“You have three duties as a volunteer” explained Altay Abi over breakfast on my first day, sitting on a picnic table in the courtyard between the dormitories and the area where we kept the sick reptiles for display. I stared at the stale bread. When the bread delivery all the way from the nearest town didn't make it on time, we made do with stale bread from the previous day. There were no places within a 30 minute driving radius to buy basic groceries. We were, after all, the sole human residents of the protected beach between 8PM to 8AM, before the busses would start bringing*

*beach-goers to the designated swimming area.*

*“Rehab duty is cleaning the reptile tanks and giving medical care to the reptiles between 8 and 10 in the morning. Info duty is providing information to the tourists between 10 AM to 6 PM. Field duty is the nightly beach monitoring patrols between 10 PM to 9 AM the next morning. We try to alternate the Field team every night, so everyone can get some rest... You’re on Info duty during the day and then Field duty tonight”.*

This thesis grew out my one-month long ethnographic fieldwork at the Marine Reptile Research and Rehabilitation Center in Western Turkey. I deliberately keep the location, dates, and the animals in question vague, to protect my interlocutors, all the names are fake.

I applied to volunteer at this center through an online form. They called to ask if I could come as soon as possible on a spring day, and I found myself on a plane a few days later. The center, on the month I volunteered there, was short staffed, I was the only volunteer. I participated in all of the operations at the center.

As the vignette above explains, my tasks at the center were cleaning reptile tanks in the morning —my interlocutors would give medical care to them during this time—, overseeing tourist visits and selling souvenirs during the day, and monitoring the beach for population study data at night. I occasionally aided with medical duties, where I cleaned the wounds of the reptiles, administered IV drips, and attended necropsies.

Marine Reptile Research and Rehabilitation Center is located on a protected beach on a coastal region of Turkey. This beach is significant for being one of the biggest nesting grounds for endangered marine reptiles. Organizationally attached to a university in a nearby province, the center occupies a unique official status as a non-profit treatment and research facility, a category invented specifically for it at the center’s inception some 20 years ago. The center is funded by European Union grants, NGO support, and some governmental funds, in addition to sponsorships and donations from international for-profit companies.

The center is perched about 250 meters inland from the beach. It houses 15 large reptile tanks 2.5 meters in diameter, where injured or sick marine reptiles are kept for treatment and research. These tanks are arranged into an expansive display for visitors. This display is called the Info Area, where tourists and visitors are provided with information on marine reptiles and their protection.

In a room called Intensive Care are smaller tanks for reptiles who need to be handled and cleaned daily. Like the surgery room adjacent to it, it is closed to visitors.



Surgery room is where reptiles receive medical care, from IV drips, to stitches, to siphoning food into their stomach with syringes.

The living quarters of the staff are located behind the Intensive Care and surgery rooms, made up of a few prefabricated containers that serve as the dormitories, the kitchen, and a bathroom.

The sick reptiles are brought into the center via phone reports from civilians or the navy when they have been found beached or displaying abnormal behavior in the sea. The staff collects the data of these marine reptiles and shares it with the founding director of the center, who is a zoology professor at the university the center is attached to.

On paper, the center employs marine engineers, researchers, and veterinarians year-round, although the high turnover means some of these roles are never filled. During my time there, the permanent staff comprised the biologist, the camp coordinator, the manager, two vet technician interns, one vet technician, one boat captain, one maintenance worker, and one volunteer, myself.

The center is at once a marine reptile hospital and population biology research station. The data that conservationists and volunteers gather, during medical interventions and population studies, are used in reports that the founding director of the center submits to official bodies to advocate for the continued protection of the beach.

Throughout the thesis, I will be referring to two distinct ways my interlocutors interacted with the reptiles: During the nightly population monitoring treks on the beach, and while giving medical care to the sick reptiles kept in the tanks at the center.

**Population study monitor treks (aka. field duty):** During spring and summer months, when endangered marine reptiles swarm to the beach for nesting, and then later in the season when they hatch, the center enlists volunteers at month-long intervals, to oversee the repetitive and physically demanding protection and monitoring tasks on the beach. Every day volunteers take turns sweeping the 5 km beach at night, back and forth, walking 20 kms per patrol to find nesting mothers, collect their biological data, locate new nests, mark their locations, note their characteristics—including the number of eggs and the depth of the nest—, find and chase away foxes and badgers, and install snares and cages to protect the eggs from predators. During hatching season, similar tasks are undertaken for hatchlings who leave their nests and head to the sea at night.

**Medical care (aka rehabilitation duty):** Sick or injured reptiles are brought

to the center when a civilian places a call that there's a beached marine reptile that needs help, or when they spot one displaying abnormal behavior in the sea. My interlocutors drive up to a 100km radius to pick up these patients on what we called Reptile Ambulance—a regular minivan. The medical care sick reptiles received at the center ranged from receiving medicine, IV drips, amputations, minor operations, force feeding, wound cleaning. When a patient started showing signs of improvement, it would be transferred between tanks of different depths to see if it could dive and hunt on its own. Once it was ascertained that a patient had recovered, it would be sent back to the sea with a small ceremony.

### 1.3 Methodology

To say I came because I was obsessed with alienation and fantasy wouldn't be entirely truthful. In fact, I didn't know I was writing about alienation and fantasy until after I had returned from the field.

I had no idea how I would do ethnography; I had taken no methodology classes. But I had read ethnographies, and I had read about authors whose works, while not ethnographies, were thoroughly ethnographic. I knew that the most important thing was to have everything in me, from my sensorial receptors to my discernment, to be wide open to take in the flood of information the field was giving me. At the center I mainly did whatever they told me to do as the volunteer. I took my field notes by intuition.

I informed my colleagues at the center that I was there doing research. Instead of formal and structured interviews, I organically familiarized with everyone at the center, having long conversations with them from the midpoint of my fieldwork onwards, thanks to the intimate setting of the beach monitoring patrols. As I kept my field notes openly, my interlocutors always knew that the things they shared could go into my research.

In an interview with Anna Tsing, David Giles says “the field makes YOU into a field note” (Giles and Tsing 2020). This is the summary of my ethnographic adventure and my methodology. The process of keeping my receptors open, being open to the world in an intentional way transformed me before my very eyes—and I was there to observe it as it was happening. I realized I was my own epistemic device: Imagine a machine in which you put in raw material and out comes an item synthesizing the raw material. Now imagine the machine being transformed by the raw material that goes in it. I had to understand not just the raw material and make an item of it

(the thesis), but also the machine that worked the raw material according to its own programming, functions, its own makeup, and the transformation engendered by the raw material itself. My ethnographic journey suddenly jolted me into a reflexive space that penetrated deep into who I was and what I was doing at the center, why I was doing anything I was doing, how I could do justice to the story of my interlocutors when I was a thoroughly impartial subject myself.

I believe this experience must be universal. Anyone who does ethnography for the first time must be overwhelmed —slapped in the face really— by the psychic revolution it causes. The point is that, the person I was the day before I went to the reptile center isn't the one writing this thesis today, and that transformation is not tangential but central to the story of the center.

The ethnographer's systematic efforts to understand herself in order to qualify her own epistemic authority and limits, in order to use her own reflexivity process as an analytical tool is what Bourdieu calls Participant Objectivation (Bourdieu 2003). Part of the objectivation process is instinctive to ethnography, but most of it I learned thanks to Prof. Ayşe Çavdar's ethnographic pedagogy workshop.

### 1.3.1 The Breaking Points

There were a few breaking points that shaped the direction of my research. The first was when I attended the marine reptile autopsy from the opening vignette a few days into my fieldwork, and experienced total abjection from the reptile (Kristeva 1982). I could no longer think of it as cute, or even as a person. What I had previously thought of as a cute little guy had turned into viscera soup before my very eyes. Was I really viscera soup, beneath the illusion of self-containment? Did I have a soul or was that just a little lie the viscera told itself? What *is* life? Why should I care about anything at all?

The second was when I got a true feel of how constrained my interlocutors were. The conditions my interlocutors lived in were so dismal that nothing as abstract as environmentalism or climate change could explain their putting up with it. Why were they there, really?

The third was the most significant and took place after I had returned from the field: Prof. Ayşe Çavdar's ethnographic writing workshop.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Because I was the participant of the workshop, I can only explain what I experienced, but Ayşe wrote a paper on the loop writing technique she used with me for jump starting my reflexivity process, which can be found here: Çavdar, Ayşe, "Field Notes on an Ethnographic Writing Experiment" (2025). *OSUN Publications*. 31. [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/osun\\_publications/31](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/osun_publications/31)

At one point in the workshop, Ayşe told me to tell her a lie, something that did not happen to me at the field that I would relay as though it did. The story I told her featured me helping a reptile, the reptile making eye contact with me and then swimming away. I read it out loud to Ayşe. She told me “It’s impossible to lie when you write. You’re revealing a truth to yourself here. That you’ve said goodbye to the reptile.”

We had to stop the session; my heart was beating like crazy. Something big and exciting had happened. This was a transformative moment, because indeed, I had turned away from the reptile, and I was too ashamed to let go of my multispecies theoretical orientation to admit it.

An important part of the workshop was about overriding the part of the brain that thinks, edits, criticizes, plans while it was also trying to write. By imposing a sense of urgency through timing my writing, Ayşe had managed to get me to form a direct line from somewhere inaccessible within myself to the paper. After the lie that revealed my truth, Ayşe got me to admit, by overriding my self editing, that I was really wanting to write about alienation. Another surprising moment—I had heard my mouth say what I hadn’t realized I was thinking.

I was shaken: Could reflexive writing be my epistemic tool? Was the backing to my truth claim radical honesty with myself?

Previously I had believed the researcher had to start from the argument, and then synthesize the findings with the literature to formulate an outline. Now, I was trying to sublimate my beliefs, desires, un-articulated thoughts about my field experience by refusing to self-edit as I wrote. The process also revealed my biases, prejudices, hopes. The result of this was hundreds of pages of journaling, unintelligible streams of consciousness, tempestuous word-purges. The literature I championed necessarily pivoted from sociological to psychoanalytic.

This was how I arrived at two of the difficult choices I made: To employ psychoanalytic theory to explain a social phenomenon, and to write in a narrative voice instead of adhering to a more orthodox academic tone. On the one hand, I was compelled by how psychic modalities (like alienation, fantasies, and desires) interplayed with and co-constructed the social world; on the hand, I was compelled to be truthful to my own voice, which was not that of the academia. In Lacanian terms, it felt unethical to force myself to symbolically defer before the academic Big Other when my truth stemmed from subjective voices, my own and those of my interlocutors.

When I adopted writing as a thinking practice, what emerged was a delightful, and in retrospect unavoidable parallel: The alienation that my interlocutors went through

was mirrored in my alienation from the academic conventions. Content-wise, my thesis was about alienation and fantasy as my interlocutors experienced it, but its form owed to my own alienation from an academic fantasy I had. This fantasy was one where I would grasp a truth in the field, bring it back, slap it onto the paper. It was a fantasy where I would, by my openness alone, experience in real life the theories I had read at home about posthumanism, multispeciesism, anthropocene, sensorial knowledge making et cetera. My field experience toppled these fantasies.

As I grew alienated from what I had taken to be the role of academia in knowledge production, and my role in the academia, I developed an imaginary that transformed me: Now I believed ethnography called on something more serious, more spirited, more alive than convention. It behooved me to be affected, wounded, transformed. I had to lean into literature, poetry, and intuition, not objectivity. This is the reason why I wrote in my own voice, without stifling it with a structure that would have stiffened it.

#### **1.4 The Argument and the Structure of the Thesis**

My main argument in this thesis is that alienation holds emancipatory potential. Far from being a hurdle to overcome in the effort to be well integrated into the social order, alienation signals a radical break that demands of the subject to take a hard look at what it is refusing. In this refusal inheres the potential for defiance and transformation. I also argue that fantasies are essential for our formulation of environmental ethics. As the stories we tell ourselves about why we desire what we desire, fantasies give us an internal reasoning far more powerful and relevant than overarching narratives about our environmental ethics.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces us to my main interlocutors, Miray and Kerem, and examines what had brought them to the reptile center. It was the stories of these two people that galvanized my thinking process. The following chapters will see more interlocutors introduced. Miray and Kerem's stories, from their past before they had arrived at the center, to when they had left it for new horizons, helped me see the center as a site of psychic reconfiguration. Their stories enabled me to question the beyond of the political economy of conservation I could observe, in favor of the voices of individuals. I demonstrate that their arrival to the center was preceded by an alienation from the gendered citizenship ideology that violently controlled and dominated their lives, actions, choices, identities, alignments. In this chapter, I delineate between two key Lacanian concepts: Subjectivity and Symbolic

Identity. Framing alienation in this first chapter as the split between the two, I argue that once my interlocutors broke with their symbolic identities, they were able to seek a more authentic way to be in the world. My goal in this chapter is to elucidate why the stakes are so high for my interlocutors in their quest for agentivity and ethical selfhood at the center by contextualizing their background. I also present the contours of a cycle of alienation that will repeat in the third chapter.

The second chapter brings us to the heart of my fieldwork. I discuss how the marine reptile center enables my interlocutors to feel themselves to be agentive and exercising their ethical selfhood through saving the reptiles. Here, I use the Lacanian concept of Fantasy to analyze the narratives they employ to make meaning of their work. The crucial point to underline here is that the fantasy framing does not imply a dismissal of their claims as delusional. Far from it, I contend that fantasies are all we have to make sense of why we want what we want—whether that is justice, dignity, or hope.

In this framing, I problematize Green Fantasy as an ideological narrative that simultaneously enables my interlocutors to engage with the reptiles, render their work meaningful, and undermines their quest for agentivity by its real-world conduit, neoliberal conservation edifice. This chapter discusses how the Green Fantasy constructs a specific image of nature as harmonious sans human intrusion, a moral authority in reference to which to organize the social world. The catch, as this narrative argues, is that humans are an excessive element that endanger nature's order. However, the good news is this endangered nature is salvageable by human action. The problem with this narrative is that it proscribes a specific way to conceive of and engage with the world that only finds expression in the neoliberal conservation institution.

In the third chapter I address this paradox between the ethical self-positioning of my subjects and the managerial framing of neoliberal conservation. I discuss the justifications given for the protection of the reptiles, in order to explore the tensions between the conservation edifice and the environmental ethics held by my interlocutors and myself. I demonstrate in this chapter how the fantasies of my interlocutors topple when the conservation context renders them vulnerable to the same domination and dehumanization that had catalyzed their initial alienation. I trace the breakdown of their fantasies through the angry affects produced by the clash between their self-narratives and the constraints the neoliberal conservation places on them. Then, I show how my interlocutors embrace their alienation, move forward with their lives with new imaginaries and goals that enable them to discover new avenues to articulate their agentivity and ethical selfhood.

My goal in this chapter is to demonstrate the cyclical nature of alienation and its emancipatory capacity. I also aim to emphasize how multispecies engagements can result in a wide variety of affective investments. I argue that the fantasy framing, far from dismissing the modes through which my interlocutors relate to the reptiles or to the environment, enables us to see how and when these relations get interrupted or get bottlenecked.

In the conclusion chapter I discuss how fantasies and alienation can buttress ethics.

## 2. ALIENATION BEFORE

In my early days at the center, I kept pestering my interlocutors with bizarre questions: “How do you feel about reptiles?” or “What do you think is the *ethos* of reptile conservation?”. This place being a reptile center, and reptiles being the object and point of the work that we did there, I expected reptiles to be the *reason* my interlocutors arrived there too.

I was looking for a congruency between the expressed mission of conservation and the motivation of the workers there. After all, I was interested in the concept of the Anthropocene, and was hoping to glimpse into the effects of climate change, both as a psychic and structuring force in the lives of my interlocutors and their reptile companions.

Thus, I would ask “why must we protect the reptiles” and be baffled by the vague answers. No one was talking about climate change, no one was talking about the value of life, or about making kin, or about an earth family that was about to be lost.

They were talking about their own lives.

One of the first nights Miray and I were on field duty, I probed her motivations for saving the reptiles. It was unusually quiet at the beach. The vindictive gusts had allowed us a rare night of respite under the clear starry sky. “You know, my cat is just a cat. If she died, it wouldn’t matter. But in her own experience she is a whole life, with a past, with experiences, with feelings.” We kept walking in silence. “But why reptiles?” I asked, risking Miray’s annoyance. She was concentrated on the sandy expanse ahead. She took a moment, then in a calm and contemplative tone, without looking at me, she explained: “There are certain moments when somebody hurts you so bad that you want to kill them. Holding on to that anger is easy. What is hard is to let go and keep living. The reptiles, they come to us injured, and then we return them to the sea they just keep on living.” Her words gave me goosebumps. I knew she was saying something significant, but I couldn’t figure it out yet.



Something similar happened with Kerem. The night he and I played hooky on field duty, he told me stories of his military duty at the political prison just before his arrival at the center seven years ago. The contrast of the setting in which we were conversing—sprawled on sun beds under a moonlit night listening the gentle rhythm of waves on a pristine beach—with the stories of his military service at the prison caused a epiphany: This was not just a sanctuary for the reptiles but a sanctuary for the people who were working there.

From then on, I started hearing what my interlocutors were really telling me when I asked why the reptiles must be saved: “Because I must be saved”.

How had this transference come to be? What had my interlocutors needed saving from? In this chapter, I will present what Miray and Kerem were up to before they came to the reptile center.

The reason why I focus on the stories of Miray and Kerem is because their stories had a lasting impact on me. I found myself thinking about them again and again after I had returned from the center; theirs were the stories that I felt the most responsibility for. Other interlocutors will be introduced in the following chapters, but Miray and Kerem take the credit for compelling my pen.

It can be said that one purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to my key interlocutors and provide the context for their presence at the center. But their stories are not mere background: They demonstrate how identity fractures are central to their engagement with the reptiles, and to their articulation of new subjectivities through their time at the center.

Here, I will discuss the contours of their alienation that precede their arrival, through a Lacanian reading of alienation as an emancipatory distance between symbolic identity and agentive subjectivity. In the next chapter, I will study the specificity of the reptile center as the place where they sought refuge.

## **2.1 Miray**

When I arrived at the conservation center in the late spring, it was as a temporary volunteer joining a group of workers who had spent the off-season winter months living together in isolation. By all accounts, I was intruding into an established household. I was received with detached disinterest.

From my first day onwards, I had imagined my place in the household as adjacent

to Miray's, the 24-year-old resident vet technician. I tried to befriend her thinking both of us being young women would lend us easy rapport, that it would facilitate my entry into the field. Miray, however, like the rest of the staff, was courteous but distant, unresponsive to my attempts at befriending her. I later learned that since volunteers were temporary and of varying temperaments, it was customary to keep them at an arm's length until they had proven worthy of acquainting with.

I was soon deeply intrigued by Miray, despite the scant attention I received from her. A diminutive young woman with childlike big eyes and a permanently solemn expression, she worked restlessly, quietly, with religious zeal and an unmistakable devotion to the reptiles. There was something brittle and endearing about her general reticence and restraint, which would transform into grounded strength when she was working for the reptiles. Who was this girl?

Here is Miray in my mind's eye:

*Miray goes on field duty on consecutive nights, the only one of us who has the mental and physical fortitude to do so. She's marching quietly on the dark beach, with her serious shoulders slightly hunched, her gaze steady and her thin legs taking assured, purposeful, fast steps in the soft sand. Her eyes are searching ahead: Either the flitting red glow of the eyes of a treacherous fox, or the slow flail of the fins of a reptile as it awkwardly emerges from the foamy waves. Miray on field duty is focused, a woman on a mission. Neither the gritty sand nor the gusty wind, nor my incessant chatter can distract her from a mysterious quiet that she inhabits alone.*

*Now I see Miray with her eyebrows crossed as she inhales her cigarette, passing by the tanks in the info area, en route to putting the field notebook back into the office. She's done with entering its data into Excel. A completely pointless task, torturously repetitive; she knows it but never complains. She's wearing a tank top with a woven mesh bolero that's in fashion among her generation. Her eyes are downcast under the flamboyant glitter on her eyelids. It contrasts with her posture and her smoking, which embody a masculine aesthetic of dejection.*

When the director of the center came to visit for the weekend with an entourage of his guest in tow, 2 weeks into my fieldwork, it suddenly brought an end to my status as an intruder in the household. The rite of passage occurred when the director tailed me and Miray on our field duty, subjecting us to hostile treatment for the 12 sleepless hours of heavy physical work, and then humiliated us in front of his guests and the rest of the staff when we got back.<sup>2</sup>

That afternoon, while the director's guests were occupying our usual hangout, the

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2. This event will be further explored in the third chapter.

refectory, Miray invited me join the rest of the staff taking refuge all together on a picnic table behind a tree by the reptile tanks.

As the golden hour gave way to the blue haze of the early night, it was just me, Miray and Fatma Abila left around the table. I innocuously asked: “It’s my 10-year high school reunion soon but I’m not going. Do you think you’ll go to yours when the time comes?”

“I don’t think so” Miray said after a pause, “I was a very different person at the time” , laconic as usual. Fatma Abila interjected with inappropriate cheer “Haha yeah they wouldn’t recognize you, you wore a headscarf and everything”. I could not hide my shock “Oh my god, for real? Is Fatma Abila joking?” There was a shift in the air, and then Miray lifted her clear gaze at me and told me the following story:

She grew up in a deeply conservative social environment in a small town. As a kid she had always known she would don the *çarşaf*<sup>3</sup> once she was of age. She entered the youth league of the conservative JDP in high school. It was around this time that her mother suddenly passed away, leaving her and her younger brother under the protection of their paternal grandparents, who shielded them from their physically abusive father.

“Being so involved in the JDP youth league, I was curious to read something written by the opposition. I picked up Atatürk’s memoir at the library and it changed my life.”

After high school graduation, Miray applied to the vet technician school, not because of a passion for animals but because it was in the next town over—away from home. She explained that following her encounter with Atatürk, she had realized she didn’t want to wear the headscarf anymore.

But how could she disrobe like that? “I was deeply depressed. Not to disrespect the headscarves women, but I felt like I was wearing a potato sack every time I went out. It wasn’t me. I felt so immured, how could I possibly turn my back on the headscarf? To my family?”

Finally, when she couldn’t bear it anymore she told her family she wanted to get out of the headscarf. Her grandparents were supportive.

Her dad was not. He went quiet first and then he said, “You know, whenever I saw femicides in the news, it would puzzle me. How can a man kill his wife, his daughter? But now I get it. Daughter, take off your headscarf, and I will take your life.”

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3. *Çarşaf* is a mode of veiling in black, covering from the lower part of the face all the way to the feet.

“He’d have done it too. He’s never failed to follow through on a threat of violence” Miray said, as she drew a breath from her cigarette with a far off look on her face.

The summer she finished vet technician college, if Miray had not come to the reptile center, she’d have had to go back to her hometown. Instead, she took off the headscarf and she came to the center as a volunteer, then she stayed on as the vet technician. This was 2 years ago.

The stakes were high for Miray when she broke with her symbolic identity as a headscarved JDP supporter. How can we contextualize Miray’s arrival at the conservation center in terms of alienation? Let us now turn to the Lacanian conceptions of alienation.

### 2.1.1 Alienation Between Symbolic Order and Subjectivity

Lacanian psychoanalysis identifies two splits that result in the emergence of subjectivity. The first is that of language. Language is never equivalent to experience or phenomena, yet language is all we have to represent them. Thought is necessarily dependent on language, a system of signification that we ourselves were never given the option to choose as a medium. Indeed, neither do we choose what word signifies what object; nor how words and concepts ought to relate to one another. It all comes pre-determined. Even our names, which signify us, are always external to us. As we learn to think in language, we are thrust into a symbolic order that we did not choose (Kartal 2024, 27).

Compare this mode of subjectivity with that of an infant. An infant just *is*; it *means* nothing to it that it is sitting in its own poop. The very categories of diaper, teat, bib, vomit do not exist for the infant, because it lacks an internal commentator who superimposes these symbolic representations on things that simply *are*.

By being cast into language, the infant comes to develop a commentator. “Wow, I exist!” It thinks. The I that thinks this thought is the subjectivity of the infant, the commentator. The infant has effectively sacrificed its state of just BEING for a condition whereby it mentally represents its being through symbols imbued with MEANING. Lacan calls this “the vel of alienation”, when subjectivity emerges as a result of having sacrificed being to meaning by entering into language. Once one has been thrust into the world of signification, they have to give up on just being for the sake of meaning (Kartal 2024). <sup>4</sup>

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4. Of importance here is the lack of choice for the subject to opt out of the representational order in favor of remaining in the undifferentiated state of being. The subject is forced to become a subject the moment it encounters meaning. Looking back, the subject identifies the undifferentiated

According to Lacan, the subject emerges as it enters the Symbolic Order, the aggregate of all symbolic, social, cultural structures and elements of the world. This trading of the undifferentiated wholeness of *jouissance* for the Symbolic Order of language is the primary alienation.

The secondary alienation is a split between the Symbolic **Identity** of a subject, and its **subjectivity**. A symbolic identity is the signification of a subjectivity in the terms of the Symbolic Order. No subject is identical to its identity. As McGowan puts it, “Symbolic identity provides markers of what one is to plaster over the question of who one is.” (McGowan 2024, Chap. 1). None of the many symbolic identities I occupy—a woman, a Turk, an environmentalist, a student—comprise my inner voice or account for my moral convictions. Alienation inheres in the distance between Symbolic Id and subjectivity.

McGowan argues that this alienating distance provides the basis for freedom, indeed, for true political action: Where Symbolic Identity has readymade answers to existential, ethical, political questions (“How must I act towards an immoral woman as a female Muslim JDP supporter?” “What must I do as a Turkish soldier with a Kurdish convict?”), subjectivity does not. Alienation enables subjects to become free agents instead of parroting what their symbolic identities would have them say. This is a central insight of Lacanian ethics: Alienation forms the basis of emancipatory politics.

This is the reason why McGowan argues that we must embrace alienation as intrinsic to subjectivity, and that we should recognize alienation’s emancipatory potential, rather than try to overcome it. Alienation cannot be overcome—we can neither make do with identities all together, nor can we ever fully be one with them. As such, promises to overcome alienation, in positing alienation itself as a problem, glosses over the matter of what one is alienated from, supplying misguided solutions that are naive at best, and predatory at worst. The solutions, to illustrate, can sometimes take the shape of commodity fetishism (“If I just put on the right makeup I will become a better woman”) or exclusionary politics (“If we got rid of all outsiders, we would have a harmonious society”).

If emancipation is a response to oppression, we must articulate the relationship between oppression and alienation. McGowan does so through a discussion of racism.

He starts out by explaining that race as such is a modern concept. In premodern times, individuals did not have the notion of race as a biological differentiator. It

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state it can never go back to as *jouissance*. From then on it experiences the glaring lack of this *jouissance* which can never be recovered. Subjects nevertheless strive to fill this lack through objects of desire. Lacan calls this process of being cast out of wholeness as *castration*, and the object of desire which promises to fill the lack as *objet-a*. (Kartal 2024)

was *invented* as a function of the transatlantic slave trade, in order for white slave owners to differentiate themselves from the black peoples they enslaved. Rather than racist acts existing due to inherent differences between races, race came to exist due to racism (McGowan 2024, chap. 3).

McGowan goes on to explain that in a racist society, Symbolic Identity replaces subjectivity. It is not individuals who are separated from one another but Symbolic Identities. Through the emphasis on the difference and distance of Symbolic Identities from one another, identities are reified. Explaining our behavior as a result of our Symbolic Identities is avoidance of our inherent alienation. Bearing in mind that racism inheres not in races but in racist acts undertaken by subjects, “The struggle against racism requires the translation of Symbolic Identities back into the acts of alienated subjects.” (McGowan 2024, chap. 3).

In a similar vein, Žižek demonstrates that the antisemitic fantasy of the Jew disrupting social harmony rests on an inversion of causality. He argues that it is not that the conceptual Jew “prevents Society from existing (from realizing itself as a full organic solidarity, etc.); rather, it is social antagonism which is primordial, and the figure of the Jew comes second as a fetish which materializes this hindrance.” (Žižek 2009, 97).

Race is not the sole domain where separating one Symbolic Identity from another serves to justify oppressive acts of subjects under the banner of essential differences.

I argue that Miray and Kerem’s arrival at the center was preceded by an alienation from a gendered political ideology that operates through violence. Coming into violent confrontation with this ideology as subjects in contradistinction to their Symbolic Identities, Miray and Kerem were thrust into their respective alienations. How the center served as the place where this alienation was processed into new operative narratives—fantasies— will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **2.1.2 Miray’s Alienation**

Miray’s contentious experiences as a member of the JDP’s youth league, and her struggles with her dad’s threats of violence must be analyzed as a function of JDP’s ideological program. Miray’s own clear narrative demonstrates the links between the ideological sanctioning of masculine violence and Miray’s embrace of a particular subject position in response.

*Five months after I left the marine reptile center, on a bright and arid fall morning,, Miray picks me up from the her hometown’s train station. This is my second*

*foray into the field; I want to ask my former colleagues to tell me more about their experiences that had led them to the center. On our phone call, Miray told me she moved back. I am concerned: Why and how did she return from the conservation center where she lived freely, back to her conservative hometown?*

*After catching up over coffee, we go to a run down chicken rotisserie place looking over the newly built architectural abomination that is the town's city hall. Haphazardly joining kitschy faux-Ottoman and Saljuk features with the style of the Early Republic's First National Architecture, the structure towers over the town like a grotesque avatar of the state. Miray and I make ourselves comfortable sitting around the single cheap plastic table in the rotisserie shop waiting for our order.*

*"I remember you told me about your time as a JDP youth league member... What was that like?" I ask Miray.*

*At her all-girls Quranic high school, a friend of hers told her she was going to the JDP youth league meetings, Miray decided to give it a try.*

*"For me at the time, it was an organization that matched my views. There was nothing there I was opposed to. Primarily, we participated in talks, rather than serving a cause. Like a social activity. Most of the time we talked about what we could do in this town to propagate our views, but we discussed ideas we were opposed to, views of outsiders, more than the views we held. We talked about the people who didn't share our opinions, people we could never think like.*

*"There was this guy who ran the talks, a university student assigned to lead us high schoolers. You could say he had rhetorical skills. The things he would tell us were quite questionable in my opinion, not just in terms of insulting Ataturk and stuff, but like... A discourse of some unknown people hindering him... He'd say things like," Here she lowered her voice to a theatrical bass, "They have tried to block our path, like they had tried to block our prophet's path"*

*I laugh, "Men!" Miray laughs too and continues, "For real, a testosterone bro... It was all so disturbing, in retrospect. He had constructed a cause in his mind and made us his disciples.*

*"Imagine a high schooler, who wants to feel like they belong to something. You tell these young people 'look, we're doing something good and there are people who are jealous of us.'*

*I laugh, "Is he invoking external forces (dış mihraklar)?" "Something like that."*

*"The league instilled in you a certain zeal. You know that feeling you get during national holidays when you feel so extremely patriotic... There, it felt like we*

*were serving a great cause, something worth dying for. ‘Even the smallest of your contributions are in service of God’s righteous path...’they would say.*

*“JDP’s exploitation of religion is rather famous... ‘This country’s president knows the terms of religion, he knows the meaning of adhan. The others do not! Their environment is completely different. Don’t you remember when they banned headscarved girls from universities on 28th January? That’s their real vision, they will never accept you.’ They would say the league. They inculcated this so well in us, that even when we criticized JDP, we thought it was the best option we had. We might not have liked everything about JDP, but we absolutely couldn’t accept the opposition.”*

JDP’s polarizing discourse can be read as assigning a moral us against an immoral them, essentializing certain qualities as being intrinsic. Miray’s experiences above exemplify how the *other* is discursively consolidated, and how the boundaries between the two camps are drawn.

Miray talks about how how the league inculcated a zealous sense of serving a great cause against powerful, cunning adversaries, who, in addition to being immoral (willfully ignorant of the terms of religion), would never accept them and would in fact strip them of civil rights if given the opportunity. Kandiyoti notes that JDP increasingly “legitimizes its rule through a heightened sense of crisis, enjoining followers to sacrifice their lives for country and leader” (Kandiyoti 2016, 111), underlining that “The sub-texts of death and martyrdom inevitably invoke violence and potential strife directed at those citizens deemed to be traitors or terrorists (against the more distant backdrop of a powerful external ‘alliance of evil’ *ser ittifaki*)”. The youth league leader is recreating the master narrative of populism employed by the state, whereby good God-Fearing moral people (following *the path of the prophet*) are at war against the conspiratorial, treasonous others (who would block their path) backed by external forces of evil. In this narrative, the great cause, mimicking the prophet’s, is worth dying for, which would be akin to martyrdom.

The recreation of this narrative is precisely the discursive act of othering. In defining and drawing boundaries between Symbolic Identities, it defines the other as equal to a Symbolic Identity (immoral secular outsiders), subsuming any question of their subjectivity. McGowan, articulates how racism operates by conflating subjectivity and identity:

Those invested in the racist structure gain a sense of their own superiority, but even more important, they gain a sense of what they are. The identification of the racial other assures them of what they are by show-



ing them what they are not. Without the Jew, the Aryan would have no identity. Without blackness, whiteness would have no value. Under the spell of racism, all these identities appear substantialized and safe from the trauma of alienated subjectivity. (McGowan 2024, chap. 3)

This act of essentializing differences erases the space for alienation, reifying the *other* and any relationship that can be formed with them. Conversely, when one recognizes this process of reification, encountering it not as the natural result of intrinsic differences, such as being moral or immoral, but as constructed through acts of subjects, it reintroduces alienation as a gap from which resistance can flourish. I will now show how Miray's resistance, which eventually led to her adopting feminist politics, stemmed from an embrace of this alienation, after she glimpsed at the othering act as constituting the other, not the other way around.

*"So what was the break for you?" I ask.*

*"Of course, it all started with Atatürk. When I read about his life, I started noticing some disturbing things about the JDP community's attitudes, like how they would only talk about his flaws... I had really come to respect how Atatürk had lifted this country out of ruins. Even though I could tell he was someone who rejected religion, even though such a rejection was unacceptable to me back then, I was pushed to the point of thinking he had a point.*

*"What do you mean?" I ask.*

*"I was wearing the headscarf back then, right? I remember I was little and I had done well on a quiz or something, and the male teacher had offered me a hi-five and I had turned it down because he was a man—I wouldn't touch him. It wasn't that I was being forced to act this way, I wanted to live like that. But at the same time it felt... Unfair?*

*"Guys could play football, they could go out on the street, have fun. They could even teach religion! That was my dream in high school, to show people what I loved about Islam, to teach it. I wanted to be in the places where knowledgeable people formally discussed religion. Men had that opportunity. Women did not.*

*"Or for example, I would pull up a religious talk on YouTube; it would always, only be male speakers. Imagine if I published a religious talk, would I receive the same congratulatory messages or would I be told off because my female voice is haram? I was starting to feel terribly constrained.*

*"We had a prayer room in my all-girls school where we held unofficial religious talks. The literature teacher and the religion teacher always praised the talks I would*

*lead there on the strife of our persecuted ummah brothers and sisters in Xinjiang, for example. I wanted to address wider audiences, but only men could do that.*

*“Then I would look at the seculars whom we scorned... Their women could do everything they wanted. They had so much more going on, they could go out there and have a voice. I had an interest in law enforcement back then, but I could never hope to become a policewoman. They wore pants and I was wearing the headscarf! Police training was co-ed! That was some absurd stuff in my reality.*

*“Eventually I realized achieving all of that was possible if I only just accepted that the constraints over my life were not right. I said to myself, ‘How can I be beneficial to the world like this? As it is, I’m not even a person—I am living like a sub-class of human!’ Today I still identify as a Muslim. But that lifestyle felt wrong. I wanted to participate in life. I wanted to be more in the world.*

*“So, with this realization I started to notice the toxicity of the people at the youth league. Why was the leader trying so hard to shape our opinions? Here is how the breaking point came for me: The leader was presenting the image of a proper, suitable Muslim boy. But I had seen him disparage one girl to others, telling them she was obsessed with him.*

*“This girl and I went to the same school but due to the leader’s rumors I was always cold to her. One day I was upset about something; she approached me to offer support and we got talking. Eventually she told me everything: The leader was lying about her. It was all slander! She showed me the text messages to prove it. Something snapped in me there and then. I felt like the unease I had was validated, that I had concrete proof of their corruptness. So I went to the league and publicly confronted the leader, showed everyone the proof that he was slandering an innocent girl. The reaction of the community came as a complete shock: They were furious at me! They ganged up on me and threatened to come to my school and beat me up. It made me so mad that I started to cry. The leader’s assistant consoled me and lent me her jacket. When I returned the jacket on my way home, the assistant declared she sensed something off about it. They loudly concluded I must be possessed by evil djinns!*

*I still can’t believe it! How can they be so stupid? This is why I hate them now. The moment they sense dissent, they’ll do anything to invalidate it.”*

When Miray saw that it was no inherent quality of the denigrated girl that resulted in her being slandered, and that it was not her own being possessed by evil djinns but her dissent that resulted in her excommunication from the group, she saw how the other is constructed with recourse to an inherent quality. When she cries “how

can they be so stupid?”, it is in response to the absurdity of the inverted causality of othering.

This othering is not the result of something intrinsic to the other, but the result of *the act* of othering. Much like racism, polarizing populism conflates Symbolic Identity with subjectivity, obfuscating the oppressive act under a veneer of essential qualities. This process ultimately defines and reifies Symbolic Identities, in addition to the relationships between them. Oppression stems from a disavowal of alienation, rendering the subject equal to its Symbolic Identity.

Moreover, Miray realized that despite being an obedient, pious girl, her desires even within this order were curtailed at every turn by the very gender regime she upheld. McGowan locates freedom in the unconscious: Our unconscious desires escape the dictates of our symbolic identity, giving us the opportunity to contest them. This is why alienation is the basis of emancipation. Miray’s desire to transcend her “sub-class of human” status by “being more in the world” not only contests the patriarchal ordering of her world but also the political order.

Deniz Kandiyoti, in her lucid 2016 article "Locating the politics of gender: Patriarchy, neo-liberal governance and violence in Turkey" posits that:

[JDP’s] populism relies, in part, on a politics of resentment that encourages the projection of hatred onto groups or communities seen as either privileged and exclusionary or as potentially treasonous (and sometimes both). [...] Gender norms and specifically women’s conduct and propriety play a key role in delineating the boundaries between ‘us’ (God-fearing, Sunni, AKP supporters), and a ‘them’ consisting of all political detractors and minorities, cast as potentially treasonous and immoral. (Kandiyoti 2016, 111)

She demonstrates how this polarization rests on a gendered citizenship contract. According to it, the state operates like a big family with the head of the state the *pater familias*. The citizen subject is the male head of a family, exercising sovereignty over the dependents, women, children and elderly, who are conceived as grateful beneficiaries rather than citizens with rights of their own. This gendered citizenship contract confers to men untrammelled control over women; and social benefits to women as long as they abide by the patriarchal authority of the *pater familias*, both the state and the male head of the household.

I had emphasized that the policing of gender roles was a way that JDP constructed an *othering*. In JDP’s gendered ideology, resistance against patriarchy is necessarily insubordination against the state and is punished as such. This is exemplified by

the routine police violence against participants of Women's Day and Pride marches, both of which are banned and take the form of protests in Turkey.

This conditional citizenship sanctions violence over not just women who fail to comply with the gendered contract, but a whole set of *others* who fail short of the citizenship ideal, over whom violence is permissible on account of their status as immoral and treasonous (Kandiyoti 2016, 105). Kandiyoti gives the example of an infamous incident where the police, aligned with the state, turned a blind eye on the mob violence inflicted on the members of opposition..

Miray's insubordination against the political and patriarchal rationale are inextricably connected. Refusing to liquidate her subjectivity to her Symbolic Identity, by forming her own opinion of the denigrated girl rather than conforming to the group verdict, Miray renounces the subordinate obedience expected of the grateful beneficiaries of the *pater familias*.

This explains why the moment she expresses dissent she became someone on whom violence was permissible: In her rejection of the gendered citizenship contract, Miray lost the right to be protected—she was symbolically excommunicated from citizenship.

Kandiyoti explains how the familial citizenship model, by excluding women as legitimate bearers of rights, renders them susceptible to violence. When access to rights becomes contingent on a status of compliance, victimhood, and dependency, those who reject presenting themselves as subordinate beneficiaries are outlawed. An outlaw in the olden times was someone who, in breaking the law, was excluded from its protection. It is exactly in this way that expulsion from gendered citizenship sanctions violence against women as a legitimate mechanism to restore lawful masculine dominance over them. Considering that most domestic violence and femicide cases occur in contexts where women exercise autonomy—such as by initiating a divorce—the state's tacit endorsement of masculinist restitutive violence becomes evident in the lenient sentences imposed on perpetrators of domestic violence and rape. "If women's side of the citizenship bargain is to trade acquiescence and propriety for protection, men's loyalty partly rests on the implicit promise of their untrammelled control over women." (Kandiyoti 2016, 110) These lenient sentences render visible the state's primary allegiance to the gendered citizenship contract over the world of law.

Of significance here is the fact that it was not the accused leader but the given political unit who threatened her with a beating. Their violence can be read as the masculinist restoration that Kandiyoti outlines as the pulling of all stops to restore the superiority of a threatened hegemony of patriarchy.

How does Miray's alienation tie to her rejection of the headscarf, being threatened by her father, and arrival at the center?

*I ask Miray, "You had started your story with Atatürk, but I have the impression your alienation from this community was already in motion by the time you came across his memoir..."*

*"You're right," She replies, "I guess Atatürk was my excuse. You know, you can't leave a belief you so strongly held without holding on to something else. Researching Atatürk's life, the excitement of discovering an alternate world vision overpowered my conservatism. I was all alone in this new vision in my small town—I still am. I had no-one to whom I could open up, not my family, not my friends. They wouldn't have understood me. By the end of high school I was secretly wanting to take my headscarf off, but it felt impossible. Then, when I started college, I was away from my family, and I figured if I didn't do it then, I never would. I didn't want to turn 40 one day and find myself having lived like that my entire life. I felt to my bones that I was wearing something that didn't suit me. It was not me."*

*"What do you mean it was not you?"*

*"I guess when wearing the headscarf, rather than being someone, I was everything that was not me. When I put it on, I couldn't pretend that the headscarf was meaningless—it's not an accessory. After deciding through painful tribulations that the lifestyle the headscarf called for was not right, I couldn't just continue to wear it. I was a new person, and she was not covered. She was not covered in anything she wanted to do. I would imagine myself going out and the me in my imagination was uncovered. But I had it on, in reality. I was deeply depressed."*

*"I grew up with beatings, it doesn't really get to me at this point to be honest. But when my dad threatened to kill me when I opened up to him about taking off the headscarf, that hurt. I hadn't wanted to believe that a person could be so seriously endangered for something like this. When he said "I never understood how people can kill their wives, daughters, but now I do" he made sure I knew he meant it. That's why it was so crucial to me to win in this regard: I was either going to live how I wanted, or I was going to die. 'So kill me because I will never ever cover myself again'... I thought."*

*"So the last time I returned home from university, a week before I took off for the reptile center, I got off the bus uncovered. My grandparents were more accepting, they didn't love it but they didn't fight me. My dad was constantly trying to convince me. I tried to keep peace by praising the virtues of the headscarf and told him my religious will wasn't strong enough ("Örtünmek çok güzelmiş de bana nasip olmamış*

*gibi, nefsim yetmemiş gibi”).*

*My grandparents knew I was serious about my decision and left me alone. They thought I was on the verge of going insane—I had threatened to go to the police if my dad beat me again. A violent father would have caused more shame than an immodest daughter. Then I came to the center.”*

McGowan’s framework of emancipation through an embrace of alienation is articulated in Miray’s recognition of her subject position in relation to her symbolic identity when she says “When wearing the headscarf I was everything that was not me”. The headscarf is a symbol imbued with meanings, representing a way of life and a symbolic identity that Miray did not identify with.<sup>5</sup>

The violence Miray’s father threatens her with is the same type of violence that she faced at the youth league: The masculinist restoration that aims to reinstate the threatened patriarchal hegemony. Why should the father feel threatened by her desire to get out of the headscarf?

Remember that in the gendered familial citizenship model, the rightful citizen is constructed as the male head of the household with the elderly, children, and women as grateful beneficiaries rather than bearer of rights. When Miray wants to remove her headscarf, similar to when she exposes the youth league leader, it is a symbolic rejection of both the patriarchal authority, this time of her actual *pater familias*, and the political authority of the state. By removing her headscarf, she renounces both the proper womanhood that JDP sanctions, and JDP’s ideological rationale which legitimizes her father’s authority over her personhood. Her father’s reaction is in response not just to the threat to his own authority, but to the threat to the legitimacy of his authority, since the headscarf is a political sign in the gendered ideology.

Headscarf being a signifier of belonging to a particular political identity in JDP’s gendered ideology, taking it off can be read as more than a personal decision on religious expression. It signals a break with appropriate, subordinate, virtuous womanhood as defined by JDP. Such a break, in the eyes of the state, legitimizes violence despite

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5. Internationally discussed in terms of freedom of speech, gender, and civic participation, the political meanings of the headscarf in Turkey are layered and volatile. The period between 1990s and 2010 saw headscarf become a site of political struggle as headscarved women demanded rights to participate in the secular civic sphere. Ayşe Çavdar recounts how in the 90s, a university education for a headscarved student was more about the struggle for equal civic participation (Çavdar 2013).

The postmodern coup of 28 February 1997 banned headscarved students out of universities, until JDP enabled it in 2010. This is the event that the youth league invoked as a means of drawing the boundaries between the secular elite and the religious people when they said, in Miray’s words, “Don’t you remember when they banned headscarved girls from universities on 28th January? That’s their real vision, they will never accept you”.

word of law.

This also explains why her grandparents were more accepting of Miray's decision: Where her father took it as a challenge to his state sanctioned patriarchal authority, the grandparents interpreted as a religious decision. This also explains why when her dad tried to dissuade her, Miray, in order to keep peace, framed her decision in terms of a weakness of her will against worldly appetites. She was trying to make it seem as though she still complied with the patriarchal ideal, hiding the extent of her disavowal of it.

The recourse to Atatürk, the champion of the seculars, could lead to a reading of Miray's removal of the headscarf as a switching of sides while remaining in the polar political order. Such a reading would imply that her emancipation was in adopting a secular worldview. The reality is more complex. Neither is emancipation so tangible, nor Symbolic Identities so firmly bifurcated. Moreover, our relation to alienation is never so neat as to imply that in fulfilling its emancipatory potential it is no longer relevant. What we can speak of is an expansion of margins of maneuver, potentialities, possibilities for action and imagination through negotiations of different forms of alienations, on multiple meaning registers. I will discuss the specificity of the reptile center in channeling and percolating Miray's alienation in the next chapter, after discussing Kerem's story.

## 2.2 Kerem: Double Loss of Reality

Up until this point I have talked about the women's end of the gendered citizenship contract. What does it take men to enter into this contract? Açıksöz argues that the mandatory military service is the male end of the bargain through which men acquire their status as rights-bearing masculine citizens<sup>6</sup>. Açıksöz explains that since

“military service operates socially as a prerequisite for employment and marriage, all young men are expected to submit themselves to the sovereign power's grip if they are to become sovereign masculine citizen-subjects. Thus, compulsory military service operates historically as a key

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6. How mandatory conscription works in the Turkey: Upon entering adulthood, men are expected to serve in the military for varying durations. For wealthier men, it is possible to postpone military service by staying in school or by paying a certain fee to do it for only a month. Kerem's military service was fifteen months. Although I did not ask his age, tracing his timeline, I understand he was in his mid 20s when he was conscripted.

rite of passage into normative adult masculinity, sealing the heteropatriarchal contract between the state and its male citizenry.” (Açıksöz 2020, 5)

I argue that like Miray, Kerem’s arrival at the center was preceded by an alienation at the intersection of the gendered citizenship ideology and the violence it entails. The ethical binds he experienced as a conscript resulted in a rupture between his symbolic identities as a male Turkish citizen, and his subject position in relation to this identity.

### 2.3 In Kerem’s Words:

Kerem phased in and out of my sight over the course of my month at the center as he carries tools between the shed and the center’s satellites—the tiny fisherman’s boat, the minivan, metal spikes in 100m intervals spread about the beach, where we pile up caging irons for fresh nests, the storage shed at the other end of the beach. Now here, now there with power tools in his hands, potbellied and of indeterminate age, Kerem gave me an intimidating impression.

Despite sharing the space of the center for weeks, Kerem and I had never talked before the night when we skipped field duty together.

It was a beautiful moonlit night. I was paired with Kerem, the jovial, honest faced resident boat captain and maintenance person. At the end of our second hour of marching he turned to me and said “Look, I don’t have the energy for a field tonight. Let’s ditch field duty and chill on the sun beds until it’s time to go back to the center” I was utterly delighted, “We have absolutely run into 0 marine reptiles tonight. That’s what we’ll tell them”.

We laid down on neighboring sun beds. A few days prior, I had had tea in the dead of the night with the lonely night guard at the isolated end of beach; the guard had told me that this area was a djinn hotspot. I asked Kerem if he had ever seen a djinn out on field duty.

“There could be djinns, I would believe it. I’ve seen some messed up things, djinns wouldn’t phase me at this point.”

Not to a colleague, but to a co-conspirator in ditching field duty, he started telling me stories far scarier than anything with djinns in it. We were facing the sky, unable and unwilling to see each other’s faces. There was a confessional quality, a



vulnerable intimacy to the conversation that neither of us wanted to break with eye contact.

Kerem's military service was at the hospital inside the Silivri Jail during the politically turbulent Ergenekon, Balyoz, and KCK trials. He had seen all sorts of pain: sick inmates humiliated at the hospital by being denied cigarettes; inmates who had been assaulted; an elderly inmate on shaky feet waiting for his turn, who filled his heart with compassion until he read on the inmate id that he was a child molester. His soul had withstood all the ugliness he had seen but one:

One of his few friends in the barracks, an orphan who had grown up in a state home, was given leave to attend the wedding of his sister sponsored by a wealthy benefactor, a truly jubilant occasion for someone who grew up without a family. When he returned, he reported back on duty half an hour later than when he was supposed to. The commander punished him with a brutal beating for an entire hour in front of all of his unit.

The next morning the commander verbally humiliated him in front of the unit again, and assigned him consecutive nights of guard duty.

With a single gunshot inside the mouth, administered with a bullet stolen from the armory, Kerem's friend killed himself a few days later. Kerem's hallucinations started on that day. He would live with the hallucinations for months as he served in the military.

Beyond greetings, Kerem and I never really spoke again after that night. We knew too much about one another, it was awkward being face to face. Even so, it was Kerem that my mind kept returning to once I had left the reptile center, his stories kept echoing in my head.

After visiting Miray in her hometown, I called Kerem. He told me he had quit the center and was captaining his own tourist boat in the nearby town now. He could meet me for tea after he dropped off the tourists the next day.

I took the 8 hour intercity bus from Miray's hometown to the town near the reptile center. Around 8 pm, Kerem appeared on a scooter by the cafe in the now empty touristic center of the town. He would go home to his little daughter and wife after our chat, so we didn't have too much time. He sat down, I showed him the recorder and told him I could not stop thinking about what he told me that night and that I wanted to hear more about his time at the prison hospital for my research. Would he be willing to tell me what it was like?

*"It was a shocking crowd. The guys there, they don't care about you—he's already messed up his life, if he just killed you, it doesn't matter. He's already serving a*

*life sentence, it's not like he'll get extra punishment.*

*"So I came back home having lived that life for 15 months. You know how you have to find a job as soon as you return from military service? This was the first one I found.*

*"I was serving during Ergenekon and Balyoz trials, I've seen the KCK. I was exposed to all the trouble associated with these. For example, my prison was located by the highway, right? Somebody once drive-by shot at the guard tower. Or for example, an inmate convicted on KCK... He went to the hospital and got assaulted.*

*"Torture?" I interrupt.*

*"No, I mean... I mean naturally, since this guy is a terrorist, someone who has killed Turkish soldiers, people naturally want to react to that. You want to react too, but the man is under your protection. So you end up thinking, am I doing the right thing? Imagine, you live in the same camp, under the same flag, but you're tasked with protecting the guy who shoots at you. It's one hell of a psychological state.*

*"During day time it's easy, you just do your job. But when you go to bed you have to face what you did. That's how it is, it's the only thing to do. You either talk to your family on the phone, smoke, or if you can go to bed, chew the day over.*

*"So there's this law, the moment you enter military service, you're the property of the military. You do what they tell you. They say die, you die. You gotta forget about your civilian life. Your normal becomes living on the order of the state. Orders are all that matters, you do what you're ordered to do. To the extent that if they tell you not to go to the bathroom, you don't go to the bathroom. Where military starts, rational thought ends. There is no such thing as rational thought. You do what they tell you. I lived like that for 15 months. You get up on order, you walk on order, you work on order, you sleep on order, you sit on order, you stand on order. Then you get used to it.*

*"So what happens is that you see this guy, the child molester for example. What do you gotta do under normal circumstances? You gotta beat this guy up. But what's your boundary there? You have to protect him. At least your responsibility is to get this guy, take him to the clinic, bring him back. He's your responsibility the whole time. If something happens to him you're responsible. Even if the family of the victim comes and tries to hurt him, you gotta prevent that. Like for example there was this guy who had killed someone. The family of his victim tracked him and gunned down the hospital transfer vehicle. I was responsible of protecting this guy in that vehicle, I got out and took him to safety.*

*"Did you never ask yourself, what am I doing here?" I ask.*

*“Everyone asks themselves that, there’s not a single human who does not. Not just conscripts, all people. Even the people who come to the reptile beach from Istanbul. What am I doing here? That’s normal. I did ask that when I started working on the boat. My main thing is, I can’t work under orders. I can’t live taking orders. I did that for 15 months. It offends me to take orders when I’ve been through that. I will not take orders. I will take the client from the pier, give them a tour, drop them back. It will all be my own, that’s the life I crave.”*

Let us address the relationship between the violence suffered by the conscripts and the gendered ideology that legitimizes this violence, and even sanctions it as the prerequisite for admission into heteropatriarchal citizenship.

Açıksöz discusses an anthropological approach to sovereignty where sovereignty is described not as something that the state has in relation to other states, but something it continuously has to convince its internal subjects of through displays of violence. Sovereignty here is conceived as performative, its effect contingent on performances of violence.

Sovereign power needs to be constantly reenacted, reproduced, and reiterated in the matrixes of everyday life and people’s encounters with state institutions, particularly through public performances of violence, to create a singular and stable sovereignty effect (Açıksöz 2020, 8).

While Açıksöz examines sovereignty in terms of the violence it wreaks on internal others, such as through the *homo sacerization* of Kurds in armed conflict, I will now suggest a parallel between sovereignty-as-a-feature-of-the-state, and sovereign-subjectivity-as-a-feature-of-masculinity in the gendered citizenship order.

According to the gendered citizenship contract, a sovereign citizen is the autonomous male head of the household, with authority over dependents, the elderly, women and children. A man who has not done his military service is ineligible from both employment (ensuring autonomy) and marriage (being the head of a household).

Further, since draft evasion is a crime, refusing military service means living as a fugitive, avoiding all contact with civil institutions. As such, military service is the prerequisite for becoming a sovereign subject with the ability to produce and consume, exercise civil rights and authority over women and children (Açıksöz 2020).

Beatings are the way that the state reenacts its sovereignty in the military, while also defining sovereignty in relation to violence. Altınay notes that,

“Punishment through beating in the military exists as a “public spectacle,” rather than being a hidden, non-corporal process. The military is not only an institution that exercises “legitimate violence,” but it is also an institution that embodies physical violence in its everyday operations. Use of physical violence in the military by higher-ranking soldiers is both legitimate and routine. Regular beating seems to be one of the major strategies through which young men are taught submission to authority (Altınay 2004, 67).

Kandiyoti draws a parallel between the forced submission to that conscripts must endure under threat of beatings and the experience childhood where the child is completely helpless in relation to the father. She explains that in the face of total and arbitrary authority, the only way to avoid beatings and public humiliation is to assume the “the placatory and disarming stance of the boy.” (Kandiyoti 1994, 195). Indeed, the infantilization that the hierarchical claim to violence calls for is humorously expressed in the standup act of the celebrated comedian Cem Yılmaz. In this act, Yılmaz recounts meeting a high ranking commander during his own military service, and alternates between what he said out loud to the commander, and what his inner voice sounded like. When the commander calls Yılmaz “Son”, he contrasts the anger he felt about being patronized with the respectful deference he expresses to comic effect; the punchline is when he embodies his inner voice in that moment, that of a clueless and silly baby.

Kandiyoti argues that “Although the institution of authority and control in the army must build upon earlier childhood experience, it may also act as a template to reproduce these experiences in the following generations.”(Kandiyoti 1994, 195). In the context of violence, not only is sovereignty associated with the paternal authority that the father is granted over women and children, but it is also reinforced as being legitimately bolstered through violence. The violence that the state exercises on conscripts with impunity is an expression of the gendered citizenship contract which grants sovereign male citizen rights to violence over his dependents, and offers the template of sovereign masculinity.

Further, the moral ambiguity Kerem inhabits as a prison soldier undergirds this crisis of political legitimacy and masculinity, ultimately resulting in an impoverishment of the his relation to himself and to the world at large—alienation. The demands routinely made of Kerem as a structural feature of the military complex caused Kerem to experience a moral dissonance that destabilized his personal ethics.

While Kerem did not perpetrate violence in the normative sense, he felt he was being made to take the side of the perpetrator in submitting to the demands of the military authority which he viewed as unjust: He was ordered to protect whom he saw as

morally indefensible and deserving of violence, that is, molesters and terrorists. As a soldier, not only was he expected to identify with the state who subjected him to violence, but he was also being prevented from exercising his ethical social subjectivity.

Let's follow this line of thought from Kerem's perspective: Incarceration is insufficient punishment for social wrongs, such as killing Turkish soldiers or molesting children. The society on behalf of the victim is responsible for restituting justice in the form of corporeal punishment. At the prison, the state and the military stand in the way of societal restitution, while administering corporeal punishment over its rightful subjects, the conscripts. This is not an accidental feature of the military logic—it is in fact central to it. By forcing the conscripts to subordinate their own ethical judgement to the military institution, and making them instead adhere to, and reproduce the moral hierarchy of the military, mandatory military service functions as a rite of passage.

In the same way, the conscripts are forced to habituate to submitting utterly and completely to the military authority, to the point of having their bodily functions controlled by orders “There is no such thing as rational thought. You do what they tell you. I lived like that for 15 months. You get up on order, you walk on order, you work on order, you sleep on order, you sit on order, you stand on order. Then you get used to it.” The experience of having to prioritize duty before one's own well-being, as in the example of the vehicle being gunned down while Kerem was transporting the inmate to the hospital, is another instance of the military dispossessing the conscripts of their agentive capacity.

Conscript/soldier identity has a reified relationship to every aspect of life, with no margin of maneuver. Rahel Jaeggi explains that when Marx described alienation as a “double loss of reality”, he was referring to both the individual failing to recognize itself as effective in the world, thus powerless and unfree, and the world becoming indifferent and meaningless (Jaeggi 2014, 6). This is precisely the case here: It is not only that there is a disconnect between Kerem's subjectivity and his symbolic identity as a Turkish soldier serving the state; but also that in the military's moral indifference and irrational ordering, citizenship scripts lose their legitimacy and the world loses its coherence (“So you end up thinking, am I doing the right thing? Imagine, you live in the same camp, under the same flag, but you're tasked with protecting the guy who shoots at you.”).

Açıksöz examines how the co-constitution of state legitimacy and masculine sovereignty is destabilized when the state fails to deliver on the promise of sovereign masculinity awaiting conscripts at the end of the military service on the occasion

they are left disabled, and thus excluded from becoming autonomous heads of families (Açıksöz 2020, 48). While Kerem does not leave with a physical disability, has a job and a family, his time in the military resulted in lasting mental health issues, including depression and hallucinations. We could argue that the reptile center has no specificity in this story, being the first job that Kerem found upon returning from military service. However, Kerem worked there for seven years, before quitting to captain his own boat. What was it about the reptile center that kept Kerem working there for seven years despite the low pay? What had made him quit? How does his time at the reptile center, where a benevolent sovereignty is exercised over docile reptile bodies, feature in his experience of alienation from the state and the ableist and masculinist ideals it represents? These are the questions we will answer in the next chapter.

### 3. "FOR WHOSE SAKE ARE WE DOING THIS?"

*At nine pm on my first night at the Marine Reptile Research and Rehabilitation Center, dressed entirely in black, I reported for beach monitoring duty. With two other volunteers from the previous month, we set out from the center towards the beach. I was immediately disoriented by the extraordinary darkness—the nearest town was 12 kms away. Once at the beach, we removed our flip flops. “From here on out, we’ll walk on wet sand and surveil ahead to spot nesting mothers emerging from the sea,” explained the field leader. We started marching single file on firmly packed wet sand with the waves gently licking our feet. The licks would turn into a sloppy assault once we left the hilly cove for the open stretches ahead. The sea unleashed its relentless rage at night, hurling roaring waves to the shore until the morning. This would not be a serene stroll.*

*About an hour in, the field leader spotted a reptile in the distance with habituated night vision, jerked his arm up to halt and shush us. I squinted my eyes. Ten meters ahead, creeping forward with haunting slowness was a 70 cm long oblate abyss, barely distinguishable for being slightly darker than the fine sand around it.*

*We quietly dropped the field tools we were carrying and immediately got to work preparing for data collection: sample collection would come first, which entailed cutting one piece off of the reptile’s carapace, and two more from the soft tissue of its flippers. Next, we would pierce its fin with a metal ID tag. Lastly, we’d measure its length and width, and record the findings in the field notebook. Although I had read about the procedure in the information manual, I was utterly shaken by its execution.*

*With the leader’s signal, we crouched down and stealthily approached the oblivious reptile. Suddenly, we turned on our red headlights. The field leader ordered me to grab the reptile and restrain her before it got away. He swiftly produced a small surgical knife and sample tubes from somewhere while the other volunteer readied the data notebook and the measuring utensils.*

*Here I am in the moment: the relentless angry roar of the sea mixes with the pounding inside my head, as though the waves are banging inside my skull. In the unnerving darkness, our headlights emanate a dim haze of demonic red over the giant reptilian flailing her impossibly powerful arms in slow motion. Her eyes are haunting voids of solid black, ceaselessly secreting a stream of thick, salty mucous. "Is she crying?" I'm too horrified to speak. "Don't let her get away!" calls the leader, and I pull with all of my strength on the ridge where the carapace connects to the bumpy leather of her neck. The leader manages to grab a hold of her muscular fin with one hand, the knife glints menacingly in the other. The moment of the vile incision: the beast spasms and thrashes as the pounding in my head mounts to a frenzied crescendo. I'm not allowed to let go. I hate this, I hate this, I hate this; I chant like a prayer. I feel dirty.*

Why had we done all that? The visceral violence of the operation undid any claims it had to sensibility for me. This was not the image I had in mind when I thought I would contribute to the protection of nature, of marine reptiles. What are the meanings of nature, marine reptiles, conservation, anyway? How are these meanings constructed? What do they do to the humans and non-humans entangled with them?

What's more, how had this place, Göldeniz beach become what it was: A protected enclave, a reptile hotspot, home to a conservation center?

From my pre-field research, the conservational framing of the beach seemed conservative to me. It implied an ahistorical order whereby the reptiles had been nesting in this beach since time immemorial, that the beach itself was unchanged since primordial times; it was only with the recent human interventions that the natural order was disturbed. In this narrative, conservation served to restore a natural order by rectifying the wrongs of humans.

In this chapter I will explore how the protected beach, the conservation center, and the reptiles feature in a certain fantasy of nature. I argue that it is this fantasy of nature that marks the specificity of the conservation center as the place where my interlocutors found a form of refuge from their alienation.

I will study fantasy here as a Lacanian concept. I will discuss how nature and conservation emerge as fantasies of rescue and agentivity in the narratives of my interlocutors, and what these fantasies do.

In the third chapter, I will discuss how the green ideology, as the fantasy that undergirds conservation, reveals its own inconsistencies, and alienates my interlocutors anew.

Fantasy gets a bad reputation. We often vilify fantasies, claiming they blind us to



a real truth, tricking us, deflecting our energies from things that matter. Fantasy is equated with delusion. That is not how I employ fantasy here. Through psychonalytics, I argue there is no truth to mask over—it’s fantasies all the way down. As such, I advocate for studying fantasies, not as delusions, but at structuring narratives. In the same way we do not dismiss fiction for not being truth, cherishing them instead for painting worlds for us, I argue that fantasies allow us to make sense of our world and are worth studying. Here, I will study fantasies as sociopolitical narrative formations that explain to us why we desire what we desire: We desire that reptiles survive, yes, but through what mechanisms, imageries, experiences do we desire it? By studying fantasies not as emanating out of the object of desire (reptile), but as being structural features of our psyches, I celebrate fantasies as that which gives shape to the ethics we hold.

My insistence on approaching nature through a lens of fantasy invites comparison with the school of thought that understands nature as a social construct. On the one hand, the social construction of nature means that what we call nature is *materially* brought into being through human social processes. On the other hand it means that the very *idea* of nature is something socially determined. The association of trees with nature, and plastics—whose raw material is fossilized trees—with not-nature, stems from a man-made symbolic topology.

The conservation center can be read through both angles. Let’s first look at how the beach was materially made and remade in interaction with social forces.

### 3.1 Nature as Materially Socially Constructed

The center is located at the tail end of a lagoon ecosystem, downstream from pomegranate orchards. One of my interlocutors, Koray, the resident field biologist, told me that before the 1980s, villagers living nearby would use reptile shells to make cots for their babies. Knowing that these reptiles laid tens of eggs in one go, they often unearthed the eggs to use as fertility enhancers for new brides. During those days, the beach housed fishermen’s huts; residents of the town upstream told me they would come to these huts to have barbecues with their families.

Then in the 1980s, when neoliberal reforms were underway and Turkish coasts were being reinscribed as tourism hotspots, a wealthy European woman led an international campaign to keep Göldeniz Beach protected from hotel construction. After the beach received its protected status, there was fierce, politically charged contestation over what exactly would be done with it. Students occupied the beach from

time to time to defend it from construction projects that attempted to make use of legal loopholes. This was around the time when the current director of the center, then a graduate student, began camping out on the beach to conduct population surveys for his studies.

Later, in the early 2000s, he managed to strike a deal with the environment ministry and had the center built about 250 meters inland from the beach. A prefab complex with a surgery room, reptile tanks, and a few trailers serving as volunteer dormitories, the center was given special status as a nonprofit treatment and research facility for marine reptiles.

The center undertook two main projects: Giving medical care to injured endangered reptiles (what was called rehabilitation duty among center staff), and conducting population management and monitoring studies at the beach (what was called field duty, where we searched for nesting mothers, took measurements and re-located endangered nests).

In recent years, the conservation landscape around the center has been shaped by the ecological consequences of upstream agricultural practices. According to the resident biologist, pesticides used in the pomegranate orchards make their way into the shallow waters of the lagoon and the beach, killing the microorganisms that feed on the seaweed. This disruption has led to an overgrowth of seaweed, which in turn has caused a spike in the green marine reptile population that feeds on it. With more reptiles come more eggs, which are then preyed on by foxes and crows. The increased protein availability has caused fox and crow populations to rise, and when they aren't eating reptile eggs, they have taken to pestering the local farmers. We often heard of farmers shooting foxes.

On one of his rare visits, the director of the center told me, as we trekked back from field duty: "Everybody has their own niche in the environment. Mine is to regulate populations, so I uphold the rights of not just the reptiles, but also foxes and the farmers." This particular narrative of the role of conservation is one of the fantasies we will explore in the next chapter.

I asked the biologist whether we might speak of a reptile culture in flux as a result of human actions. In asking this question, I was haunted by Van Dooren's multispecies poetics, which lay bare how, when a species is lost, a way of life is lost. I had read in *Flightways* that the penguins who once bred and nested along the Australian shores had lost their nesting grounds due to sea walls, swimming pools, and other urban structures—structures that, ironically, brought people closer to "nature" while preventing penguins from coming ashore to nest. And yet, year after year, penguins still attempted it. (Van Dooren 2014)

I was also thinking of how, about a century ago, the creation of national parks in the US led to wild bears learning that when they intercepted visitors' cars and made a begging gesture, they would be given food. Abandoning hunting, they began teaching their cubs to beg. Their "nature", both in its symbolic meaning and material foundation, had become undeniably socially constructed, a joint production shaped through human interests. (Neumann 2022)

Van Dooren uses stories as a framework to understand how animals and humans encounter one another in the Anthropocene, accounting for the experience of the animals. I was probing the field biologist to see if a storied empathy with the plight of the reptiles could be fostered by understanding what exactly they were losing that we were trying to recover for them.

Much to my surprise, the field biologist told me No, marine reptiles neither had a culture, nor had their way of life undergone significant changes. "As solitary creatures, marine reptiles don't nurture their young, so there's no transmission of culture whatsoever. But we can talk about bad habits they adopted, like a cigarette addiction." He explained. One of these bad habits was going for the easy prey that tourist boats handed out.

Marine reptiles, marketed as a spectacular natural resource shielded from human impact, proved to be the main attraction on which tour boat operators relied. At the far end of the beach, boats awaited beachgoers to ferry them to and from the town upstream. These boats advertised the experience of feeding locally caught blue crabs to marine reptiles.

What this has meant for the marine reptiles is that, with a stable food source nearby, some began to refuse migration—even when the sea temperature dropped, and they should have left. Moreover, the most prevalent ailment for which reptiles were brought to the center was boat propeller injury. Having come to associate boats with free crab, reptiles had taken to making a dash toward any boat they saw, often getting caught in the propellers as a result.

To add insult to injury, the major foreign tour operator in the region had sponsored caged propellers to prevent reptile limbs from getting caught in them, which they advertised as their contribution to sustainable tourism. The same operator was also the chief donor of the center, bringing in hundreds of guests each day to view the amputated and sick reptiles in the tanks. It was, of course, these same guests who benefited from the services of the boat operators who fed the reptiles crab.

Already we are seeing the nature under protection being not so natural. The reptiles, their life worlds, the protections they are granted or denied all make and remake

the environment, their way of life, and the political economy around them. The “nature” at the protected beach is, far from being an untouched, primordial clearing, constructed by social forces.

### 3.2 Nature as Symbolically Socially Constructed

“Nature” is also socially constructed in the sense that the concept, far from signifying a self evident object, is a symbolic construct. Nature is perhaps the most slippery term in language (Swyngedouw 2015, 133). Where is nature? Is it the great outdoors outside of cities? Is it the plants that grow on the sidewalk of a busy street? Is it the fossils of ancient trees that we make plastic bags out of, which then go on to strangle marine reptiles?

What is nature in symbolic terms? Is it law; the authority on ethics and conduct in a post-religion world (Zizek 2008, 153)? Is it the domain that is outside of human intention? Is it the childhood of humanity, pre-society?

Despite the notion ubiquitous in the industrialized world that nature is something that exists outside of us, irrespective of our attempts to make sense of it, where we locate nature is an entirely social affair. Is “nature natural at all?” Asks Castree:

“What if, instead of it being an object or domain we make sense of in various ways, our sense-making practices reveal something wholly ‘un-natural’ to us? What if it’s a world whose naturalness is not given but merely appears to be so? What if the so-called Book of Nature is legible to us because we wrote, rather than simply read, the contents (plot, character, scene)? I ask these questions because in this book *I aim to make sense not of nature but of the various ways in which what we call ‘nature’ has been made sense of.*” (Castree 2013, 6)

Rather than taking the

“ideas, feelings and beliefs [that] refer to a ‘nature’ [as] self-evidently ‘there’” (Castree 2014, 6), Nature is understood as “a collective representation, a language game that reflects a prior pattern of sense-making activity” (Alexander 2003, 13).

In this sense, Escobar, after evidencing the social construction of Nature by demonstrating the historical shifts in what counted as nature and culture in the West, asserts that:

“Nature, bodies, and organisms must thus be seen as “material-semiotic” actors, rather than mere objects of science pre-existing in purity. Nature and organisms emerge from discursive processes involving complex apparatuses of science, capital, and culture. This implies that the boundaries between the organic, the techno-economic, and the textual (or, broadly, cultural) are permeable.” (Escobar, 1996, 60)

Let us look at how the social construction of nature has been problematized by disciplines that study science, capital, and culture.

The field of Science and Technology Studies examines how scientific knowledge about nature itself gets produced and then gets imbued with epistemic authority. By studying socio-technical practices, STS examines how “facts” about nature are produced. Through the works of thinkers like Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, STS challenges the claims that science “discovers” nature. Instead, it suggests that what we call nature comes into being through a complex interplay of instruments, institutions, language, and power. A famous example from Feminist STS that lays bare how our scientific conceptions of nature aren’t in fact natural, is Emily Martin’s 1991 study of scientific literature regarding the fertilization of an egg. This study demonstrates how the egg is depicted as receptive and passive while the sperm is depicted as heroic and active. Even at the level of cells, it is cultural narratives about gender that shape scientific representations—scientific facts about nature do not refer to discoverable absolutes but are embedded in language, metaphor and ideology.

The field of geography problematizes how capital flows and political processes shape “nature”, in addition to its historically contingent, emplaced, culturally contested meanings. Thinkers like Noel Castree demonstrate how nature is not an externality to society but is produced and managed to serve economic, colonial, developmental interests. Employing the lens of political ecology, for example, a geographically informed study of the social construction of nature would look at how power struggles play out in the making of nature-scapes at the intersection of meaning and materiality. Studies that focus on how conservation projects planned and funded in a global NGO’s Western headquarters transforms the way a community in a developing locale relates to nature and makes a livelihood off it would be within the scope of geography, for example.

The discipline of Cultural Studies is interested in the social construction of nature in terms of its place in the symbolic order. This field studies nature as a discursive and ideological object, a site where social ideals, ideologies, values, identities are articulated. Studying how nature becomes a canvas to fill with emotional and symbolic

content, scholars adopting this lens question what an invocation of “Nature” does in different contexts. For example, my analysis of a campaign undertaken by an apparel manufacturer that urges consumers to buy jeans to protect marine reptiles questions whose interests the appeal to “nature” serves:

The blog post for Apparel Jeans’s<sup>7</sup> Indigo Reptiles campaign starts out by informing the reader that Reptiles are endangered; only 40% make it to the sea after hatching and a fraction of that survives to adulthood. Then, the page invites consumers to buy a themed t-shirt to save Reptiles: “So they can swim in these waters too... Buy 1 Indigo Reptiles t-shirt to save 10 baby Reptiles!”. How exactly will buying a t-shirt save 10 baby Reptiles? What is the story being told about Nature here? Igoe, Neves and Brockington would argue that this is a story where the “environmental problems in late market capitalism are best repaired by capitalist solutions, and it is possible to manage our planet in ways that simultaneously maximize its economic and ecological function.” (Igoe and Neves and Brockington 2010, 497). That Nature can be managed, and that a properly managed nature not only cancels out the damages caused by capitalism but also creates more profit is a distinctly novel one. In this is the discourse of neoliberal sustainable development, Nature’s core value is articulated in terms of its capacity for generating wealth (Escobar, 1996).

Ultimately, we have no way of verifying how buying a t-shirt saves reptiles: The relationship between humans and the nature it presents as being true are unverifiable. The consumptive activity of buying Reptile themed t-shirts conceals the complexity of the relationships it mediates (Igoe and Neves and Brockington, 2010, 501). Such a simplistic solution hides the global connections between the garment industry and marine pollution, for example.

Now that we have covered how various disciplines problematize the social construction of nature, in the following section, I will introduce and explain how social constructionism compares to and complements nature as a fantasmatic construction, a psychoanalytic concept in the Lacanian tradition.

### **3.3 Social Construction of Nature vs. Nature as Lacanian Fantasy**

What does Lacanian theory bring to the study of marine reptile conservation beyond the social construction of nature angle?

Lacanian theory complements social constructionism by theorizing about Fantasy.

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7. Not real names

Nature, the most slippery term in language, is expressed in narratives and fantasies: We talk about CO2 emissions as a villain that threatens us, we talk about kissing a lover while watching the sunset at the beach (Swyngedouw 2015, 135). Where do all these meanings of nature come from?

Lacanian theory intersects with the social constructionism in a very fundamental way: Both of them are anti-essentialist ways of understanding the world; both disavow a pre-discursive reality as a base upon which discourse sits as a superstructure. So the meanings of nature do not emanate out of nature itself, but are created socially.

At the level of signification, both Lacanian theory and social constructionism concur that it is the meanings that hold on to and sustain one another, and thus make one another: Rather than stemming from the signified, meaning comes to exist in reference to the greater web of meanings. "Signification is produced through the relations between signifiers, through the formation of linguistic chains, chains that refer to other chains. Signification never indicates the real per se, but always refers back to another signification." (Stavrakakis 1999, 57)

Another thing Lacan adds to social constructionism is the concept of the Real, which emerges where the Symbolic register fails in representing the extent of reality.

The Real is that which cannot be symbolized. It is distinct from reality, because I can talk about reality—if I can represent it in symbolic terms (talk about it) it is Symbolic Reality. Since the Real is not symbolizable, encountering it directly is traumatic for the subject. The real is what the barred/split subject is barred from. A direct encounter with the Real could look like a natural disaster for example, when the symbolic order fails so totally that the rules of the symbolic world prove to have no absolute referent. Climate crisis often manifests in the terms of the Real and not the Symbolic, for example—it is so diffuse and abstract we cannot represent it (Morton 2013).

The failure to represent the Real results in the emergence of the Lack. "Lack emerges in and through the symbolization of the real (Stavrakakis 1999, 44)". The emergence of the Lack results in a self-perpetuating, never fulfilled desire to capture the Real. "Desire, the element that keeps everything going, is animated by the quest for a lacking/impossible fullness, around the promise of encountering *jouissance*—and *jouissance* always has 'the connotation of fullness' (Forrester, 1990:100)." (Stavrakakis 1999, 44). As such, *Jouissance* is also an instance of the Real.

Lack sits in the center of Lacanian theory. As the lack is traumatic when encountered directly, the subject needs a way to represent this lack from a place of safety. This

where fantasy comes in: The subject fantasizes that the object of desire, if attained, could fill in the Lack. The catch is that, nothing will fill the Lack—the lack is not a bug but a feature of our psychic makeup. The promise that the object of desire could possibly do so is a fantasy. In Lacanian mathemes, the formula of fantasy is expressed as the relation of the castrated subject to the object cause of desire.

Why have I chosen to use fantasy as the frame through which to understand how my interlocutors experience the conservation edifice? As I experienced the center myself and listened to each of my interlocutors' stories about being at the center, I grew more and more confused. No wide spanning social constructionism theory could account for the particularity of their predicaments. Trying to retrofit them into existing theories could not do justice to the saturated individuality of their stories. I considered referring to Agrawal's Environmentality to explain their transformation into environmental subjects, I considered re-hashing the vacuousness of the sustainability discourse. But saying "I observed that the theory works" would not cut it. I started to look for a way to go deeper into personal stories while looking at how they were in a constant co-creation with the social forces around them.

Lacanian theory recognizes that desire can only find its object within the symbolic social order. The stories we tell ourselves about what we want and why we want it do not unfold unidirectionally, from the subject toward its object of desire. When we desire something, it is always in reference to the desire of the Other: the totality of the social-symbolic field in which the subject is embedded, including language, laws, institutions, and the imagined gaze of others. What the Other desires of the subject becomes what the subject comes to desire for itself. The narratives we construct to justify or explain our desires are what Lacan calls fantasy.

"Fantasy mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality - that is to say, it provides a 'schema' according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure." (Žižek 1997, 7)

Why do my interlocutors want to save reptiles? What structures their desire, points to the lack within themselves and in the Other? What are the stories they tell themselves about what is missing in themselves and in the world that saving the reptiles could remedy?

Through a consideration for the interplay between the Lack in the subject and the Lack in the Other, Lacanian Fantasy framework accounts for the entanglement between the subject, the world at large, and the process whereby new meanings are



produced. This is where social constructionism stands to benefit from the psycho-analytic angle: Desire and fantasy are the locomotives through which new meanings are constructed. Attending to the individuals in an effort to delve into the specificity and generalizability of fantasies prepares the grounds for a political engagement with the social construction of nature.

Social constructionism and Lacanian theory complement one another in important ways. Below is an example of how the two approaches present a complete picture.

Stavrakakis, to demonstrate how it was nature that had to conform to a particular fantasmatic construction of it, and not the other way around (whatever was true about nature changing the fantasy associated with the “nature”) presents a vignette from the history of nature conservation.

“As is well known nature conservation was developed first in the United States; what is not so well known is that ‘a major feature of the crusade for resource conservation was a deliberate campaign to destroy wild animals—one of the most efficient, well-organized, and well-financed such efforts in all of man’s history’ (Worster, 1994:261)” Stavrakakis starts out (Stavrakakis 1999, 64).

Rooted in a ‘progressive’ moral vision, this ideology framed both nature and society as needing protection from supposed exploiters, leading to the state-sanctioned removal of predators like coyotes and wolves. This wasn’t just about managing ecosystems; it was about imposing an ethical ideal of what nature *should* be. Backed by Roosevelt’s administration, this vision led to a full-blown extermination program under the Bureau of Biological Survey, with tens of thousands of animals killed in just the first years (Stavrakakis 1999, 64).

So “nature”, in having to conform to its fantasmatic counterpart, was socially constructed. In symbolic terms, this was done by discursively associating it with a sort of purity from “undesirable” elements, certain wild animals native to the conserved areas in this case. It was also socially constructed in material terms, through the very act of purging it of the animals that did not conform to the symbolic ideal.

In what follows, I will use Fantasy as a framework to understand what the desire to be in nature and save the reptiles reveal about what my interlocutors feel themselves lacking, what the world is perceived to be lacking, and how the fantasy of nature promises to cover over these lacks. In doing so, I go beyond the social construction of nature to understand how and why people come to need and desire these constructions in particular ways.

### 3.4 Nature as Lacanian Fantasy

*The peak of the nesting season began on my last week at the center. Despite the help of the newcomers, the center was still tragically short-staffed. We were awaiting the return of certain reptiles that had GPS machines attached to their shells years ago. We had to make sure not to miss a single nesting mother lest it turned out to be the reptile with the GPS.*

*Two days before I left the center, we had an especially intense night. I was paired with Şule, the 23-year-old vet technician intern who had a permanently sour face and demeanor. From our previous outing together, I had learned she was ambitious to switch to the full veterinary medicine track, because during a previous internship at a pet clinic in Izmir, she had been treated to expensive lunches from the neighborhood and was enamored with the lifestyle she observed there. She had said she was here at the center firstly because her boyfriend (the other vet technician intern) had suggested they go. Secondly, it was because she wanted to leverage the unique experience of having worked with reptiles when she went back to pursue the career in vet medicine. I had gleaned in her no deep emotional investment in reptiles that I had observed in Miray, for example.*

*We were given new orders to install what was called a moat cage. This entailed opening moats in the dry sand around the nest in which to push a grid cage sideways. This was an almost Sisyphean task since the dry sand filled the moats as you dug it. To compound our tribulations, a storm broke out. We were both stressed out. I told Şule this was not going to work out, we were losing too much precious time and energy, we'd be going on the whole night; we hadn't even completed the second cage and we were already exhausted. My suggestion was to take initiative and forego the moat cage and install a regular one instead.*

*She was incensed at my unwillingness to do what we were told and started rudely addressing me in the imperative tone as the assigned field leader. Şule's efforts seemed self-flagellating to me, punishment-like, unrelenting. For her part, she was angry at me for not matching her intensity—I was putting in my bare minimum. Tension was running high. We kept at it passively burning with resentment for each other through the stormy night.*

*On the trek back I told Şule, "I respect the work you do; I hope you don't take my lack of investment in it as a personal affront."*

*But she had. The next day, it was revealed I had missed one slot to be filled in the field notebook. Şule threw a tantrum, banged the door of the office and started yelling*

to Miray: "Can you believe her?"

I invited her outside, "Let's talk it out. Şule, you're clearly frustrated. I'm happy to listen." Miray followed us out; she wanted to make sure peace was kept.

Şule started enumerating all the ways I had fallen short of perfection in my endeavors to protect reptiles. I told them, "I respect the effort you put in but you're right to point out I don't care as much as you do. In fact, I'm truly curious why you guys care as much as you do and would love to hear your thoughts."

Şule jumped in: "We have chosen this profession!"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We're the kind of people who've dedicated ourselves to saving animals," she said. "Like, when I was interning at the pet clinic, there was this cat with no hips. For a whole month, we had to help it eliminate waste. The day it finally recovered and left, I bawled my eyes out, snot and all."

Miray said, "You have pets yourself. When a loved one or your pet gets sick, you hope the vet cares as much as you do for your pet. In this way we can't ever forget that these animals are living beings. Vets see so many cases, at some point they get used to death. But even then, we need to remember that they're not just numbers on a patient list."

Doğuş chimed in: "Remember how happy we were the day Xena ate?"

Xena was a reptile missing a front flipper—Doğuş was usually the one who cleaned her wounds. They told me the first time she ate fish by herself instead of through a feeding tube, they had cried.

They also told a story about another amputee, Emmy. Doğuş had been doing physical therapy with her since she first arrived. The other day they came across photos from her first day and couldn't even recognize her. "We were like, is this really Emmy? Now she's able to use her back flippers and even dive!" Their faces lit up with a quiet, beaming pride.

I said, "You work here under incredibly tough conditions—the hours are absurd, the workload is intense—what's the reward? When do you feel like it's worth it?"

Miray didn't hesitate: "When the hatchlings come out!"

Doğuş and Şule would not be here for the hatching season, but they had made Miray promise to send them videos. Doğuş told me there was a nest that he had relocated and caged, he checked on it every time he was out in the field. He explained that that nest meant a lot to him. Miray had promised she'd watch over it for him once

he had left.

*They kept coming back to how deeply committed they are, and how natural that commitment feels for people who choose that line of work.*

*"You don't have to try to understand it," Şule said. "Saving those animals just feels natural to us. It makes us happy."*

*Doğuş said there used to be a vet here until last month, someone who, like the others, wasn't here for the money but to be close to the reptiles. "That guy had told us, 'We become life for those who don't have a voice.'"*

*Şule added, "Even street cats and dogs have someone who cares about them. But reptiles? They don't have anyone."*

*"That's exactly what I was about to ask," I jumped in. "Where do reptiles fit into all this for you?"*

*Miray said, "I used to just see reptiles in documentaries. I thought they were just off doing their own thing. Then you come here and see the reality: some reptile's shell is cracked just because someone wanted to go on a boat ride. We find plastic inside them, all for our enjoyment."*

I argue that for my interlocutors, injured by a injurious, volatile world that confused their social coordinates and alienated them, the conservation work and the immersion in seemingly pristine nature promises two things:

Firstly, the particular fantasy of nature constructed in the conservation context positions my interlocutors as rescuers/saviors of a world that had proved to be cruel, chaotic and harmful to themselves and reptiles alike.

Secondly, the fantasy of conservation promises my interlocutors a sense of agency. Before arriving at the center, their alienation was marked by a feeling of powerlessness, a disconnect between their inner lives and intentions, and the outcomes they faced. The fantasy of agentivity promises coherence between their identity, actions and their reverberations in the world.

In the following section, I will explore the Green Fantasy and the conservation fantasy, which position nature as the absolute authority that is outside and beyond social structures. The fantasy of nature as the Other of the Other in Lacanian terms<sup>8</sup> presents "nature" as the arbiter of truth and proper conduct, as the point of

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8. What does it mean to say "there is no Other of the Other"? Callum Neill explains thus: "There is no possibility of a position outwith any social context, there is no position available outwith social order from which this or that social order could be judged; 'there is no such thing as a metalanguage ..., no language being able to say the truth about the truth' (Lacan, 1989: 16). That is to say, the most that might be available to us would be the comparison between social

ultimate reference beyond humanity.

Then, in the section following Green Fantasy, I will demonstrate how this imagining of nature facilitates fantasies of rescue and agentivity for my interlocutors. In the third chapter, I will explore the orchestration of the green fantasy through the logic of neoliberal conservation. We'll see how the neoliberal conservation framing at once enables and destroys the fantasies of my interlocutors, resulting in their adoption of new imaginaries.

### 3.4.1 Green Fantasy

I frequently thought of the manner in which my colleagues toiled in religious terms. I saw it everywhere I looked: Biodiversity ARK projects, the moralizing about how to act as ecological subjects, the descriptions of climate catastrophes that sounded straight out of descriptions of a religious apocalypse. Climate crisis was an eschatological narrative. My interlocutors were self-flagellating in the needless intensity of their labor, it almost seemed like Miray wanted to martyr herself for the reptiles, her devotion was total, zealous, religious. How else could I explain the intensity of efforts to save reptiles, if it wasn't in terms of an apocalypse?

When I had returned from fieldwork, the mental image I had of the center was one of a monastery. It wasn't black shorts we wore for field duty; we donned habits. The dining area was a refectory. We weren't entering field data into the notebook with a pencil, nay, we were writing scripture. We weren't conservation workers, we were acolytes. Our monastery shunned sinful society, here we abstained from sin and pleasure. we worshipped the reptiles and preached to the visitors that the end was neigh. Didn't they see the signs? Did they think they'd be spared when nature was dying for our sins?

When I decided it was more about their personal stories than about anthropocenic eschatology, I got to thinking about how to account for this mythic formulation.

Stavrakakis argues that where the hegemonic story about nature was once about its availability to humankind as raw material, a paradigm shift has occurred in line with the developments in the science of ecology and the environmental crises that have proved there are limits to growth (Stavrakakis 1997). The new paradigm posits that nature was once at balance, and this balance has been disturbed by human actions.

Stavrakakis notes that this Green Fantasy is extended into an ideology:

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orders but such that any comparison so made is made from a position within a given social order." (Neill 2011, 197)

“Green ideology, however, is not concerned solely with the dislocation of the dominant paradigm regulating relations between humans and nature, and it is not devoted solely to covering over the lack produced by this dislocation. Like every political ideology, it attempts to provide answers, hegemonically appealing answers, to all social dislocations, to the inherent division of the social. [...]” (Stavrakakis 1997, 125)

Zizek concurs:

“Homologous to the Lacanian proposition "Woman does not exist," we should perhaps assert that Nature does not exist—it does not exist as a periodic, balanced circuit, thrown off its track by man’s inadvertence. The very notion of man as an “excess” with respect to nature’s balanced circuit has finally to be abandoned. The image of nature as a balanced circuit is nothing but a retroactive projection of man.” (Zizek 1991, 38)

Black and Cherrington summarize,

“Žižek’s (1991) account of nature and ecology takes aim at liberal ideologies, which present nature as a harmonious entity (Mother Earth) that has been violated and unbalanced by human action. Here, nature is often predicated on a presupposed notion of a stable equipoise, which is subsequently unbalanced by humanity’s hubris, yet, at the same time, redeemable through (unchallenged) attempts to rectify our mistakes and rebalance nature.” (Black and Cherrington 2020, 5)

Thus far, the argument is that, nature when left to its own is in harmony and equilibrium, but with the intrusion of industrial man, it has lost its balance. By this logic, industrial man is an alien intruder, whose elimination can restore nature to its naturally balanced state.

But there is more to it. This green fantasy posits harmonious nature as a social authority. So the ills of society, and the ills of environment are seen to have their solution in the restoration of the harmonious order. Here the saving of nature is not just about nature, but about reinstating a working political order.

“In that sense, we could rather safely assert that Green ideology constitutes an answer both to social dislocations and to the environmental dislocation, an answer articulated in a way that attempts to cover over the lack produced by the dislocation of the radical tradition. [...] For Green ideology, though, environmental dislocation overdetermines all the

other dislocations [...]” (Stavrakakis 1997, 125)

Every ideology has at its core a fantasmatic harmonious order that is made impossible due to an excessive element. For the Nazis, this was the figure of the Jew. For the green ideology this figure is the industrial man.

One might argue, if it is not industrial man that has upset the natural balance, then what is it? Therein lies the contribution of Lacanian perspectives to ecological thought: The inconsistencies of the social order don't have easy and ready made answers. "We must learn to accept the real of the ecological crisis in its senseless actuality, without charging it with some (paranoid) message or meaning" (Žižek 1991, 35).

Green ideology provides such a readymade answer: If nature was at balance until industrial man disturbed it, simply get rid of the industrial man and fix his wrongs! "It is easier to fight a single identifiable foe than the inherent division of a social order. It is also the way to try to eliminate the terror of the Real." (Stavrakakis 1997, 128)

This fantasmatic formulation of a harmonious nature implicates nature in a political ideal: "the notion of a utopian future "sustainable society" organized around a fantasmatic conception of nature as a supreme point of unity, stability, diversity, and harmony as something that has intrinsic, absolute value in itself." (Stavrakakis 1997, 126).

This was the elevation of nature to a religious authority I had felt at the center. This particular fantasy of nature did two things:

Firstly, it covered over the lack in the Other, buttressing a pretense that there indeed was an Other of the Other: A god, a meta language from which the social and symbolic world could take its cues—it was nature all along!— when even The Other doesn't exist. This has profound political implications. Any belief in the big Other, or the other of the other, and adherence to any other given authoritative notions about how the world works and how we can fix it, possibly foreclose, limit, shadow thought, preventing us from "staying with the trouble".

Žižek underlines in *Tarrying with the Negative* that,

"The crucial, hitherto underestimated ideological impact of the coming ecological crisis will be precisely to make the "collapse of the big Other" part of our everyday experience, i.e., to sap this unconscious belief in the "big Other" of power: already the Chernobyl catastrophe made

ridiculously obsolete such notions as "national sovereignty," exposing the power's ultimate impotence. Our "spontaneous" ideological reaction to it, of course, is to have recourse to the fake premodern forms of reliance on the "big Other" ("New Age consciousness": the balanced circuit of Nature, etc.). Perhaps, however, our very physical survival hinges on our ability to consummate the act of assuming fully the "nonexistence of the Other," of tarrying with the negative." (Zizek 1993, 237)

Secondly, this Green Fantasy, with its claim that rectifying the wrongs of industrial man is the path to reinstating an original harmonious state, offers a new fantasy about how to go about this path: The Conservation Fantasy.

### **3.4.2 Conservation Fantasy**

How did this fantasy emerge? Let's go over a brief history. Morton explains that 'The "thing" we call nature becomes, in the Romantic period and later, a way of healing what modern society has damaged.' (Morton 2009, 22) Heise underlines that 19th century conservation, initially a matter of protecting spaces by instating national parks and nature reserves, integrated in the 20th century the protection of species with the discovery of extinction as a historical process. This discovery is associated with the conservation motive synthesizing "fears concerning the extinction of individual species in the contemporary age that are often tied up with anxieties over the consequences of modernization and colonization" (Heise 1016, 19).

Van Dooren notes that

"both the term 'biodiversity' and its companion science – conservation biology – emerged in a 'climate of crisis' in the USA in the 1980s (Takacs; Robin 2011). In this context, a focus on biodiversity made life/nature quantifiable in new ways, simultaneously allowing an accounting of, and drawing public and political attention to, the staggering loss of species, ecosystem and genetic diversity (Farnham)." (Van Dooren 2015, 6)

Conservation fantasy is the story that alienated subject, interpellated into the green ideology, tells itself about how to right the wrongs of the industrial man. It posits a nature that is salvageable, proscribes the means to salvage it, covering over the lack in the subject and in the Other. It defines a coherent moral subjectivity based on what this imagined Other of the Other wants of the subject, assigning environmentalism as a core value. It provides enjoyment in the form of self-denial: there's fun in the libidinal negotiation of desire, such as refraining from using plastic straws.



It's fun to refuse to use chatgpt ("Their servers use up too much water").

In the next section, I will explore how the green fantasy constitutes subjects who, in their efforts to salvage nature, posit themselves as saviors and agents capable of affecting change in the world they live in.

It's important to note that even though I will study these orientations under the titles of savior and agentivity fantasies, I don't mean that my interlocutors do not in fact affect any change: In their medical practice, they are indeed helping individual reptiles survive by correcting assaults on their biological substrate, and through the population study they help advocate for the continued protection of the nesting beach. While I believe that conservation is a narrative game, my emphasis on fantasy is not because of the dubious truth value of the claims and convictions of the conservation edifice, or of my interlocutors.

Rather, I seek to render visible what stories undergird their convictions, beliefs, efforts. Fantasy being the relationship that the alienated subject tells to itself about what it desires, what does the desire to be in nature, save the nature signal about the world that my interlocutors seek to render coherent? What is the story being told about nature and alienation here? I ask, what does it mean to engage with nature conservation and not, say, a humanitarian organization in the effort to counter alienation wrought by an unjust and volatile world? What is the specificity of the nature in and upon which my interlocutors seek refuge?

In the next chapter we will see how these fantasies get toppled, in a perpetual movement of alienation and disillusionment with the object of desire. For now, let's move on to the savior fantasy.

### 3.4.3 Fantasy of Saviorship, Ethical Selfhood

*On field duty, Miray worked harder than anyone else, tirelessly, fastidiously. Her transparent face would relax and glow incandescent with the passion of the devout even as her waif figure sweated and slaved in the sand. Her toil made me think of the origins of the word "Passion", stemming from the root pati, meaning to suffer, as in patience. Compassion is sharing the suffering of another.*

*One night on field duty, cloaked in our field habits of black hoodies and shorts, Miray and I crouched behind a silent mother in her egg-laying trance and bid time until she finished so we'd engulf her with the giant L shaped rulers we wielded on our backs. A pair of grim reapers with their scythes, I thought, and shivered equal parts with the jitters and the cold.*

*Miray was conscientious and gentle with the reptile. Her deft hands extracted the tissue samples with merciful efficiency. The reptile nevertheless fought us for her life, lacerating our exposed thighs with her side claws as I seized her and Miray pierced her flipper with a metal tag. "I wish you knew we're doing this for your own good!" Miray cried as she received a final pummeling, and finally let go.*

*"Are we doing this for her sake though?" I asked myself. Indeed, for whose sake were we harassing these individuals? Certainly the population study and sample taking made no improvements on the lives of the individual Reptiles. The benefits that the reptile population as a whole derived from our scientific interventions were likewise dubious: Reptiles weren't invested in the survival of their species.<sup>9</sup>*

All my interlocutors explained their presence at the center in terms of doing right by nature. They all articulated an environmental ethic that compelled humans to do right by the nature they were killing. At first this might strike one as a given: Of course we must, what else? But while the injured reptiles brought to the center attest to the destruction human wreak, it's unclear whether the labor of my interlocutors contributes in any meaningful way to the protection of the environment. The efforts to protect nature appear more as a way to confer coherence to the world than as an actual means of staving off immanent environmental disaster or saving marine reptiles, in addition to covering over a lack in their own self that brings to question their identity. If my interlocutors had been injured by the heteronomous conditions of the social world in which they could not identify with the actions they were taking—the very definition of alienation—, conservation work promised a sense of convergence between what they did and what how they identified: As someone with an ethical stance.

The day after the confrontation-turned-focus group, I approached Miray sitting in the pergola by the dormitories, she was reading Oğuz Atay's *Tutunamayanlar*. I asked her, once again: "Why must we save reptiles?"

*"First off, because they're alive. They have a life, a right to exist in this world, just like we do. And more importantly, the reason it's our duty to protect that right is because we're the ones taking it away from them.*

*Of course, they also benefit the ecosystem. Their presence in the seas makes the oceans healthier for humans too. For instance, they eat jellyfish, which helps make*

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9. Survival and consciousness of survival are distinct registers. We make sense of the world by storying it; survival is a story we tell ourselves about life. The mere continuation or transmission of life is indeed survival in a strict biological sense, but if we take survival to mean an existential goal, a story we invest in, reptiles do not have that. As such, if the conservation effort is taken to refer to making reptiles live, at the level of mere life (if not bare life) then we're not talking about doing anything for the reptile's sake. We're doing something wholly external to them by a tautological movement of valuing life for the sake of life.

*tourist areas safer for swimming. They clean the sea. By feeding on seagrass, green reptiles act like the gardeners of the ocean.*

*But above all else, beyond any benefit or harm: they're living beings. And they're living beings that do us no harm. Yet we still go and make their lives hell—just for selfish reasons like money, tourism, the economy... It's not just me—every volunteer who comes here, you too—we all feel a kind of responsibility.*

*Because out there in the world, we don't really learn much about reptiles, we're not even aware of the damage we're doing to them. But almost every animal that ends up here is here because of humans. It's very rare for an adult reptile to come in for natural reasons. That alone shows how we're hurting nature for no real reason. And it's not just about reptiles. We humans—we just can't seem to exist without destroying something. And the fact that we're destroying everything... it's terrifying."*

The sentiment that we humans are tasked with righting the wrong that humans wrought on the environment was one that got repeated across interviews. This allowed my interlocutors to claim a rescuer identity, associated with being of benefit to the world through their labor.

Altay, the camp coordinator, had previously been employed at a tourism agency in Bodrum where he worked under the pressure of a sales goal. He explained that the work with reptiles, despite the low pay, was one with spiritual satisfaction because it allowed him to see the benefit he had been to the world.

*"I'm 40 years old—I've done all kinds of jobs. There are far worse places than this, some that call themselves "corporate" or sell lies. Like that tourism agency. I didn't feel useful there. What does it matter if you sell three-four tours, do some accounting... It all turns into robotic routine: work home, home to work, work to home. But here, you get a bit of spiritual satisfaction. When I'm working with a reptile, I feel useful, my work feels meaningful. Like, when you're taking it out of the tank to feed it, you're holding its leg... or when you're placing an injured one on a stretcher, you're holding up the IV bag, holding the animal... There's no money pressure there. No one's breathing down your neck to sell this or that while you're feeding a reptile. That's what I love.*

*I've done everything—accounting, procurement, even earned more money—but I've come to see that it's not just about material gain. It wouldn't even matter if it were reptiles or trout. When you put effort into something and see that it's going well; it's fulfilling. One reptile, Helios, started eating without a tube after three years and I was over the moon. I never thought he would, but when he finally did, I was so happy. It's not a small feeling—it's real, deep satisfaction. Even if it were growing*

*trees or planting a forest—you're seeing the impact of your effort, and that alone gives joy."*

Recall when during the focus group, Doğuş had express similar pride at having seen the amputee reptile Xena finally eat without a tube.

When Tolga, a volunteer, told me he felt like the reptiles were asking for help, I asked him if he would define himself as a helper to reptiles:

*"Not exactly a helper. It's more about trying to recover what we've harmed. That's the real goal. Because if it weren't for humans, these animals wouldn't need help—they've survived this long on their own. But now, with all the external threats, their existence is in danger. So I wouldn't call it "help"—let's say support. We're doing our best to give them that."*

When I asked Kerem what he felt about reptiles, his answer also emphasized that the responsibility falls on us to help the reptiles because they ask for help, having been injured:

*"It's not about reptiles specifically—it's just that, it's a living being. Think of it like a cat or a dog, a creature without a voice. It wants something from you, but you can't understand it. We can't understand animals. But in the end, it's come to you, injured, broken, asking for help. It's not necessarily because I love reptiles or because I enjoy doing saving them. But if that animal has ended up there, then it's my responsibility, and I have to do everything I can for it. That's how I approach every job I do."*

*In boating, that boat is mine, that customer is mine—I try to keep that customer happy. It's the same here: an injured animal shows up, tangled in fishing line, and it's counting on me. It doesn't have hands or feet to fix itself. So when you help it... or when you carry this weak, exhausted animal in, and then months later release it back to the sea—you feel joy. You think, I really cared for this animal. I did my job well."*

There is nothing surprising that giving an injured animal the gift of health makes my interlocutors proud. "You don't have to try to understand it. Saving those animals just feels natural to us. It makes us happy." Şule had said.

Where is the fantasy? Doesn't nursing an animal to health render them saviors for real? I argue that the truth value of the assertion is irrelevant (although I would also cast doubt on it: Is it still rescuing if the reptile isn't aware that it has been saved?). Which is not to say my interlocutors are delusional. As I said before, I contend it is fantasies all the way down—we are only trying to uncover what this particular narrative frame is saying.

What makes it a fantasy is not the truth value but the fact that the desire to save the reptiles tells a story: That evil human forces are injuring innocent creatures, who, despite their powerlessness, deserve life; that saving them is possible through ethical acts; and lastly that my interlocutors are moral people who are able to fix the evil wrongdoings of the evil human forces through their labor. This is a fantasy that renders coherent both the world, offering an explanation about how the world works, and my interlocutors' selves, giving an explanation about how to fill the lack in their cores and in the world.

#### 3.4.4 Fantasy of Agentivity

*The news of Tolga's imminent arrival at the center sent waves of jubilation among the seasoned staff. Something of a legend in the center, Tolga had been coming here every summer for the past 7 years as a volunteer. His field experience, confidence, and efficiency meant he was worth tens of green volunteers. People spoke of him with deep reverence.*

*Out of a compact mountain jeep decorated with stickers denoting corporate sponsorships emerged a tall and athletic man with his long grey hair in a headband. I'd later learn that he was in his early 50s, but looked at least a decade younger.*

*I was nervous to be paired with Tolga on my next field duty. I had found field duty with Miray to be brutal, because she took her work so seriously and made sure to take each measurement to perfection, refusing herself (and myself) breaks. More than once I noted in my field journal, often to suppress my mounting frustration with her fastidiousness, "We've been out on the field for more than 11 sleepless hours, I'm exhausted, how is she still going on?". As Miray's senior on the field, and as an older man, I expected Tolga to run his field duty with an iron fist.*

*Here is how that night went: After a silent start, we took a break about an hour in, a first for me on field duty. He offered me a much welcome cup of warm coffee from his thermos.*

*Tolga was not a chatty man, but he was polite, soft spoken, and willing to entertain my curiosity. I learned over the course of the night that he had been born in Germany, but grew up in Turkey. He studied civil engineering at a high ranking Istanbul university, then went on to build a respectable career in it. He was a mountaineer: At first, his outdoors adventures were self funded but as he made a name for himself, his climbs started to receive sponsorships. Through them, he had climbed the highest peak of Mt. Everest, spent time in Africa.*

*After the July 15 2015 coup attempt, he made the sudden decision to quit his job, and dedicated himself full time to the outdoors. It was from Tolga I learned about KuzeyDoğa, the wild bear and eagle conservation center in eastern Turkey, and of the Sea Shepherd fleet, an ocean conservation organization that patrols seas around the world.*

*When we came across a nesting mother, Tolga produced a digital laser ruler, decimating the time it took to take measurements. He recorded the data on a custom app on his phone instead of in the field notebook. Skipping the arduous process of administering 5 anti-predation cages together on top of a nest, he fixed only one. “No need” he explained.*

*We took more breaks. “You have to be taking breaks. You’re human, you need them”. When he saw reptile tracks that required a decision as to whether or not to record their data, he made the choice with an eye for efficiency, rather than a rigid adherence to code.*

*Around 3 AM, Tolga declared it was time to rest. “But what if reptiles come out to nest while we rest?” I asked. “We need the rest to go on.” Tolga replied. We took a nap at the far end of the beach.*

*We got up a few hours later with the first rays of sunshine for our trek back. Tolga put on a classic rock playlist on his portable speakers. It was a glorious morning, I was filled with joy at the pleasant fatigue that signaled a field duty almost completed, thankful that I got to see the clear sky and the ethereal shades of green and blue cheering me on in the slant of the morning sun. For the first time, I returned from field duty with a smile on my face.*

*Everything Tolga did had made perfect sense to me. If this mode of field duty was possible, why were my colleagues putting themselves through torture? What was different in Tolga’s approach to the conservation work?*

In the first chapter, I explored Miray’s alienation through the clash of the symbolic identities available to her; and Kerem’s through his loss of autonomy within the military edifice. Alienation, as Rahel Jaeggi frames it, can also be understood as relationlessness: the sense that there is no meaningful connection between one’s subjectivity and the world in which one acts (Jaeggi 2014). In response to this felt ineffectiveness, this experience of having, at best, partial agency at the mercy of vast forces beyond their control, my interlocutors found a renewed sense of agentivity through conservation work.

Their direct, embodied engagement with the reptiles, coupled with the broader narrative of helping to save a species, enabled them to feel that their actions had

real consequences aligned with their intentions. Rather than functioning as passive cogs in impersonal and oppressive systems, the interplay between a rescue fantasy and the narrative of conservation allowed them to experience themselves as agentive subjects, as people whose actions mattered.

When I asked Miray why she had initially come to the center she explained, “At first I came here not for the reptiles but because I thought it could provide my own space for me, that was it. But then I realized, this place isn’t just ours, we share it with other creatures. To be able to do something so they have their space too, to be able to do it every single day feels so good. It makes me feel like I’m useful. At the same time it makes me feel insignificant, like I’m only one part of a great system.”

Remember that Miray had come to the center after she had defied her father, choosing to take off her headscarf despite the pressures of her community. Her assertion that she’s able to do something to allow the reptile to have its own space, sequestered from the intrusions of the human forces, rang to my ears as a metaphor for her own plight.

Miray continued,

*“In fact for me to be human means to know that your actions have consequences. Humans have the power to set things in motion. Imagine, the story of the animals and the nature, alive since time immemorial, changes rapidly the moment humanity comes on stage. They all start falling apart, rapidly. Humans are a catalyzing force, that’s what it means to be human. I disagree with the thought that a mere human cannot affect change in the world. No. Just as the plastic trash one person litters into the sea can strangle a reptile, refusing to litter can save that reptile’s life.”*

This quote makes explicit a triple narrative: 1) Nature, without humans, is static and harmonious 2) Humans are a harmful force 2) Human agency is what decides the fate of nature. This is precisely the narrative of green fantasy.

Danowski and Viveiros De Castro’s *The Ends of the World* take narratives about the anthropocene seriously, approaching them as thought experiments about “the downward turn of the Western anthropological adventure, that is, as efforts, though not necessarily intentional ones, to invent a mythology that is adequate to our times.” (Danowski and Viveiros De Castro 2016, 6). To underscore, my concern is not with the truth or falsity of my interlocutors’ statements, but with how they formulate these fantasies or narratives in the intersection of lived experience and the social milieu. The dominant discourse and fantasy of conservation, what Stavrakakis and I criticize as Green Ideology, provides the immediate fantasy context where the heteronomy that alienated my interlocutors is alleviated through an foregrounding of

agency. In this fantasy, conservationists are positioned agentive subjects, inherently by merit of their humanity, and grammatically, as the subjects acting on mute and docile objects.

Miray's sentiment of being useful and beneficial via one's labor was also one that got repeated across my interlocutors. In the previous section Altay had explicitly contrasted the alienation he felt in his office job, using descriptors like "robotic" and "mechanical", with the feeling of effectiveness in the world ("you're seeing the impact of your effort, and that alone gives joy").

Altay and the resident biologist Koray had both expressed their efforts in terms of influencing the K12 school groups who they guide around the tanks, giving presentations about plastic pollution in the sea. Altay told me,

*"When children ask me something, or when a reptile who cannot dive finally manages to dive, it makes me happy to think I had the smallest contribution. We need to turn towards children: You can't change an adult who doesn't care, but you can save his kid. Through a child, you can save the reptiles, you can save the whole country. When I'm at my lowest, I tell myself if I can change a child I can change something in the world."*

What Altay recounts is the opposite of a *relation of relationlessness*. When he believes his labor remedying the world in a way he is invested in, the congruence between his intentions and the supposed outcomes makes him feel agentive in the world.

Recall that when I met Kerem for the interview, he had quit the center to captain his own tourist boat. He explained to me the reason he had quit after 7 years was because he felt he was being bossed around, given orders by a new manager, and that he preferred being in charge of his own daily routines.

*"When I first started working on the boats, I asked myself: what's my role here? And honestly, that's where I'm happiest: On the boat, taking people around, making sure they have fun, feeding them if needed, and dropping them back at the dock with a smile. That's what I'm really about. I can't work under orders. I just can't function like that anymore."*

Then he tied that to his military service;

*"Because I already did, for fifteen months straight. You're constantly being told what to do: pick this up, take that there, do it this way. After fifteen months of that, it started weighing heavy on me. Always working under someone's command. I don't want that anymore. I want a life where I pick up my passengers in the morning, take them around, drop them off. Everything under my control. That's the kind of*



*life I want. [...] I didn't have any issues with the [conservation] job—but after [new manager] showed up, I started to grow cold.”*

In the previous section I showed that he had also said “when you carry this weak, exhausted animal in, and then months later release it back to the sea—you feel joy. You think, I really cared for this animal. I did my job well.”

That he stayed for 7 years at the center after his military service, enjoying contributing to the treatment of a sick reptile, only quitting with the arrival of the bossy manager, implies the center and the conservation work promoted an exercise of his autonomy and agency.

I asked Tolga what made him feel satisfaction with his efforts at the center. Since he was a volunteer and not a worker at the center, I was hoping to understand what was the pull-factor that made him dedicate 4 months of his time every year to this endeavor. He thought I was asking him when he would find satisfaction and be done.

*“There is no such thing as satisfaction to be honest, what you do here is routinized. You do the same thing every single night for the four months. So the satisfaction could be this —perhaps I won't live to see it but the future generations— Say if the reptile population isn't in the danger zone anymore— that's satisfaction. You know how they ask, what will you leave behind you when you die? This is clearly the answer for me: I will have left a species behind, or I will have contributed to the survival of a species. That's where I would locate satisfaction.”*

Then I asked him why he thought of his legacy not in terms of his career or mountaineering achievements but of reptiles. *“There's no one there on the mountain to bear witness or applaud you on the mountain, not that it matters. Here you actually come into contact with another, you touch it. That's so special.”*

“What do you mean special?” I asked.

*“Hmm let me give you an example. About 2-3 years ago —I've been coming here for 7 years— I had thought to myself, I am done, I contributed all I could to the reptiles. The next generation can continue the work. Then one night, we came across a reptile missing a hind flipper. She couldn't dig a nest on her own. So she couldn't expel her eggs, which was a fatal risk to her. I dug her nest with my own hands. This something you don't come across much in wilderness. I dug her nest with my own hands, she laid her eggs, and before she returned to the sea she turned back and looked at me one last time. That moment of eye contact must tell you all you need to know. That was when I decided to continue here. There's still things to be done it seems. A very special thing.”*

Here we are seeing both the savior fantasy and the fantasy of agentivity: Given the fact that reptiles are reptiles, with no symbolic or emotional equivalent to the human concept of gratitude, Tolga's projection of the sentiment tells us that he is looking to feel like he makes a difference, that his actions matter in a meaningful way.

He then contrasted the construction industry in which he had built his engineering career, with the night time field duty:

*"Civil engineering is something anyone can do. It doesn't matter if I'm the one doing it, there will always be somebody doing it. All it takes is some education. But this work is different—it takes confidence, courage, strength. I'm drawn to the fact that this is a place where I can use all of my skills."*

My experience affirms that the field duty takes confidence, courage and strength (if they service the expressed purpose is another story). That Tolga contrasts the engineering career, which he frames as impersonal, to what the field demands of the conservationist, cultivatable but inborn virtues, points to the primacy he places on the congruence between skills, intentions, and outcomes. In other words, agentivity.

So why was Tolga's way of doing field duty different from Miray's? I intuit that where Miray's quest for agency was a matter of survival, Tolga's was about self-realization.

To illustrate, on one of our first fields together, Miray and I came across two nesting mothers, and Miray made the decision to prioritize installing a cage the nest that the second one made, hoping to make it back just in the time to take care of the first. But when we came back for the it, we found it completely predated by a fox, not a single salvageable egg was left. Quietly at first, and then in explosive howls, Miray repeated "It's my fault ITS MY FAULT I SHOULD HAVE STAYED HERE GODDAMIT" she violently hurled the heavy equipment to the ground and then threw herself, sobbing and screaming in unrestrained agony, punching the sand until she couldn't anymore. I offered a pathetic consolation because it felt absurd to just stand there ("You did your best"), even though I felt Miray's outburst was of a complexity not readily explained by what I could observe in the moment.

What can we make of Miray's outburst? Was it that she had identified with the plight of the reptile species, or was it because in holding herself responsible for their fate she was reinforcing the sense of agency she had laid claim to? Or was it that in the face of her failure to exercise control over natural processes she was feeling her agentivity challenged?

### 3.5 Silence of the Reptiles

Before moving on to the next chapter where I'll operationalize affect, anger, as an analytical tool to explore how my interlocutors' fantasies interact with the neoliberal conservation context, I want to touch upon a salient point that invariably came up during my interviews.

Almost everyone I talked to at the center brought up the fact that marine reptiles are biologically incapable of producing sound.

It was Miray from whom I had first heard it being articulated. A few hours after that episode with the predated nest, as if to explain her own outburst, she had told me "Holding on to anger is easy. What is hard is to let go and keep living." She had continued, "You know, all reptiles do is leave themselves to the flow, and accept it all. Acceptance without submission. Even when they hurt, even when we inflict pain upon them... They just accept it..." At a later date she had told me, "The reptile has no voice, it cannot scream".

Similarly, notice that Doğuş said about the previous vet, "That guy had told us, 'We become life for those who don't have a voice.'" And Şule complemented "Even street cats and dogs have someone who cares about them. But reptiles? They don't have anyone."

When I asked Tolga if he had a favorite reptile at the center, he replied thus:

"No, not really. I don't make that kind of distinction. The adults have their own beauty, the hatchlings another... Once it's an animal, they're all the same to me. And reptiles have this unique quality: they make no sound. Absolutely none. They're silent creatures. Maybe that silence is part of what draws me in."

"Can you say more?" I asked.

"Yes, their silence and the way, when they come onto land, the salty mucous runs from their eyes like tears. It gives the impression that they're asking for help."

This quote shows me Tolga, like Miray, construes a nature that is static and harmonious until the intrusion of humans. The silence of nature allows any narrative to be superimposed on it, while its systemic processes are elevated to the level of a religious authority—ecological discourse provides the rules and terms where canonic religious text would have filled a few centuries ago.

Kerem had also emphasized the reptile's voicelessness: "Think of it like a cat or a dog, a creature without a voice. [...] It's asking for help"

Koray the resident biologist had told me a story about having had to operate on a reptile without anesthetics. “Even in such a situation the reptile will not make a sound.”

This emphasis on the silence of reptiles is significant due to two reasons:

Firstly, nature cannot talk back in symbolic terms, rendering it amenable to fantastic superimpositions. Let’s compare to a rights based NGO that provides medical support and funding for cancer patients. A cancer patient can complicate or counter a narrative about the saviorship of the NGO workers, they can raise criticisms, or in some way participate in the narrative. Reptiles cannot.

The fact that nature does not speak for itself, nor has fixed meanings, is in fact not tangential but central to the green fantasy. Swyngedouw in 2015 underlines that nature is a floating signifier, and directs us to Morton’s delineation of three interrelated places nature occupies in the symbolic universe:

“So "nature" occupies at least three places in symbolic language. First, it is a mere empty placeholder for a host of other concepts. Second, it has the force of law, a norm against which deviation is measured. Third, "nature" is a Pandora’s box, a word that encapsulates a potentially infinite series of disparate fantasy objects.” (Morton 2009, 14)

Swyngedouw identifies in the attempt to suture meaning to the empty signifier of nature a movement of depoliticization. “Disavowal of the empty core of nature by colonizing its meaning, by staining it with inserted meanings subsequently generalized and homogenized, is the political gesture par excellence of depoliticization – nature beyond the political, hence beyond public dispute.” (Swyngedouw 2015, 34)

This is why it is important to study how certain meanings of nature get constructed in the real world, and how real life longings and desires negotiate the meanings of nature in reference to the social context these suturing moves take place. I argue that my interlocutors’ fantasies present a nuanced picture of these negotiations, beyond what gets documented in hegemonic environmentalism discourse, and practices.

The second reason the reptiles’ silence is significant lies in how my interlocutors relate to them: as companions in introspection, whose plight resonates on a personal level and even acquires a metaphorical interpretive force. In this way, the voice that reptiles lack comes to mirror the voice my interlocutors yearn for in their own experiences of powerlessness.

I observed at the center multiple instances of voices being silenced, and then angry outbursts. In fact, the prevailing affect at the center was one of anger and frustration. How can we account for the anger? I will argue in the next chapter that

where rescue and agentivity fantasies are revealed to be inconsistent, my interlocutors are alienated anew. The traumatic encounter with that which fantasies fail to account for result in negotiations about how they relate to conservation work. I will show these inconsistencies are built into the logic of conservation that takes its root from Green Ideology, the political fantasy that makes nature legible as an absolute authority on one hand, and the object of intervention on the other.

#### 4. ALIENATION: "YOU MIGHT AS WELL GO EXTINCT."

*On my first days at the center, I went around each reptile tank in the visiting area, cooing the sick reptiles who were all older than me and weighed more than I did: "You're so cute aren't you!". I felt silly, but I couldn't help infantilizing these quirky creatures. Tourists did it every day: One lady's voice soared up to an impossible pitch as she cheerfully baby talked to the 38-year-old Ladin, who had spent the last four years of her life passively dragging her plastic-filled invalid body in a tiny tank. It took me a while and some conscious effort to stop referring to the enfeebled reptiles under our care as kids: "It's time to clean this kid's tank" I'd tell Altay Abi.*

*But then, on my fourth day at the center, there was the autopsy. The reptile's dismemberment dis-membered it from a community of souls for me. After the autopsy, I looked at a living reptile. Nothing about it was cute. It was unnerving, repulsive, scary. I didn't know anymore how to relate to the reptile.*

*Doğuş had been particularly invested in one reptile at the center, Emmy, whose amputation scar he cleaned diligently every morning. "And yet, after five months, Emmy doesn't even recognize me.". He had said, smiling.*

*"Our reptile patients stay with us between a few months to a few years, but don't worry, they don't really have the emotional registers to code their time in the tanks as a traumatic experience. They go right back to their old lives when we return them to the sea. For these sick reptiles in the tanks, the tank probably seems like a particularly under stimulating enclave of their natural habitat, nothing more." We would explain to the tourists.*

*The truth of it was, reptiles did not have feelings. "Feelings" are a symbolic construct distinct from biological processes that foreground it. The release of adrenaline, or oxytocin does not equal fear or love. They felt nothing about us, their caretakers, not gratitude, not affinity. I could never relate to or engage with them on the grounds of mutuality.*

*The reptile did not have an inner world worthy of my efforts for empathy, I thought.*

*It completely resisted my superimpositions of human concepts on its experience of the world. So then, what should govern my conduct with the reptile if not human empathy? Why must I strive to protect this utterly alien creature?*

*Around late May, when nesting season peaked, we came across more mothers nesting than we had the capacity to deal with. Every nesting mother meant at least an hour of hard physical labor in the gusty beach. It was common to grind sleeplessly for 12 hours straight, running from nest to nest taking as few breaks as possible, to not lose any fresh nest to a prowling fox.*

*By then, every time I spotted a nesting mother I found myself suppressing anger: “Why do you even have to nest? You might as well go extinct.” I did the work anyway.*

*I felt ashamed and guilty about my own anger, my turning away. I was reminded of Deborah Bird Rose’s discussion of Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*.<sup>[1]</sup> I felt disgraceful having turned away from the reptile.*

*Then I decided to take anger seriously. WHY indeed should I care for this creature? Why was it that whatever we were doing at the beach was supposed to be the right thing to do? Conservation, after all, is but one response that people give to the question of “How do we live together?”. What imbued this way of relating to the environment with moral high ground? Why must we protect the reptiles? If not human empathy, what should govern our conduct to an Other? This was question not of conservation, but of environmental ethics.*

This final chapter will follow three interrelated movements. First, I will examine the ethical justifications articulated by my interlocutors and myself for reptile conservation. Then, I will utilize anger as an analytical tool to trace when and how the fantasies of my interlocutors crack due to the structural ordering of the neoliberal conservation context. Finally, I will show this alienation from their fantasies enables new imaginaries while crystallizing the grounded and positional logic of environmental ethics.

## 4.1 Environmental Ethics

I was but a newcomer to the scene, whereas all of my interlocutors had been living with the reptiles for months. I had been to a single autopsy, my interlocutors had been to many. Why weren’t they repulsed by the reptiles like I was? What kept them going? What was their specific environmental ethic that justified protecting

the reptiles?

Recall that in the previous chapter, when I asked Miray why we must protect the reptiles, she had started out thus: “Of course, they also benefit the ecosystem. Their presence in the seas makes the oceans healthier for humans too. For instance, they eat jellyfish, which helps make tourist areas safer for swimming. They clean the sea. By feeding on seagrass, green marine reptiles act like the gardeners of the ocean. But above all else, beyond any benefit or harm: they’re living beings.”

These are two justifications that my interlocutors repeated over and over again: That conservation is in human interest and that reptiles are living beings deserving of life. The third justification, that of a multispecies ethic based on a disavowal of human supremacy, is what I had brought to the field with me.<sup>10</sup>

I argue that these three common justifications are fantasies that cover over the fact that conservation really lacks foundational or essential ethics. In its absence, these fantasies are what renders conservation desirable. I argue that in this way, fantasies are essential to our ethical self-fashioning: They provide the basis for acting with accountability to Others when outside explanations prove vacuous.

#### **4.1.1 Conservation Is Beneficial To Human Lives:**

It’s easy to have recourse to the benefit of a species to the ecosystem or to humans when justifying the need to protect them. We cannot afford to let bees go extinct, who would pollinate trees! But when it comes to a species such as the panda or marine reptile, things get complicated. Sure, reptiles might be eating jellyfish, keeping the beaches nice. But is that really essential? Will saving pandas help my grandchildren in any tangible way?

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10. In this novel, the main character David is an exterminator at a pound where he’s responsible for cremating dogs that don’t get adopted. He forms a bond with a dog called Youngfella, but then exterminates it anyway when it doesn’t get adopted. David’s turning away from Youngfella’s invocation make kin with David is the eponymous disgrace. Rose relates this to Levines’s refusal to consider Bobby, a dog that adopted him at the labor camp when he was a POV, as a subject of ethics to save the idea of man.

“We are clearly in the presence of sacrifice. But why is Youngfella disposable? Levinas gave up Bobby to save the Idea of Man. What does David save in giving up Youngfella? On the face of it, David is sacrificing the dog in order to save both the boundary between human and animal and human control over that boundary.” (Rose 2011, 38)



#### 4.1.1.1 Green Fantasy, Conservation Fantasy, neoliberal conservation logic

Previously I had discussed Green Fantasy and its attendant Conservation Fantasy in terms of their positing a salvageable nature, covering over the unbearable lack that “salvageable, harmonious nature” did not exist. Neoliberal conservation logic is the conduit for these fantasies to play out. In other words, it is in the mechanics of neoliberal conservation that green fantasy is put into action.

Neoliberal conservation reframes the paradoxes and ecological damage caused by late capitalism in terms of management and market optimization. According to Escobar, “The notion that nature and the Earth can be “managed” is a historically novel one. Like the earlier scientific management of labor, the management of nature entails its capitalization, its treatment as commodity.” (Escobar 1996, 49). He goes on to explain that the objective for the management of nature is the survival of capital, not nature. Expressed as such, biodiversity conservation —the response to the anthropogenic endangerment of nonhuman life— ascribes value to nature for its potential to generate capital.

Any claim that justifies the protection of a species based on their ecological or economic value for humans is really the instrumental logic of neoliberal conservation, not an ethical stance.

The center is a textbook example of neoliberal conservation. In this logic, if a part of nature is being bracketed off from extractive use, this bracketing-off should be justified in terms of capital. At the center, this bracketing off is framed in terms of generating tourism profits. So the protection of the reptiles keeps beaches nice for the beach-goers, and pulls tourism income to the country!

Here is how the green fantasy of a harmonious nature salvageable by human acts interacts with neoliberal conservation by packaging nature in consumable terms:

*Monday, Thursday and weekends were busy days at the center, when mass tourism operators brought in flocks of European vacationers, smallest of their groups comprising 30 people. This number could go up to more than a hundred in the off-season month of May. That Saturday, everyone at the center braced themselves when a tour bus appeared at the end of the driveway, but we all knew the burnt would be borne most acutely by those on info duty.*

*Info duty was only in part about providing information, it also entailed surveilling the tourists lest somebody dropped their phone in the tanks, knocked on tanks to provoke a reptile, dipped a hand in the water, or tried to touch a reptile.*

*Another part was selling “gifts in exchange for donations”—their purchases would help protect the reptiles! The narrative went.*

*Laid out over the info desk were notebooks, tote bags, and T-shirts with an ugly graphic design imploring humanity to save the reptiles. The sales of the gifts was as soul crushing as any retail job, with the tourists swarming over the products like zombies, ripping the clear plastic bags to try on different sizes, shoving cash into my face while I scrambled to count their change and arrange the jumbled items back into a respectable display. In the meantime, tour guides would scream memorized commentary from atop the elevated viewing platforms by the tanks. Tour groups signaled a pandemonium of noise and disorder for both the reptiles and the center staff.*

*The T-shirts were sold for 10 Euros, other trinkets for 1 or 2. Some tourists dropped banknotes of 200 TL or so into the donation crate, which the camp coordinator deposited to the bank every afternoon. However much income was being generated on a given day seemed picayune to me—what is 100-150 euros a day compared to the expenses the center must incur daily?*

*On that Saturday, while I was actively dealing with a particularly exasperating tour group, the slimy tour guide attending to them came up to me for the asinine small talk: “Don’t worry that there aren’t so many tourists yet, you’ll get all the tourists you need once the season is in full swing”. I was overwhelmed with the work, and concerned for the sick reptiles whose peace was being rudely violated in that moment, so I snapped at him: “May they never come, this is a place of healing for the reptiles for god’s sake!”*

*The guide’s bloated face turned red with disdain, and he put me in my place: “How do you plan to run this place if tourists don’t come? Tourists complete this whole scheme”.*

#### **4.1.2 Multispeciesism Over Human Supremacy:**

I had started this journey of doing ethnography with a grand claim to wield anthropology to understand other species, shed my anthropocentric prejudices, see the world from an utterly alien angle. I was going to do reptile anthropology, understand the world as it appears to a reptile, in order to figure out what a true coexistence, generative co-becomings with members of our earth family could look like. What was the alternative to the unfettered exploitation of nature? What did it mean to truly recognize the human as a humble member and not the master of

the world?

When I got to know reptiles though, I found myself angry and resentful, not replete with a renewed appreciation for their right to exist, or privy to a multispecies wisdom.

How naive I had been! How could I possibly think I could be an equal to a reptile, that it could be a part of my earth family, my kin! The reptile was not my family, it was a freaking reptile and I was a human. I was utterly shaken to realize the basic fact that I was a completely different species with a different set of life circumstances, from my very biological makeup to what governs my every day world. How had I ever thought I could understand and then elevate the reptile into equal grounding with humans? Multispeciesism was an entirely human concept, an anthropocentric, hubristic fantasy.

So multispeciesism as a *multispecies* ethical imperative fell through for me. The argument against human exceptionalism in favor of multispeciesism emphasizes that it's the way we relate to the animals and not their inherent qualities that makes us justify killing one for food and loving another as pet. "Lambs are just as entitled to dignity as dogs" multispeciesist public discourse exclaims. While undoubtedly stemming from a virtuous consideration, such framings rely on aesthetic and affective registers emphasizing that animals are beautiful, innocent, relatable. The radical alterity of non-humans is subsumed through images of children hugging a lamb, a cow licking the head of her sow, a colorful shot of chickens looking endearingly befuddled, dorky. It's rare to come across a plea for multispeciesism that doesn't invoke the humanness of animals.

I would argue after my time with reptiles that even just talking about dignity, equivalence, rights, and multispeciesism itself are utterly human concepts. These are narrative framings—which is not to say they are not valid, but they do not refer to a sovereign principle independent of humans. Just like the story that humans are outside and above nature and other animals, multispeciesism is a fantasy in the Lacanian sense. On its own, it's not an ethical principle that discusses how to act towards an Other, and why.

Another way of framing multispeciesism perhaps is to recognize that the ethical imperative behind it is precisely a recognition of their radical alterity, the irreducibility of the other into a register of sameness. Reptiles might be a completely different species, dignity might be a human concept, but if we respond to the ethics they call forth in us, while fully recognizing it might not correspond to anything in the other whose inner world we may never understand, that's an ethical stance immune to attempts to universalize ethics on the basis of overarching principles. It's an

interpersonal ethics, based on subjective desire—the justification of fantasy in the Lacanian sense. This brings us to the Life argument:

#### **4.1.3 Life Is Valuable:**

My interlocutors frequently invoked that reptiles had to be saved because they were living beings. What did this mean? Mosquitoes were also living beings, but we have no qualms exterminating them. Further, who was to say life was inherently valuable? Wasn't this homologous to the pro-life arguments that placed the value on an embryo independent of the context of its life—the body and the suffering of the mother?

So, the argument that life must be sustained was tautological and even reductionist in many senses. Ladin, the 38-year-old reptile who had ingested a foreign object that left her unable to feed or dive, had been being kept in a tank at the center for more than 4 years. The vet technicians would haul her out of her tank every morning to syphon food into her stomach with a feeding syringe they'd push into her throat. Was life really so precious that she had to barely live?

On the level of individual reptiles, I thought life argument had certain purchase as an ethical imperative. But this imperative, rather than being based on the value of bio, or a species-wide right to exist, seemed to invoke a Levinasian interpersonal ethics.

Levinas says that the face of the other compels us not to turn away. As Ruti summarizes:

“Arguing that it is not the subject's own death, but rather the death of the other, that matters, Levinas builds a relational ethics that posits the subject's responsibility for the other as unconditional and irrevocable. The vulnerability of the other as “face,” Levinas argues, “interrupts” the subject's complacency of being, inaugurating an ethical demand that cannot be ignored.” (Ruti 2015, xi)

On the level of individual encounter, “life” worked as an ethical imperative. But on the level of species and conservation, it did not hold. In effect, we were subjecting individual reptiles to violence in the name of conservation. The nighttime field duty at the beach for the population study had the mothers subjected to senseless violence that we believed would eventually contribute to the survival of their species. If conservation was predicated on the sacrifice of the dignity of individuals for the

sake of a species, the value being upheld there wasn't that of life, or the invocation of a face to not harm it.<sup>11</sup>

This was where conservation differed from care ethics, this was where there was a difference between somebody leaving out cat food in Istanbul, and the conservation efforts mobilized to save a species. Conservation was a political mission, a biopolitical mission in fact; but the way my interlocutors conceptualized their labor for the reptiles was a matter of interpersonal care ethics.

When they emphasized a reptile being a living being, thus worthy of saving, they were invoking the responsibility they felt engaging with an individual, be it when they encountered one in the field having a hard time building her nest, or the ones they gave medical care to. But the exercise of violence in measurement and sample taking for the population study had to be fitted into the fantasmatic explanation of conservation if it was to avoid blemishing the ethical claims of my interlocutors.

I observed that “they are living beings” argument was really the core of my interlocutors’ dedication to working at the conservation center. They felt their labor was meaningful, useful, ethical when they interacted with the reptiles, tended to their wounds, fed them, saved their nests; not when they were filling out the population records book. The very embodied, affective, sensorial, tactile engagements with the reptiles was the saving grace of the conservation work.

Therein lied the paradox: Neoliberal conservation is not motivated by ethics, it is motivated by biopolitics, in service of capital— “how do we make endangered nature sustain our exploits of it?”, it asks. Where my interlocutors were concerned with the reptiles on the level of the individual, conservation was about species preservation on the level of the population. Conservation’s underlying logic, especially in the neoliberal context as I touched upon earlier, was to render reptiles legible to capital, not to uphold the value of their lives or lifeworlds. The contrast between the affordances of conservation work in enabling ethically motivated, embodied, interpersonal (and interspecies) encounters, and its structural orientation towards capital in essence, resulted in moments of rupture.

These ruptures are the moments that revealed conservation work as such was not about saving reptiles out of a responsibility for their Levinasian Face, but about managing the degree of their extinction. In other words, certain moments revealed that conservation edifice did not merit the ethical valuation my interlocutors had been reading their labor through.

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11. There is another salient justification, that humans are responsible for correcting the wrongs it has wrought upon other species. Because this justification is problematized as Green/Conservation Fantasy in the previous chapter, I will not discuss it here.

I argue in the next section that these rupture moments, marked by angry affects, reveal inconsistencies in the conservation fantasy, resulting in the breakdown of their agentivity and savior fantasies.

## 4.2 Anger as the Affective Core of Alienation

Zizek recounts a story by Patricia Highsmith in which a group of men in a small town get together and reminisce about a haunted house, they keep repeating that nobody should approach the house because it is haunted, they recount events from their youth where they went into the house for youthful transgressions. This house literally houses and preserves the stories their youth through the prohibitions in approaching it. Its haunted status is like a protection lid on the validity *of their fantasies around who they are as individuals and as a community and how they came to be who they are*. Then, a newcomer to the town goes to the house, inspects it, and then returns to tell the men that the house is not haunted—all he found there was some dirty rooms. As he turns to leave, one of the men attacks and kills him.

Why do the men of the town kill the daring newcomer? Because the newcomer destroys their fantasy. Zizek argues that to dismantle the fantasy frame of someone is the worst sort of offense (Zizek 1991, 7-8).

The reason why it took me a while to realize we were all quietly seething at the center was because the aesthetics of the protected beach were so incongruent with an angry affect. It's hard to imagine pictures of an azure beach, surrounded by lakes and mountains with captions that read #ANGER #RESENTMENT #FURY.

To be sure, anger wasn't the only emotion that prevailed, but it seemed to be the most visible one. In the quotidian rhythms of the center, anger seemed to linger close to the surface in stomping feet, clenched jaws, sonorous draws of cigarette smoke. But it also surfaced in explosive eruptions; ruptures.

Recall that my own anger had proved to be my most potent analytical tool for exploring my experiences at the conservation center—"you might as well go extinct" I had thought with a mixture of resentment and shame and then thought through these feelings in finding the core of my thesis. I started paying attention to when my interlocutors expressed anger.

I will discuss instances of my interlocutors' anger. These instances reveal the cracks in green fantasy positing nature as salvageable through ethical acts, which positions my interlocutors as agentive saviors. These cracks appear precisely because the

conduit for the green fantasy is neoliberal conservation, which, by its very definition, is concerned with the management of natural resources so that capital can thrive on it, not reptiles or people. I argue that my interlocutors apprehend these cracks in the green fantasy with angry outbursts. The cumulative result of these cracks is a disillusionment from the conservation fantasy down the line. Once alienated from their previous desires, they generate new imaginaries and personal goals.

#### 4.2.1 Miray

*I first met the director of the center two weeks into my fieldwork, when he came with a group of personal guests, his students, and some foreign researchers. Prior to his arrival, I had a vague impression that my colleagues considered the director to be a micromanager, but I had heard no explicit criticism of his character. Nevertheless, the air increasingly got charged with nervous anticipation as we prepared for his arrival. There was frantic movement in the center and a heavy, foreboding quiet.*

*When the director did arrive, I had thought he seemed more cheerful than I had expected. But that soon changed. That night, Miray and I were paired on field duty. About halfway into our trek, the director caught up with us and increased the degree of his involvement in our efforts. To call it micromanaging would be charitable—his instructions veered on abusive in their tone and intensity. At one point, he laid down on one of the sunbeds and ordered us to carry iron cages from a few hundred meters away. He could have helped us, if not out of politeness, then because it would have sped up the process for the eggs the cages would protect. He took a nap on the sunbeds while we toiled, only to wake up in time to tell us we were installing the cages imperfectly.*

*It was as if Miray and I were failing at every single task we had at hand, and this failure was due to our character flaws. “If you didn’t follow a gluten free diet you’d be more energetic” he had commented after rudely waking us up after merely 2 hours of rest following a 15km trek. On the trek back during sunrise, his intimidating and callous demeanor with Miray never abated as he chastised her for any and all imperfections, which included being too diligent and precise with her measurement-taking.*

*I was proud of how well I had forced myself to stay composed and not let him see I was fuming. In order to give Miray a respite, I decided to keep the director occupied with my questions.*

*“What is the ethos of reptiles?” I asked him. “Just as the nomadic Turkic people*

*gather their yurts and go wherever they like, reptiles are enmeshed with the Turkish culture. They are the symbol of moving with determined, steady advancement". He replied.*

*I asked him, "Why are you protecting the reptiles?" "Everybody has a niche in nature. Mine is to protect the reptiles, and regulate this ecosystem, so I control the population of reptiles, of the foxes who prey on them, and uphold the rights of the farmers that the foxes would disturb." We were passing by the bathing part of the beach where the first of the workers of the facility were setting up the sunbeds before opening time. The director waved at them, "you see, I'm so egalitarian I would even greet..." He paused for a moment and pivoted the sentence "even the facility workers have a niche in this world... The center owes its success to my involved participation, you know."*

*Once we had finally made it back, before we even had a chance to go to the bathroom, the director stopped us in front of his guests and yelled: "I allow these girls to rest—they are useless as they are, I don't want such ineffective, sluggish workers". After he left, Miray slammed herself into the office, I rushed in after her. Between sobs she tried to muffle, Miray cried "He doesn't even see us as human! I want to learn more about the reptiles, I want to protect them, but he wouldn't ever see me as worthy of doing conservation. I'm so scared I won't amount to anything!". She cried and cried while I tried to console her, "You were doing a great job out there.". The director barged in "what's going on with you, are you crying?" He asked Miray. "No, no it's nothing" she replied.*

It's natural Miray would get angry after being subjected to hostile treatment under physically taxing conditions. What about how she contextualized her anger? "He doesn't even see us as human!". Up until the moment the director came in to remind her she worked under his orders, and that all she was authorized to do was to follow his orders and vision, Miray had retained a semblance of agency. The director superimposed his fantasy over Miray's—that he runs the center as the ruler who controls individuals, populations, upholds and distributes lives and livelihoods (of the workers, of the reptiles, of the foxes, of the villagers)—destabilizing Miray's fantasy that she was exercising her agency in service of an ethical cause. Miray's position as agentive savior shifted from being a hero, to being in need of protection from the exploitation and the unchecked power the management wielded over their workers. This breakdown of Miray's fantasy takes the form of her angry tears.

This unchecked power is of course part and parcel of the neoliberal ordering of the center. In Altay's words:

"NGO work is messy anyway. Since it's not part of the industrial sector or anything,



the state just leaves it be. In the end, it's doing the government's job, right? So the state says, "Just don't drag me into it, and don't make a mess of it either—if you're going to do it, then do it. Just don't involve me too much." Why are foundations even created? Because the state can't tax the rich—so instead it's like: "Build three schools and I'll let you off the hook for something." Here too, it's like: "Treat marine reptiles, take care of seals"—whether it's to cut taxes, look good, whatever. "Just don't get me involved by accident" ..."

NGO work is in-between voluntary and formal work. On the one hand, the lack of checks and balances on its operations and its reliance on financial donations renders it structurally insecure for the workers. This is compounded by the fact that it capitalizes on its workers' desire for being beneficial over generating profit—the values-based motivation of the workers is taken as the justification for exploiting their labor.

Ezgi Kan's findings about the top-down structure that renders NGO workers vulnerable to abuse in the absence of state controls in the neoliberal era corroborates what I observed at the centers. The social workers she interviewed suffered the same injustices as my interlocutors:

"These complaints include the non-democratic process of decision-making based on "one-man rule," the employees' needs, burnout and lack of motivation, which the management largely ignores, the non-constructive pressure on the quality and quantity of their work, and the lack of trust in the experiences and competencies of the employees." (Kan 2020, 26).

#### 4.2.2 Kerem

On our meeting at the cafe in November, I asked Kerem why he had quit the center.

*"Like I said, it wasn't the work itself that exhausted me. What wore me out was doing the same task over and over again, going back and redoing the same thing. Running after grunt work. I mean, the work wasn't progressing anywhere. Maybe in the [management]'s eyes we were, but not in mine. Doing the same thing I did three days ago again three days later... That work had no meaning.*

*I don't mind doing things outside my actual job—piloting a boat, carrying wood, that's all fine. But doing the same task ten times over is the problem. When there was nothing to do, they'd just have me carry that wood back and forth. Why? Just so I wouldn't be idle. Because I was getting paid a salary, so the logic was, that I should work for it. That's why we kept carrying things from here to there and back*

*again. That was our main issue. I didn't have any problem with the job itself."*

This quote illustrates the frustration Kerem had felt when his labor no longer seemed to serve the fantasy that he was exercising his agency to save the reptiles. He quit because the fantasy scaffolding for the work gave way, revealing the managerial logic behind neoliberal conservation, whereby he was not an agentive actor in the eyes of the managers but a repository of labor. This dehumanization mirrors what the military machinery had made of him—stripping him of the say he might have in carrying out a task, forbidding his capacity for initiative. He emphasized multiple times that he had no problem with the work itself, but the framing of the work: The conservation fantasy—working for the reptiles—still made sense, but the neoliberal managerial ordering of the work rendered the fantasy impossible.

#### 4.2.3 Altay

*When I went back to the center 6 months after my fieldwork, I found the center in a construction frenzy. There were workers carrying logs around, Altay was helping out. To talk in peace, we had to be away from the security cameras and the meddlesome, tyrannical, sycophantical middle management. We went to a little alcove beneath olive trees overlooking the lake.*

*Altay was customarily cheerful, which I had come to realize was stylistic flair, not necessarily expressing happiness. Smiling, he told me about some of grave offenses against workers and volunteers that took place after I had left. "Sometimes I wish the tip of the little finger of a volunteer would get injured, so somebody would hold the center accountable... If this place burned down, I wouldn't be sad!" He joked.*

*I couldn't stop thinking about that joke. There was fury beneath the light tone. I gave him a call after I had returned to Istanbul. "What did you mean by that?" I asked him.*

*"Let someone hold them accountable for once, that's what I mean. Some things come easily to the management just because they have good relations with the state. You've seen it yourself, we're carrying on loads that weigh tons. If something happens to us, they'll say, "We never told them to carry it, they did it themselves."*

*Because you're an employee here. But for a volunteer... they can't do that to a volunteer. One volunteer actually objected, saying, "Are we here to do hard labor?"*

*In this country, whose rights as a worker are ever truly protected anyway? It's not that I'm afraid—I could go ahead and file a lawsuit, but like... Someone needs to*

*hold the management accountable, without letting the center take damage. Let them feel that they can't get away with everything so easily."*

The context here is that, the conservation center often has the workers do tasks unrelated to their job description, like participate in the construction work, carry heavy loads that should be handled by specialists, or serve the management's guests as housekeeping staff, or paint the container walls. My interlocutors did not have the power to hold the management accountable to the exploitation and mistreatment—the management held more power than the workers, and had the social and financial means to win a legal standoff.

What are we seeing here? Behind Altay's jovial voice was the very anger that I had seen constantly swimming near the surface at the center, ready to erupt. He was responding to the fact that corruption and precaritization of NGO work had left them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, suppressing their voice. This voice with which he would demand to be treated fairly was silenced because he felt the management held corrupt power over him. A volunteer, not being tied to the management's whims, was in a position to embody the voice Altay had to suppress.

Recall the emphasis on the reptile's silence. The workers and reptiles are both unable to voice their grievances. As such, the act of saving the reptiles, the attempt to uphold the reptile's right to life appears to me like a response to the pained efforts of the workers to uphold their own right to a dignified life, not just within the context of the center, but in terms of how they relate to the social world at large.

Altay also emphasized the contradictory impulses of neoliberal conservation:

*"You know they treat us like we're idiots, right? They say they're protecting nature, but we're washing the tanks with chemicals. Just pay a little more and get the chemical-free version. It's like a sinner preaching religion. Or take the gravel that the management made us dump into the woods for the tourists, for example. "Oil companies protect the nature!" They say. You can pull that kind of stunt to the outside world, but don't do it to us, we're on the inside, we see it all.*

*And then they have the nerve to scold you for not throwing things in the right recycling bin. The middle management has this idea, to build a greenhouse here and grow lettuce and peppers for the reptiles in our care. It's all for show—The soil here isn't even fertile, and there's no fresh water. They'll bring fresh water by tanker. They can just call someone for a tanker, they know people. Then we'll be responsible for the maintenance of the tanker. The management thinks our laziness is why we're against the green house. At this point, I'm like: just stop caring."*

Once again we're seeing the neoliberal conservation, as the conduit to the fantasy of conservation, simultaneously engendering and destroying a fantasy. While it enables my interlocutors to interact with the reptiles, providing a space to introspect, feel their labor to be meaningful in their saviorship and agentivity fantasies, it also proves the impossibility of becoming truly agentive within the same system, constantly emphasizing their own vulnerability to the same forces that threaten the reptiles. Just as much as the reptiles, their caretakers feel a need to be saved from the ravages of the exploits of neoliberalism, and even the conservation edifice, which participates in these exploits.

### **4.3 Where Are They Now? The Emergence of New Imaginaries**

The break down of their fantasies, not in the moments of eruptions symptomatic of the Lacanian Real, but in their cumulative effect, alienated my interlocutors to the desires they previously held. Once alienated from her conservative small town, the headscarf, and her role in the gendered political order, Miray had found a new purpose in protecting the reptiles at the conservation center. Once again alienated, this time from the conservation center, where does Miray go?

The end point of alienation isn't disillusionment. Alienation moves more like a vortex than a sad line. It gives way to new imaginaries and fantasies. In this section I will present what new imaginaries my interlocutors relate to following the collapse of their fantasies of ethical selfhood and agentivity in the conservation context. These new imaginaries are not final either. They emerge from renewed self-narratives, as consequential negotiations of how to live ethically, truthful to one's desires and values in a volatile and injurious world.

Alienated anew, Miray doesn't fall into apathy, but develops a new voice, a new vision, a new way to relate to and appropriate her world. Remember in the first chapter, she had explained that as a high schooler, she had had an interest in law enforcement, but hadn't even considered that path for herself—policewomen wore pants and their schools were co-ed. When I visited her in her hometown months after my fieldwork, she was preparing for the police academy exams.

This is the movement and nature of alienation: We are meant to be alienated, latch onto a new fantasy, and then grow alienated from that fantasy one day, and then move on to the next one. This, Lacanian theory argues, is the nature of desire. On a political level, embracing one's alienation opens paths to imagine what could be different—fantasies are built on top of toppled fantasies; coming up with new

imaginaries requires old ones to lose their valence.

Let's look at how my interlocutors contextualized their changed attitudes towards their work at the conservation center, based on when they told me in November.

*"Where did this come from?" I asked Miray. "What is it about being a police officer that draws you in?"*

*Miray replied, "It feels like the best job I could possibly do. It feels like something I can do. I can't say the same about veterinary work. But with this, I feel like I could do it to the best of my ability.*

*Being a police officer is kind of like... catching criminals, right? Police catch criminals and ensure justice and all that... And the biggest crime is murder—so something like that makes me want to catch the criminal.*

*It's a lifestyle that appeals to me. On one hand, it's the feeling of doing something properly. That's my ideal. On the other hand, it's a bit disturbing, but I do want people to follow the rules.*

*If people are infringing on others' rights... I see it less as "catching the criminal" and more as "protecting the victim." [...]*

Miray has not abandoned her ethical stance, it's still about standing up for victims of injustice. But now, she aims to lay claim to a power to keep perpetrators accountable, not just remedy the wrongs. In fact there's a strong sense in which her bid for "lawful" power is colored by her gendered experience of violence. Below, Miray recounts how, when a previous veterinarian had made a disparaging comment about a femicide victim, she stayed quiet and has lived with the weight of her silence since:

*"That guy spoke so casually about a woman being murdered, and I kept quiet so that no one at the table would feel uncomfortable, thinking "Everyone probably agrees with me anyway." But honestly, if I had snapped and said "What the hell are you saying?" and shouted at him—what would he have done, really? Sure, our relationship might have turned bad—but so what? Why was I scared in the first place?*

*If you try to explain something to these people, they'll just say you're rambling. They'll ask, "Why are you trying to make yourself look righteous?" They'll instantly slap on the labels they read online: "pink-haired feminazi," whatever. If you try to reason with them, they'll mock you. If you're being polite, and they'll claim don't understand reality, like they're the ones who've seen the truth.*

*The fact that I couldn't say "What the hell are you saying?" at that table—it really got to me. From now on, I'm walking away from every table like that. When they see me, I want them to say, "If that person's here, we better keep our mouths shut." I*

*want them to feel that uncomfortable—because right now, we’re the ones being made uncomfortable just so they won’t feel bad. Then we turn around and ask, “Why are people like this?” and try to understand them like fools. Why the hell am I the one trying to understand him? At that table, I should have been the crazy one—and he should have had to understand me. I couldn’t do it that day, and it really hurt.*

*We’re going to be strong. We’re going to speak our minds without fear. And we’re not going to try to make the world a better place for them. If this world has to burn, then so be it—we’ll be the ones to burn it down.”*

Once silenced, Miray now boasts a loud and confident voice. From being marginalized and structurally dispossessed of her voice and potentially her life and livelihood, Miray is reclaiming her place in the world despite the Others that would justify her erasure from society, from life. Her stance might not reflect reconciliatory politics to guide collective action, but she has clearly come into herself in being alienated from the structures in which she was subordinated. In Lacanian terms, Miray no longer seeks to be legible by the symbolic order of the Other; she would rather be “crazy”, disturbing the discursive status quo, re-inscribing power rather than trying to conform to its dictates. Alienation, in her case, allows her to reclaim a voice; one that articulates her agentivity and ethical stance with critical, intentional purpose. Of course we would expect the fantasy of realizing this new subject position through becoming a police woman to eventually give way to a new fantasy—but such is how desire, fantasy and alienation works. So long as she doesn’t try to convince herself to betray the truth of her desire for something different, so long as she doesn’t dull her anger with easy fixes, she only stands to gain new imaginaries out of any alienation to come her way.

This holds true for Kerem and Altay as well.

*Kerem had started to captain his own boat after quitting that summer, occasionally he worked in a boat construction shipyard, which he found satisfying, because he got to refurbish and beautify battered boats using his creative capacity. In the future he wants to explore work in fisheries. Here is how he explained to me his future vision:*

*“The reason I want to work at the fish farm is this: In fish farming, you do the milking—you extract these tiny, bead-like minerals and produce fish from them. From eggs. You get to see every single step of that process. That’s the only thing I’m curious about, and that’s why I want to work there—because I’m curious.*

*At the shipyard, you take fishing boats in for maintenance. You paint them, fix this and that, and then put them back in the water. Basically, you take something broken, renew it, and release it back into the sea.*

*Isn't that fascinating? Like, if they don't like a part of the boat, you redesign it—hammer it, break it apart, paint it, modify it, and put it back in the water. There's not a trace left of the old boat."*

Alienation is a generative force, not a destabilizing loss to be mourned. Kerem is no longer searching for a sanctuary, he's seeking to intervene, to control, to participate. He isn't on defense but is driven by an appetite, a curiosity for the processes in which he can participate meaningfully. His new fantasy is one where he steers his boat, steers a process and transforms broken ships into beautiful ones.

Interesting to note here is the content of Miray and Kerem's new imaginaries. Becoming a policewoman and wanting to work at fisheries might at first glance seem like an undoing of the environmental ethics they had built up. This manner of dipping in and out of environmental responsibilities and self-positioning tells us something more nuanced than that people abandon their ethics—I would argue that this shows us how environmental ethics are not stiff, carved in stone even for the people who embody them. Instead, ethics are grounded. Environmental ethics take shape in becomings-with the environment, they interact with their context.

Altay's response to his alienation from conservation work is grounded in pragmatic ethics of self-preservation and situated fulfillment. When I asked him where he'd like to work after this, he replied thus:

*"I'm not idealistic about it. I'm looking into the Mediterranean Conservation Society—that's my first choice. I still want to stay within the field of nature conservation. But if I'm broke, I'll cling to whatever I can—better than being jobless.*

*I'm not some Pollyanna. There's no such thing as a perfectly consistent manager anyway. It doesn't matter—as long as I'm happy, at peace, and fulfilled... I'll just do my job.*

*You overlook the small stuff—washing tanks with chemicals, etc. Who knows what goes on in hospitals, like I told you. If you fixate on these things, you won't be able to work anywhere, or even live your life. That's why I just focus on whether I'm fulfilled. Since there's nothing too disturbing here...*

*I doubt I'll find a better place than this. A place where everything is perfectly ethical? I don't think so. Even Greenpeace, WWF—who knows what would come out of their closets. So I'm looking at it selfishly: Am I fulfilled right now? Yes. Am I at peace? Yes. That's enough. If they ever ask me to compromise on my core values—the things I can't give up—then I'll leave."*

Altay's new imaginaries aren't based on a radical refusal, or a dream of realizing

his creative capacity, but on defining a personal matrix of ethics and resilience. He's looking to find a way to hold the contradictions inherent to institutional care work and his personal values. His new imaginaries may not be revolutionary, but neither are they nihilistic nor apathetic. His imaginaries articulate a resilient life lived meaningfully through spiritual satisfaction.

As for my own alienation from the reptile, from multispecies perspectives, from holding life as an ethical imperative, came a new imaginary: I consider an ethical imperative the very act of intently thinking about our relationship and responsibility to non-humans, or to the others to whom we cannot relate, or reduce to sameness. One could argue this to be the true meaning of multispeciesism. If I'm alienated from given notions of relating to my academic work, from my ethnographic efforts, from how I'm supposed to relate to the reptile, I've found a way to honor my own desire, fantasy and voice in a refusal to re-integrate or buy into these registers I've been alienated from. This thesis is the output of my alienation.



## 5. CONCLUSION

This thesis, based on my ethnographic fieldwork at a marine reptile rehabilitation and conservation center argues two things: Firstly, alienation, far from being a blight upon an otherwise harmonious social existence, is an inherent part of our psychic makeup and has a socially emancipatory potential. Secondly, we make sense of the world through fantasies, and our fantasies define our ethics, including our ethics in relation to the environment and non-human species.

There are two stories about alienation and fantasy superimposed upon one another in this thesis. One is mine: The reflexive methodology of this thesis, and its psychoanalytic theoretical orientation that problematize the notions of alienation and fantasy take their cues from my own alienation. The other is that of my interlocutors. The thesis chronologically follows the different alienations and fantasies my interlocutors cycled through. The first chapter examines what they were alienated from that brought them to the isolated conservation beach. The second looks at how their alienation was percolated through the sieve of the Green Fantasy as the organizing narrative behind the conservation context. I demonstrate that my interlocutors feel themselves to be ethical and agentic actors in their work with the endangered marine reptiles. In the third chapter I study how my interlocutors come to be disabused of their fantasies of ethical selfhood and agency due to the very conservation edifice that had enabled these fantasies in the first place. I discuss how my interlocutors respond to this new cycle of alienation and come up with new imaginaries about being agentic and acting ethically in the world.

The story of my alienation goes thus: At first, I was alienated from my own world, bemoaning the lack of enchantment it must have had in the past, when the world was mysterious still, not yet explained away by positivist science. My ethnographic endeavor aimed to re-enchant the world by gleaning into the perspective of another species and immersing in something more grounded and real than my lacking world—the Nature. Then, once I was at the reptile center, I was violently alienated from both my mission and my presuppositions: Neither could I ever understand the

reptile, nor was nature in any way more real than my own world. There was no outside to “the world”, no reference point it could reliably take its cues from. God WAS dead. Third, I was alienated from my academic hubris: If I was only able to read the world from my very biased, emotionally saturated lens, and considering I was deeply transformed by the fieldwork itself, how was I to describe and translate the world with epistemic pretensions? My claim to an epistemic authority could derive not from academic conventions, but from paying due diligence to the subject that was doing the work of translating the world—from recognizing and studying my own subjective position.

At the end of the third chapter, I discuss the transformation of my interlocutors as they traverse the fantasy, get alienated, and emerge at the other end. I too underwent a transformation. I had started out upset that I was living in a disenchanted world. I finish this thesis fully convinced the world is full of enchantment—any explaining away that has been attempted can be read as a fantasy and ideology responding to a particular set of desires, personal and political.

There is no way to represent the world, make sense of it, make meaning without fantasies. If we are to “protect the reptiles” or do anything to bring our version of a good world into existence, we can only do so through fantasies. As such, it is no ethical deficiency to rely on fantasies to compel us into action. Looking for an overarching, underlying ethical principle outside of us to tell us to behave a certain way, or do one thing over another, is not ethics at all—it’s deference before morality.

In this logic, ethics is about desire. Desire precedes principles because it stems from the unconscious. This is the political potential of fantasies: The unconscious refuses to bow down to symbolic affectations and dictates, it desires with disregard for the symbolic authority of The Other. In other words, we must save the reptiles, not because it’s sensible, but because we desire to do so. The ethical stance there is in reference to one’s own desire and not to an overarching principle.

This is the original contribution of this thesis: I put Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in conversation with environmental ethics through an ethnographic study. I argue that the questions of what to do with nature and endangered species, what the right way to behave towards non-humans is, why to protect or not to protect nature have answers that are psychically ordered. Some of the common answers to these questions that different schools of thought stress are instrumental, focusing on the how to best serve one goal or another. These goals could be to increase the population of indicator species, or to integrate a fishing community into a global economy through sustainable ecotourism development. Some emphasize how environmental ethics transform through history, or how the shifts in the way communities relate to

the environment regulate their access to social or economic resources. Some studies examine how various environmental ethics compete for discursive upper hand in representational politics.

I integrate into this discussion the political thought of Lacanian psychoanalytics, heralded by thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Mari Ruti, Todd McGowan among other giants. The marriage of psychoanalytics with politics is often regarded with suspicion; rightly so, as the attempts to read wide spanning social events as though “society” was an individual have often resulted in reductionist explanations<sup>12</sup> The central premise of Lacanian psychonalytics is that, at the core of the individual psyche lies not its unique essence but a Lack. Since only sociopolitical objects are capable of filling this lack, the subject’s desire for fulfillment is political; the stories it tells itself about its desire are also political. Lacanian thought opens the psyche to politics.

In this thesis, I employ two of the theoretical tools of Lacanian thought: Alienation and Fantasy. I bring these concepts into the field of environmental ethics through an ethnographic study. This is also a novel application of psychoanalytic theory.

The liberties I have taken with the application of theory owe to the intellectual boldness of Ayşe Hoca and Aslı Hoca. It was thanks to them that I was able to assert my voice as one that was entitled to playing with theory as though it was a friend, not an authority. The writing of this thesis was a methodological endeavor in feminist theory, although I only learned to recognize it as such after I started writing. Kathy Davis, in her chapter on doing feminist theory titled “Making theories work” asks:

“How can we engage with theory in such a way that it is not reduced to the tame and obedient performance of the ideas of others? How can doing theory become a personal, passionate and creative enterprise-something that enables us to take risks, embark on unexpected paths and, in so doing, command our audience’s full and appreciative attention?” (Davis 2014, 174)

Theoretically, my goal in this thesis was to instill in the reader a transformation I have experienced through the application of Alienation and Fantasy to a real-world experience. I began to see fantasies everywhere. From being a drab, sterile world lacking glitter, from being made up of facts and plastic, the world took on a fantasmatic, fantastic framing. It was reenchanting.

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12. One need only listen to college dorm discussions analyzing mass movements against autocratic rulers as Oedipal rage.

Now let's look at the world as an enchanted place: I believe that there exists somewhere a lover with an unmatched funny bone to tickle, that there are villainous people stirring up trouble in the world, that I'll die in a water war when I'm 70, that my grandchildren will subsist on protein bars in the nuclear shelters speaking transhuman-bimbo-radiation-pidgin. The world is chockfull of fantasmatic stories.

Another transformation that I experienced is a reconsideration of alienation as an emancipatory feature of our psyches. I came to think that when we feel alienated, the ethical thing to do is to honor the alienation, not to get over it. Imagine if Miray had tried to find a way to lull herself into being happy wearing her headscarf, if she had decided it was better to find a way to reintegrate into the community she was alienated from. Imagine if Kerem had stayed on at the center, spending the rest of his life being ordered around, saying "such is life". Imagine if instead of this thesis, I had written a boring one. Staying true to one's desires, embracing one's alienation, not giving ground to overarching morals is ethics.

To conclude, what is the ethical way to act towards reptiles? It is to stay with the contradictions of our ethical orientations, not taking the easy route to concur with the available answers, but to force ourselves to come up with our own answers without flinching <sup>13</sup>.

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13. If one does flinch, the best course of action is to weave the flinch into one's methodology. Trust me.

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