**Just Warriors *and* Beautiful Souls**

How the ideological performances of the Women’s Protection Units (the YPJ) are contributing to the process of collective identity within the female military units in Rojava from 2012 to the present

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**Abstract**

*This research aims to look beyond the military identity of the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) that is publically portrayed in Western media. Through fieldwork conducted in Rojava (West Kurdistan) and using the framework of social performance theory, this paper examines the private performances within the all-female military units to see how the dramatisations of their values and beliefs contribute to the process of collective identity of the YPJ. The thesis argues that it is of central importance to study the conscious and unconscious messages conveyed during their private interactions in order to understand the multifaceted nature of their identity. The findings demonstrate that the YPJ’s public performances portray a narrow message of a militarised collective identity, but their private performances illuminate their ideology, their feminist foundations, and feminine nature, ultimately showing that the military is not limited to the masculine.*

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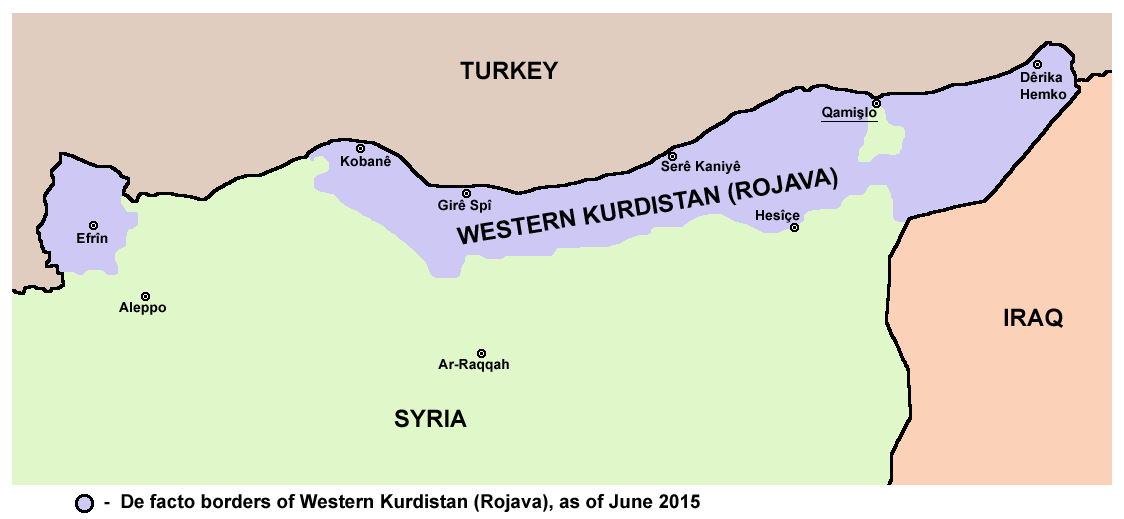
“We don’t want the world to know us for our guns, but for our ideas”

* Sozda[[1]](#footnote-1)

“A commander, a companion, a woman, and a child. Each one of her identities adds a different beauty to her”

* Zilan Diyar[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Map of Rojava**



**Acronyms and Abbreviations**

KJK *Komalên Jinên Kurdistan* (Kurdish Women’s Liberation Movement)

PKK *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers’ Party)

PYD *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party)

YJA *Yekitiyên Jinên Azad* (Unions of Free Women, YJA)

YPG *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*‎ (People’s Protection Units)

YPJ *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* (Women’s Protection Units)

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**Introduction**

Jean Elshtain (1982) disenthralled the embedded archetypes that during conflict men are the “Just Warriors” and women the “Beautiful Souls”; the former isomorphic to masculinity and the latter to femininity. However, contrary to popular thought, militarism and femininity are not always antithetical to one another, and they can instead complement each other in myriad ways.

In December 2014 the *Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê* (Women’s Protection Units, YPJ) made international headlines when they courageously helped to defend the city of Kobanê in Rojava, West Kurdistan, against the uncompromising brutality of Daesh (the self-proclaimed Islamic State). The YPJ have been painted with a broad brush in mainstream Western media as Amazonian type heroines sensationally fighting against their antagonists (Dirik 2014). This particular depiction perpetuates misogynistic imagery surrounding the YPJ and fails to comprehend the ideology and motives behind their struggle. It is not uncommon for women to fight alongside men in revolutionary struggles, but it is the savage character of the enemy they are effectively fighting that makes the YPJ so rare in the eyes of many. Daesh (the terrorist group popularly known as ISIS) have waged a coldblooded war on women, with innumerable accounts of enslavement, kidnapping, rape, and torture. It is therefore clear why an all-female military unit victoriously defeating this brutal force has captured the world; they are challenging the boundaries within the traditionally masculinised military structure and occupying a position normally reserved for men. Their uniqueness, though, goes beyond the military.

The YPJ are not only successfully playing a combat role in the armed struggle against Daesh (Cockburn 2015a). They are also leading an ideological battle in a radically left democratic revolution, something the media seldom reports. Commonly, and especially in the patriarchal Middle East, men are given the voice to define women in the symbolic realms of motherhood, reproduction, and nature. In Rojava, however, equality on the frontline is attempting to be translated into equality in society, and consequently the YPJ are being given the voice to define and defend themselves. Unlike other revolutionary movements where women’s involvement in the military is often not mirrored in other social spaces (Moghadam 1997: 143), women in Rojava *do* occupy leadership positions, they *have* broken societal traditions, and fighting alongside men *has* progressed women’s empowerment and emancipation (Serhat and Servan 2015). This study intends to understand the consciousness of these women that is ignored in mainstream media. I hope to fill this empirical void of knowledge by looking beyond the shallow narrative that presents them solely as an amorphous mass of women fighting a common enemy, and instead attempt to understand their roles in society, their ideological foundations, and their collective identity.

Through the lens of “ideological performances” I hope to understand the multifaceted identity of the YPJ. Much of the academic literature on the dramaturgy of social movements focuses on the effects that large-scale public events have on the identity of groups (Blee and McDowell 2012; Tucker 2010; Alexander 2006). Recently, work is emerging that looks at how performance theories can also be used at the level of social interaction, in order to see how *private* performances also influence the process of collective identity. Due to the central role that ideology plays in the broader social revolution that the YPJ are a part of, I focus on their “ideological performances” (Fuist 2013). “Ideological performances” are defined here as the way in which social actors dramatise their values, beliefs, and allegiances consciously and unconsciously in public and private spaces. To address the aforementioned theoretical neglect on the subject, I concentrate primarily on their conscious and unconscious *private* ideological performances.

To discuss how these performances are influencing the collective identity within the YPJ, I show how the dramatisation of their beliefs, values, and allegiances are placing both themselves, and others, into different “meaningful worlds” (Fuist 2013: 428) based upon shared cultural knowledge and collective acts. In turn I look at how these contribute to feelings of solidarity within the YPJ. I contend the importance of connecting private performances with the process of collective identity. To do this, I highlight how the messages of femininity[[3]](#footnote-3) conveyed by the YPJ in their private performances are not synonymous with the fearless image portrayed in public. Conscious that “femininity” in the military conjures up images of vulnerability and weakness, I instead hope to show how the YPJ are destabilising these traditionally held notions and re-shaping new meaning to the word “femininity” in itself. I argue that rather than these uncorrelated public and private performances being a weakness, they in fact strengthen the YPJ’s collective identity as a unified social actor.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the first chapter, the overarching framework of symbolic interactionism is introduced, before discussing the current theoretical debates surrounding social performances and collective identity formation. From the theories depicted, the second chapter specifies the analytic frames chosen for this research, and subsequently constructs the main and sub questions. The historical, social, political, and cultural context of the Kurds in Rojava is then explained in order to understand how the YPJ emerged. Conducting fieldwork in a conflict zone requires a detailed methodology; this is outlined in chapter four, as well as the challenges and limitations that arose. With the above in mind, the fifth chapter presents and analyses the private, ideological performances of the YPJ and proceeds to consider if and how they are influencing the process of collective identity within the units. The penultimate chapter will provide a conclusion to the main research puzzle and, finally, I will reflect on the paper, namely the shortcomings in the findings and suggestions for further research.

**1 Situating the Theory**

**1.1 Symbolic interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism provides the overarching theoretical framework for this study, whilst performance theory is used as the lens from which I have built my methodology. Performance theory is a field that stems from the broad approach of symbolic interactionism. Ontologically, this perspective sees social reality as a human construct, built from peoples’ interpretations of the world around them. Symbolic interactionism understands individuals to be performing a self-assigned or social role, and this is the foundation that performance theory draws upon. Erving Goffman is an important voice in both fields. Symbolic interactionism has had been especially formative in the development of his dramaturgical theory, which is the vanguard for the performative turn in social theory.

Although George Mead is the founding theorist in the symbolic interactionist school of thought, his student Herbert Blumer coined the term “symbolic interactionism” and is therefore more often associated with the theory. The main concepts of this perspective are symbols, interaction, and interpretation. Blumer summarises symbolic interactionism as follows:

Human beings interpret or ‘define’ each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. Their ‘response’ is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions.

(Blumer 1962: 180)

Evidently, social interaction and communication between individuals are central to the theory. Rather than other approaches such as Social Identity Theory, which sees human action as reactionary and biologically determined based on static characteristics such as ethnocentrism or rational-choice, symbolic interactionism understands behaviour to be defined as a socially understood interpretation of internal and external incentives. People are active agents, but not fixed or autonomous. Humans are social, interactional and symbolic (Charon 1995: 29); they are perpetually adjusting and developing in response to the active social world around them. It is the meanings that people attach to things that affects human action. These meanings arise from social interaction, which are then modified through an interpretative process between an individual’s own thoughts, and their perception of others (Blumer 1969). The meanings created influence the way people act.

Symbolic interactionists argue that all objects are social products, and thus have meaning, and that most human action is in some way symbolic (Charon 1995: 40). Symbols are created by humans; by attaching meaning to objects – social, abstract, or physical – we redefine them as “social objects” (Charon 1995: 38). They can be anything that carries a specific meaning that is recognised by people who share a culture. For example, the physical object of a flag has little material value yet the symbolic significance humans place onto a flag gives it importance. No object has an intrinsic meaning, rather meanings are built from human interpretations of what objects represent. Thus, symbols are ambiguous as different people will interpret them in different ways. Symbols can be generally grouped into three categories: linguistic, appearance, and expressive. Linguistic symbols represent words and phrases, appearance symbols represent the visible (for example clothing), and expressive symbols are the behaviours of people. These categories prove useful in my analysis as they enable me to explore the significance of the YPJs *nom de guerres* (linguistic symbols), their uniform (appearance symbols), and their behaviour during social interaction (expressive symbols). Symbolic interactionists argue that all “social objects” are created through the symbolic meaning that humans attach to them. We must now look at how this process is achieved.

The meanings that individuals attach to things, concepts, and objects is influenced by their interaction among and within people (Charon 1995: 56). Interaction is twofold: on the one hand it is the internal interaction of an actor talking to the self, thinking; and on the other hand it is the communication between people (Charon 1995: 41). Human action is never based solely on individual rationality or as a reactionary response to a situation. It is a cyclical cognitive process whereby people think, define, form, and transform the situation they are in and act accordingly. So, it is through interaction that we assign meaning to things - but these meanings are not fixed, they are flexible, creative, and continuously re-interpreted. This ongoing interpretation of the meaning of different social objects is what guides and influences the way humans act and behave, and is what society is premised ­upon (Charon 1995: 58).

For this research, of particular importance is the symbolic interactionist view on roles and identity. Role-taking is thought to be done in all interaction with others (Charon 1995: 104). According to this perspective, roles are flexible and negotiated, and individuals act according to how others interpret their social role. Humans are influenced by the roles that others cast them in; they feel they must act in a way that is consistent with the role assigned to them. Nevertheless, individuals also have the agency to shape and form their own role by externally announcing who they are through, for example, clothing. In a way roles can be conceptualised as “human symbols” because no role is inherent to a person but interpreted through interactions (Charon 1995: 151). In Rojava the role of the YPJ was often spoke about, both by the women themselves and others in society. They are not only assigned their military role, as depicted by mainstream Western media, but also social and humanitarian roles. Certain values are attached to the different roles and this appeared to have an impact on the behaviour and identity of the YPJ.

Linking to this is Goffman’s “face-work” in his book *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (1967). He theorises that the “face” is the “positive social value” that an individual claims for herself through interacting with others (Goffman 1967: 5). When she presents a consistent image of the face – consistency being judged by others – she is seen to be “maintaining face”, giving the individual feelings of confidence and assuredness (Goffman 1967: 6). Consequently “wrong face” is when there are discontinuities between external information and the “face”, resulting in feelings of shame and inferiority (Goffman 1967: 8). The expectations associated with an individual’s “face” produces their “social face”. With a “social face” comes standards which she is expected to live up to (Goffman 1967: 9).

Goffman’s theory is very similar to Mead’s social philosophical differentiation between the “I” and the “me”. He argues that the “me” is the part of the self that an individual learns through interaction. An individual observes how others behave and act towards them, she then internalises these attitudes, and resultantly acts accordingly (Mead 1934: 211). This can have both positive and negative effects on an individual. It could, for example, result in an individual internalising feelings of inferiority and acting in accordance, or it could create the Pygmalian effect whereby the greater the expectation placed on a person is, the better they perform (Mitchell and Daniels 2003: 229). Goffman’s “face-work” concentrates on positive values assigned to people, whereas Mead acknowledges that somebody’s “face”, as it were, could also have negative connotations. During the analysis stage, I apply Goffman’s “face-work” to the YPJ in an attempt to understand how societal reactions and expectations of the YPJ, especially how they are visibly and verbally mythologised, have an effect on the way they perform.

Overall then, we have seen how, ontologically, symbolic interactionism takes a meso-level perspective which postulates that individuals and society cannot be separated from one another. Owing to the idea that it is people who influence structures and not vice versa, this approach views society as a construction of peoples’ social reality. The leading criticism of symbolic interactionism is that social structures are an epiphenomenon to individual action and it thus does not pay sufficient attention to macro-analysis. Although perhaps limited in its ontology, I would argue that the theory does begin to bridge the gap between structure and agency as it takes into account that structural factors such as social roles, norms, and institutions influence the individual’s process of interpretation.

Symbolic interactionism has inspired the performative turn in social movements. I will show how social roles resemble “stage characters”, linguistic symbols the “script”, and appearance symbols the “costumes” that actor’s wear. The conflict between the “me” and the “I” can be seen as the actor’s ability to convince the audience that their stage character and their self are the same. Performance theories recognise the importance of social interaction in that neither actor nor audience are static, but that they are in a processual relationship through which both are influencing one another. Performance theories are a relatively under-explored lens through which we can view social phenomena through, nevertheless there are varying strands that have been developed.

**1.2 Performance**

The academic knowledge surrounding the performative politics of social movements focuses largely on performances in the public sphere. The idea that everybody performs in their daily interactions is not a new concept; the widely cited Shakespearean quote “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players” demonstrates that the playwright recognised this centuries ago. It was Erving Goffman (1959) who academically converged symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy and the social sciences in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* In his work he uses theatrical metaphors to understand face-to-face interactions; individuals are “actors”, clothes are “costumes”, settings are “stages”, and objects are “props” – all of which constitute the “setting”, “appearance”, and “manner”that contribute to the impressions that individuals consciously give and unconsciously give-off to others (Goffman 1959: 14). Goffman describes “setting”as “the background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action”, “appearance”as the stimuli that informs the audience of the performer’s social status, and “manner”as “the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation” (1959: 32-34). Similar to symbolic interactionism, he emphasises analysis at the level of social interaction. His work built the foundations for a whole body of theory that studies the performances of individuals and groups.

Expanding upon Goffman’s theory, Jeffrey Alexander’s work on performances focuses upon the evolution of social rituals to cultural performances. He conceptualises cultural performances as “the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” (Alexander 2006: 32). His approach intertwines the pragmatic and symbolic elements of performance; he identifies different elements that provide a toolkit for analysis. His six identifiable elements of any performance are: systems of collective representation, actors, observers/audience, means of symbolic production, mise-en-scène, and social power (ibid: 32-33). Systems of collective representation are the recognisable background symbols and the foreground scripts that signify emotional, moral, and existential concerns. Actors are the social performers; if successful audiences cannot distinguish between the performer as a social actor and a stage character (ibid: 34). Observers are the audiences that the performer is acting for and can vary hugely (ibid: 34-35). Means of symbolic production are the materials and objects which the performers use as iconic representations of their motives and moral, they are integral for dramatizing invisible cognitions (ibid: 35). The physical space (or stage) where performances occur is an element of symbolic production. Mise-en-scène encapsulates the importance of time and space; “if a text is to walk and talk, it must be sequenced temporally and choreographed spatially” (ibid: 36). And finally, social power affects the performance process. In the respect that those holding social power can decide what texts are performed, who performs, what audience members can attend etc. and thus holds great significance in determining the success of the performance (ibid). For Alexander, the quality of the performance is integral to its plausibility and is measured through the fusion between performer and audience.

In criticising Alexander’s concept of “cultural performances” for not being inclusive enough, David Apter coins the term “pragmatic phenomenology” (Apter 2006: 220). “Pragmatic phenomenology” embraces discourse, narrative, language and text (ibid). For Apter, the success of a performance relies on its quality; the act of performance is more important than the script itself and is crucial in determining the degree of resonance the performance has with the audience. The “act” is measured on expression, articulation, style and presence (ibid: 227). Apter’s work gives prominence to the aesthetics of the performance, showing a shift in the theory from narratives and language to images, spaces, and style. This is a pertinent part of my analytical frame because ideological performances do not just focus on conscious performances of language and clothing but also on the unconscious impressions that the actor gives off.

This shift in focus to images, spaces, and style is led by Kenneth Tucker (2010). He has swerved the debate away from the moral meanings behind performances and steered it towards their symbolism, and the relationship between aesthetics and social life. His work explicitly focuses on “aesthetic politics”; centrally arguing that visual styles, images, and the use of emotions are all integral for the materialisation of political activities. Symbolism, space, and emotions are central to Tucker’s notion; symbols can advance goals, spaces chosen for performances have significant meaning, and emotions can be a successful mobilisation tool (Tucker 2010: 46). A shortcoming of Tucker’s work is that he only theorises on public performances. However, his focus on symbolism, space, and emotions will prove a valuable lens through which we can observe the symbolic importance of the “props” used and the spatial settings where the private performances occurred, especially when the privacy of the performance itself cannot be guaranteed.

Todd Fuist’s framework of “ideological performances” will provide the first analytical lens for this research as he distinguishes four types of performances which incorporate everyday interaction (Goffman 1959), cultural pragmatics (Alexander 2006), performance quality (Apter 2006), and aesthetic politics (Tucker 2010). “Ideology” is defined as beliefs, values and allegiances, and they are dramatised through “behaviour, language, use of props, and aesthetics” (Fuist 2013: 428). Fuist stipulates a threefold concept of ideological performances. Firstly, through performances both performer and audience situate themselves and each other in meaning systems. Meaning systems are “meaningful worlds” we create (Fuist 2013: 428). This is where the social interaction element of symbolic interactionism becomes germane. The meaning systems created through ideological performances rely on the social interaction between performer and audience. Secondly, performances can occur in public or private, consciously or unconsciously. Thirdly, performances have a multivocal quality. The multivocality of performances is twofold: on the one hand it can mean that different audiences can perceive them in different ways, and on the other hand it means that they can communicate multiple things at the same time to the same audience. Consequently, he categorises ideological performances as follows: (1) public conscious; (2) public unconscious; (3) private conscious; (4) private unconscious.

The aforementioned literature, aside from Fuist, focuses primarily on the former two categories of public performances, and they are often conceptualised as having a tactical use (in identity formation, mobilisation, media attention etc.). The theoretical work on the latter two however, is somewhat lacking. Fuist addresses Apter’s criticism that Alexander’s “cultural pragmatics” theory is not inclusive enough, and synthesises Apter’s emphasis on the quality of performance with Tucker’s emphasis on aesthetics. In differentiating the different forms of performance he begins to converge Alexander’s six identifiable elements and attempts to recognise how they interlink and react to each other, indirectly responding to a criticism from Isaac Reed that Alexander fails to explain or understand how the elements come together (Reed 2006: 147). However, one of Alexander’s six elements that Fuist does not adequately address is social power. The distribution of power in society affects and influences performances. This is a central thought to be cognizant of when observing the performances of the YPJ. They are portrayed in a heroic and valorous light, giving the impression that they hold considerable social power in Rojavan society. What they lack in economic power seems to be compensated with ideological power, and it will be interesting to see how these high societal expectations effect their performances and, subsequently, identity.

**1.3 Audience**

Whether public or private, all performances require an audience. The audience is something that both Alexander and Fuist pay insufficient attention to. Blee and Mcdowell (2012) have conducted the most comprehensive analysis of social movement audiences, and thus their work will be explored in my thesis. They conceptualise audiences as “constructed, meaningful, and influenced/influential” (Blee and Mcdowell 2012). They came to this conclusion by blending three performance studies understandings of what constitutes an audience. Firstly, “performers construct audiences”. This places the agency with the performer, suggesting that they possess the social power to make, regulate, and shape who the audience is (ibid: 4). Secondly, “performers constitute audiences with meaning and value”. This is conceptually similar to the first understanding except performers construct audiences within a specific cultural framework (ibid: 4). Thirdly, “performers assess how audiences are influential or can be influenced” (ibid: 5). This last approach is twofold; performers can influence audiences’ interpretations, and equally audiences can influence the performer’s presentation of self through the way they respond. Blee and Mcdowell emphasise that actors assess and react to the needs of their audiences, and consequently it is the actors that define and redefine who their audiences are (ibid: 16).

Again, their work is focussed on public performances. Furthermore, they, like most performance theorists, draw a clear line between actor and audience which is a restrictive binary. They further place all agency with the performer in influencing the meaning systems and do not sufficiently acknowledge the potentiality of the audience in doing so too. This, along with the other criticisms, will be addressed in the research when discussing how meaning systems were altered due to the cultural knowledge that I, as the audience, gained through interaction.

**1.4 Collective Identity**

Another body of theory that I will be using is the contested phenomenon of collective identity. In this theoretical section my meso-level perspective will become clear. Although I am trying to understand how the YPJs performances are influencing the construction of *collective* identity, I will be observing both individual and group performances of identity within culturally defined places (Fortier 1999: 48), allowing me to consider social norms, structures, and cultural values that govern such behaviour. I will align my position with the theoretical argument that identity is performative and processual.

Theories on collective identity are far and wide, with many gaining widespread criticism in the field. There are rational choice models, political process models, ideological explanations, and resource mobilisation explanations to name a few. However, these all fail to integrate cultural, emotional and social-psychological factors that also influence identity formation (Fominaya 2010: 39). Broadly speaking, the literature on collective identity in social movements can be split into two schools of thought: collective identity as a necessary prerequisite for social movement mobilisation, and collective identity as a discursive process that is constructed during social movements. Put simply, product versus process. The former is more concerned with perceptions of collective identity from the outside, whereas the latter takes a more socio-psychological stance and refers to shared emotion and meaning within movements themselves.

The latter school of thought, social constructivism, shares many similarities with symbolic interactionism, especially their processual approach to social phenomena. Sheldon Stryker’s structural symbolic interactionist theory on identity emphasises the importance of the meanings and symbols associated to people’s positions in society (Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000: 292). For him, identity is not just an internal dialogue within individuals but is also attached to the social contexts those individuals are in. Societal norms, values, and symbols play a substantial role in identity. The social definitions that others assign to an individual, related to their perceived societal position, influences the way that individual then sees herself. Appropriate behaviours that conform to these views are then produced, mirroring Mead’s theory of the internalised “me” being acted out by the “I”, and Goffman’s “social face”. Inevitably, an individual then feels a sense of commitment and responsibility to live up to these social standards assumed to them, so they proceed to act accordingly. The more committed an individual is to an identity, the higher the likelihood is that their identity performance reflects those societal values (Stryker and Burke 2000: 286). Stryker also highlights that cultural values can steer identities in new directions (Stryker 1980). Stryker’s idea that society evaluates individuals based on their commitment to the social standards associated with their role or identity will be particularly relevant for parts of my case studies particularly because of the high expectations placed on the YPJ both internally and externally. Stryker, however, focusses on individual identity whereas this study will concentrate on collective identity. It is at this point we turn to look at the work of Alberto Melucci.

Melucci is a strong constructivist voice on collective identity formation, concentrating on symbolic expression and maintenance (Melucci 1995). His central argument is that collective identity cannot be understood simply as the expression of values and beliefs or as the effect of structural conditions, but rather it is something negotiated and renegotiated during collective action. His processual approach is concerned with the importance of language, rituals, cultural artefacts, and practices that shape and interact with one another to form shared meanings that resonate with individuals (Melucci 1995: 44). Collective identity is never static, it is perpetually moulded and developed within the social field of the movement (Melucci 1995: 50). What is most important in Melucci’s work is that he bridges the gap between individual beliefs and group interaction. The former being a necessary, but not sufficient element. He emphasises the development of collective identity as something that is constructed through daily interaction between movement members. Like Fuist’s public/private distinction, Melucci differentiates between “latent” and “visible” moments (1995: 52).

This “latent” and “visible” separation is expanded upon by Polletta and Jasper when they question whether internal identity mirrors the external identity that groups perform (2001). They define collective identity as “an individual’s cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practise, or institution” (2001: 285), aligning with Melucci’s approach that identity is fluid and relational. They expand on his argument to suggest that public displays of identity will appear more unified than they really are in private interactions among group members. This is due to framing processes, political conditions and identity formation incentives, for example recruitment (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 285). Again, this links directly with Fuists’ work that distinguishes between private and public performances as he, too, suggests that the differing spaces effect inter-group dynamics.

A shortcoming in Polletta and Jaspers’ definition is that it places emphasis on the individual and fails to account for interactions *between* individuals in the construction and sustainment of collective identity. Nevertheless, their work contributes to the constructed definition of collective identity that this project will use, because it is an interesting point of analysis to observe the similarities (or differences) of the external and internal identities the YPJ perform. Additionally, they go beyond strategic explanations of collective identity by incorporating “emotional connection” within their analysis. I will test their hypothesis that groups perform a more unified public identity and are more fragmented in private, and consider the role that emotions play in the process of collective identity.

This chapter has offered a critique of the current debates within social performance theory and collective identity. While the theoretical work on collective identity is extensive, researching the private performances of social movements at the level of interaction remains underexplored. The contribution of private performances to the creation of a collective identity is especially in need of investigation. The following chapter will situate the most pertinent features of these theories into the analytic lens through which I will conduct my research through.

**2 Analytic Frames**

**2.1 Definitions**

From the abovementioned theories I will now clarify what elements will contribute to my analytic frames and thus guide my research. In the first stage of my analysis of the YPJ, I will be largely drawing upon Fuist’s performance theory. I have purposely stipulated “ideological” performances in my puzzle in order to distinguish between the everyday performances of social interaction (Goffman 1959) from the performances that specifically dramatise beliefs, values, and allegiances (Fuist 2013). Ideology plays a hugely significant role in the Rojavan revolution and in the formation of the YPJ, hence choosing Fuist’s theory. Goffman theorises that individuals “give*”* and “give off”expressions; the former being the conscious conveying of information, and the latter the unconscious (1959: 14). Goffman’s theory will be theoretically drawn upon for the purpose of contextualising Fuist’s concept of ‘ideological performances’, but not as a means of analysis in of itself.

I will use Fuist’s definition of an “ideological performance” as being “how a performer’s beliefs, values, and allegiances are displayed for an audience via her behaviour, language, movement, use of props and aesthetics” (2013: 430). Fuist breaks down the theory into four constitutive parts:

1. Conscious public ideological performance*:* An explicit message conveyed to the audience in public
2. Unconscious public ideological performance: Message conveyed through clothes, behaviour, props etc., in a public setting, without the performer being aware.
3. Conscious private ideological performance: A performer deliberately dramatizing her beliefs, values, and allegiances to an audience in a non-public setting.
4. Unconscious private ideological performance: Message conveyed through clothes, behaviour, props etc. in a non-public setting, without the performer being aware.

(Fuist 2013: 428-431)

The latter two parts, the private performances, are what this research will be focussing on and what two of my sub-questions will be based upon. As Fuist argues, much of performance theory is restricted to the public arena, and private performances are somewhat under-explored. Concentrating on the private performances will allow me to analyse how social interaction between myself and the YPJ, as well as between the individual members of the YPJ themselves, creates different meaning systems and contributes to collective identity formation, development, and sustainment.

Fuist’s performance categories will be useful in the first stages of my research as it will enable me to further my understanding of the inter-dynamics of the group I intend to study, especially the way in which they express their ideology. I will also respond to my own criticism of Fuist’s theory – that it does not adequately acknowledge the effect of social power – by researching how society members in Rojava perceive the YPJ, and discussing whether this has any effect on their performances.

The second analytic frame I will use is collective identity. I will combine some of the aforementioned theoretical definitions in order to create my own analytical tool. I have amalgamated Polletta and Jasper’s definition of collective identity as “an individual’s cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practise, or institution” (2001: 285), with Fuist’s “meaning systems in which social actors place themselves and others” (2013: 430), and Melucci’s “learning process that leads to the formation and maintenance of a unified empirical actor” (1995: 49). Ergo, I have defined collective identity as:

*A discursive and interactional process in which individuals situate themselves in meaning systems depending on their cognitive, moral and emotional connection to a broader community and, through a sense of “we-ness”, create a unified social actor.*

Although not stated in this definition, Stryker’s emphasis on the role that societal norms, values, and symbols can have on identity will also be considered. Stryker’s theory is for individual identity but I will transfer some of his ideas to collective identity. Focus will be on the processual and interactional nature of identity formation and development, synthesising with the symbolic interactionist perspective. I have purposely included “a sense of we-ness” to address Polletta and Jasper’s “emotional connection”. “We-ness” includes feeling of belonging and solidarity; solidarity being defined as “the ability of actors to recognize, and to be recognized, as belonging to the same social unit” (Melucci 1996: 23). As I am studying private performances and social interaction, emotions and behaviour are of central importance.

Ideological performances and collective identity are the two principal analytic frames but, more broadly speaking, another sensitising concept that will guide my research is framing. Framing activities are an important part of symbolic interactionism and performance theory. Within the former school of thought frames are a form of symbols; meaning is attached to specific things by individuals. In performance theory conscious public performances enable a group to frame their activities in a particular way in order to appeal to a given audience. In Alexander’s approach to social performance one of his three key elements is cognitive simplification. Cognitive simplification is when social performers exaggerate the character of themselves and their antagonists (Alexander 2006: 59). This idea can also be seen as a framing activity as the performers are consciously choosing an image to portray of themselves. Currently, a popular frame that is being used is the representation of the female fighters as heroic, triumphant and displaying fearless prowess and Daesh, their antagonists, as inhumane and barbaric. This is likely to be true yet nonetheless this cognitive simplification and moral agonism is amplified. I will consider the ways in which the framing of both the YPJ and Daesh is affecting the women’s performances and identity.

**2.2 Research puzzle and sub-questions**

With the previously mentioned analytic frames in mind, I have formulated my sub-questions as follows:

1. How do the YPJ consciously attempt to dramatise their beliefs, values, and allegiances to an audience in a private setting?
2. What messages do the YPJ unconsciously convey through their appearance and manner in a private setting?
3. How are meaning systems constructed and sustained through the YPJ’s private performances?
4. What factors contribute to a shared sense of “we-ness"?

The first two refer to the YPJ’s ideological and private performances and the second two on the process of collective identity. Based on these sub-questions, I have fashioned the following research question: “How are the ideological performances of the Women’s Protection Units (the YPJ) contributing to the process of a collective identity within the female military units in Rojava from 2012 to the present?”

The following chapter will explain the political, social, and cultural environment of Rojava in order to place the research question into context.

**3 The YPJ in context**

Considering how under-explored Rojava and the YPJ are academically, a great deal of explanation is needed in order to understand the social phenomena under research. This chapter will begin with the historical context of Syrian Kurds, their demographics, and how they have been oppressed by the Syrian regime. A brief chronology of the Syrian civil war and the conflict with Daesh will then be presented before explaining the emergence of Rojava. The following section will be dedicated to the politics of Rojava, namely Abdullah Ocalan’s ideology and the main principles of democratic confederalism. Next, an overview of the Kurdish Women’s Movement including its history, its guiding philosophy, and recent developments. Lastly, with all of the above in mind, I will detail how, why, and when the YPJ emerged; the noteworthy elements of their military structure; and their present situation.

**3.1 Context of the conflict (The Kurds in Syria)**

**3.1.1 Oppression of Syrian Kurds**

The Kurds in Syria comprise the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in the country, with estimates ranging from two to four million of the total population, and are largely concentrated in the North (Kurdistan National Congress 2014: 3). The three main Kurdish cities in the region are Qamişlo, Hasakah, and Kobanê. Historically the Kurds have been marginalised in Syria; their identity perceived as a threat to Arab nationalist identity (Human Rights Watch 2009: 10). The infamous government population census of 1962 made this starkly apparent. All Kurds in Syria had to prove that they had lived there since at least 1945, and if they failed to do so they lost their citizenship (Human Rights Watch 1996). There was no prior notice given about this one-day census taking, and as a result 120,000 Kurds were left stateless. On a political level, unregistered Kurds had no recognition at all from the government and, on a social level, many were categorised as *ajanib,* meaning “alien” (Tejel 2009: 51). Consequently thousands of Kurds were unable to get jobs, go to school, or participate in politics (Human Rights Watch 2009: 11). This legal vacuum of denouncing many Kurds as ‘stateless’ constituted a denial of their fundamental human rights (International Crisis Group 2013: ii).

This discrimination and simultaneous Arabisation of Kurdish regions in the 1960s and 1970s led to the Kurdish language being prohibited in schools, the renaming of Kurdish towns to Arabic, and the banning of Kurdish festivities (Human Rights Watch 2009: 11; Kurdistan National Congress 2014: 4). The Ba’ath Party and successive governments continued assimilation policies against the Kurds; refusing to recognise their culture, language, or history. Prior to the revolution their political rights were refused and they were seen as secondary citizens in Syrian society.

With obvious feelings of discontent and disenfranchisement, there was a popular Kurdish uprising in Qamişlo in 2004. The government’s violent response led to a rapid increase in hostilities, resulting in at least thirty Kurds being killed and many more wounded (Amnesty International 2004: 1; Human Rights Watch 2009:15). The demonstrations climaxed when the Kurdish protesters toppled the statue of Hafez al-Assad in the middle of the city. Amnesty International estimates that two thousand Syrian Kurds were arrested for their political actions, with many reports of torture and ill-treatment (Brandon 2007; Human Rights Watch 2009: 15). Following the riots there was further government repression of Kurdish cultural celebrations, political demonstrations, solidarity events, commemorations, and public gatherings (Human Rights Watch 2009: 18-30).

The only political party in support of the Qamişlo uprising was the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party, PYD). The PYD was established in 2003 and is the largest Syrian Kurdish political party to date. Although often denied, the PYD it is an offshoot of the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers’ Party, PKK) militarily, organisationally, and politically (International Crisis Group 2013: 1). The PKK, due to their waging of an armed struggle against the Turkish state in the 1980s in pursuit of Kurdish rights, are listed as a terrorist organisation by many states and organisations in the international community, including the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Phillips 2013). The PYD is often referred to as the PKK’s sister party (Jongerdon and Akkaya 2013: 165). Due to this association, and being the only party in support of the Qamişlo uprising, it was largely PYD members who were targeted with imprisonment following the riots (Human Rights Watch 2009: 43). The systematic discrimination that the Kurds have been subject to only began to relinquish in 2011, when the Syrian civil war began.

**3.1.2 Syrian Civil War**

In March 2011 pro-democracy demonstrations began in Deraa by a group of teenagers writing revolutionary slogans on the wall of their school. The teenagers soon gained widespread popular support after seeing Assad’s government force’s violent response towards them. By August the uprisings turned into a full-scale civil war (BBC 2015). As of June 2015 the death toll has risen to over two hundred and fifty thousand, there are over three million refugees that have fled from Syria, and a third of the remaining population has been internally displaced (Syrian Centre for Policy Research 2015: 8-9; Butter 2015: 13). Amid this crisis there has been the parallel rise of jihadist groups in the region, namely Daesh.

**3.1.3 Daesh**

What began as the Islamic State of Iraq, proliferated into Syria and evolved into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. It is now referred to as the self-declared caliphate the Islamic State. I have chosen to refer to the Islamic State as Daesh throughout this study, as it is the derogatory Arabic term for the terrorist group that is used throughout Kurdistan (Chishti 2015). With their roots in Al-Qaeda, the extremist group’s origins stem back to the early 2000s, but it was not until 2013 and 2014 that they began successfully take over large swathes of Syria and Iraq (Stanford University 2015). They have rapidly expanded their control in the region, and are most known for their public beheadings, large contingent of foreign fighters, and their fascist views towards women. The latter stems from their strict interpretation of Sharia Law which dictates that women are inherently inferior to men. Female jihadists within Daesh are expected to “remain hidden and veiled”, with their main responsibilities centring round motherhood and the household (Winter 2015: 7). Those women captured by Daesh face a far worse fate; there are countless reports of women being kidnapped, raped, enslaved, sold as slaves, and killed (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Due to their anti-government sentiment, the Kurds in Rojava were inactive at the onset of the civil war. They were unable, however, to avoid the conflict against Daesh. When al-Assad’s security forces decided to withdraw from the Kurdish region and leave control to local militias, the PYD seized the opportunity to take control (International Crisis Group 2014: 15). Having formed almost ten years prior, they had developed a strong organisational coherence, allowing them to fill the power vacuum that was created by the regime (International Crisis Group 2014: 1). Their political and security presence became clear as they ousted regime buildings in some of the major cities, began to replace Syrian flags with Kurdish PYD flags, and established their own self-defence units, the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*‎ (People’s Protection Units, YPG) and the women’s unit, the YPJ. In November 2013 the PYD declared their autonomy in the three cantons of Efrîn, Cizîrê*,* and Kobanê. The latter canton finally pointed the international spotlight on the YPG in January 2015 as they liberated the city of Kobanê from the hands of Daesh. The YPG and YPJ are hailed as the only force on the ground that have repeatedly and successfully defeated Daesh (Cockburn 2015b). It is not only their military capabilities, but also their progressive egalitarian political system that has aided their success.

**3.2 Politics**

Rojava is built on the political model of democratic confederalism, a model developed by the PKK’s imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Ocalan, often referred to as Apo (meaning “Uncle” in Kurdish), is one of the founding members of the PKK. The PKK is a radical left Kurdish movement that was formed in 1978 in Turkey. Whilst fighting for democratic values, Kurdish rights, and gender equality, the PKK has been engaged in a longstanding conflict against the Turkish state. Due to this, Ocalan, being the political leader and military commander, has been imprisoned by Turkey since 1999. During his time in solitary confinement he has evolved his ideology from a Marxist-Leninist perspective to a libertarian and communalist paradigm, inspired largely by the work of the anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin. So, what began as a national liberation and decolonisation movement seeking a socialist nation-state, has grown into a freedom movement, developing a non-state political administration model which welcomes ethnic and religious diversity, and peaceful co-existence among groups (TATORT 2013: 20).

This paradigm shift arose after a critical reflection on capitalist modernity. Ocalan argues that the economic system of capitalism and the nation-state model are indivisible: “neither could be imagined to exist without the other” (Ocalan 2011: 10). He claims that the state, and thus capitalism, breeds exploitation, concentrated power, and cultural assimilation resulting in a single culture, identity, and community (ibid: 13). According to Ocalan the ideological foundations of the nation-state are nationalism, positivist science, religiousness, and sexism. Thus, it does not make sense to establish a separate Kurdish state as it would be breeding repression by replacing old chains with news ones (ibid: 19). Upon criticising capitalist modernity Ocalan has coined the term ‘Democratic Modernity’; an umbrella term that democratic confederalism falls under.

Ocalan describes democratic confederalism as a “flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented” society, in which “ecology and feminism are central pillars”. Unlike the nation-state, which is “an enemy of the peoples” (ibid: 13), democratic confederalism encourages that “society is at the centre of political focus” (ibid: 23); all of society is politicised, and community consciousness is built on shared ethics and values (ibid: 25). The leading principles of the model are: 1) The right to self-determination of the peoples; 2) a non-state social paradigm; 3) grass-roots participative democracy; 4) ethnic, religious, and class diversity; and 5) anti-nationalism (ibid: 33-34). All decision-making processes, where possible, occur at the community level within the councils and communes (ibid: 27). There are quotas in place which ensure multi-ethnic representation, and in all institutions, administrations, and bodies women must comprise at least forty per cent (Kurdistan National Congress 2014: 12; Charter of the Social Contract 2014: Article 65).

In opposition to the militarised structure of the nation-state, a central component of democratic confederalism is the principle of legitimate self-defence. This is not restricted to physical security but also to social, political, and economic security. Ocalan posits that “Societies without any mechanism of self-defence lose their identities, their capability of democratic decision-making, and their political nature…it also presupposes the preservation of its identity” (2011: 28). So long as nation-states maintain their centralised monopoly of violence, the self-defence of society will be necessary.[[4]](#footnote-4) Salih Muslim, one of two co-Presidents of Rojava said that “…the Self-Defence Committees…are guarding the people…They are armed groups and protecting the society.” (*quoted in* Jongerdon and Akkaya 2013: 174).

In Rojava, the three cantons of Efrîn, Cizîrê*,* and Kobanê self-govern autonomously, with coordination limited only to when necessity demands. Each canton has its own courts, Asayiş (police), and Defence Forces, and they have control over their education and social systems (Kurdistan National Congress 2014: 13). Local democratic councils have been operating in Rojava since 2007, but it was not until the Syrian civil war began that these parallel structures became visible and the revolution gained momentum (Jongerdon and Akkaya 2013: 173). In direct response to the oppressive policies that Kurds have been forced to endure under the al-Assad regime, the Social Contract of Rojava allows for the right to teach and be taught in one’s native language, for the expression of cultural symbols such as flags and emblems, and the participation of women in all levels of society (Charter of the Social Contract 2014: Articles 9, 11, and 27, respectively). The latter of these rights being due to the longstanding activism and organisation of Kurdish women.

**3.3 Kurdish Women’s Movement**

Kurdish women have experienced multiple layers of structural oppression based on their identity as women *and* their identity as Kurds (Dirik *quoted in* Staal 2015: 29). Recently the Kurdish Women’s Movement has gained huge momentum and considerable international support but, for those actively involved, the struggle began decades ago.

Since its formation in 1978 women have played a central role in the PKK both as guerrilla fighters and in a political capacity (Gϋneᶊer 2015: 59). One of Ocalan’s fundamental ideas is that a free society must, by definition, include the emancipation of women: “Women’s liberation is Kurdistan’s liberation” (Ocalan 1999: 27 *quoted in* Çağlayan 2012: 9). Activists within the women’s movement describe the dual components of the struggle: on the one hand it is against the systematic repression of Kurdish culture, and on the other hand it is as a struggle against gendered hierarchies within the PKK itself, as gender egalitarian ideals were not always given as much precedence as they are now (Staal 2015: 38). In the 1990s Ocalan began to develop his critique of the patriarchal structures of capitalist modernity, especially woman’s subordinate position in the family structure (Çağlayan 2012: 8). As his critiques of gender inequality progressed, so did women’s participation and mobilisation.

Çağlayan succinctly summarises Ocalan’s change in rhetoric on women as such:

In the 1980s, Ocalan spoke to militant men about how they should treat women, that is, he spoke with men about women; in the 1990s, however, he spoke with women militants about men, and drew attention to the significance of this.

(2012: 13)

In his most recent publications he condemns the view that women are seen as “both a sexual object and a commodity…a tool for the preservation of male power and…an accessory of the patriarchal male society”. In order to liberate society this mentality must be overcome (Ocalan 2011: 16). He sees women as slaves within the global capitalist system, as an “exploited nation” (ibid). As illustrated, democratic confederalism opposes all domination, but what is clear in Ocalan’s work is the particular opposition to the dominant male that he sees as an inherent feature of the nation-state model; “capitalism and nation-state are the monopolism of the despotic and exploitative male” (ibid: 17). What the “international proletariat” is for Marxism, the “woman” is for Ocalan’s ideology.

Today, the Kurdish Women’s Movement is built on four principles. The first is patriotism, which places importance on women’s connection to the land. The second is free thought and free will, which is the ability for women to think, live and decide freely. The third is that life must be based on freedom and the self-organisation of women. The last principle is that of resistance; women must empower themselves by resisting oppression in every possible way (Nurhak n.d.). A common slogan heard in Rojava is “Berxwedan Jiyane”, meaning ‘Resistance is Life”. Dilar Dirik, an activist in the Kurdish Women’s Movement, states that:

The Kurdish Women’s Movement is an idea: an idea to make sure that women’s liberation does not have boundaries and is regarded instead as a principle, as the fundamental condition for one’s understanding of resistance, liberation, and justice

(*quoted in* Staal 2015: 31).

The movement is fighting against sexist mentalities and structures in the fields of ideology, society, politics, and self-defence. Thus, there are four major components that make up the Kurdish Women’s Movement: *Partîya Azadîya Jin a Kurdistane* (Kurdistan Women’s Liberation Party, PAJK) which is the ideological movement; *Yekitiyên Jinên Azad* (Unions of Free Women, YJA) which is the social movement; *Yeknîyên Jinên Azad Star* (Free Women’s Units ‘Star’, YJA Star) which is in the field of legitimate self-defence; and then there is the Committee of Young Womenwhich organises young women politically (Komalên Jinên Kurdistan 2011). All of which have been instrumental in the women’s revolution in Rojava, particularly for the formation of the Women’s Protection Units, the YPJ.

**3.4 The YPJ**

The context above has been of central importance in the formation of the YPJ. The layers of oppression Kurdish women have experienced, Ocalan’s encouragement of women’s participation and organisation, the emergence of the gender egalitarian model of democratic confederalism, the military necessity of the conflict against Daesh and, of course, the ongoing Kurdish Women’s Movement have all played significant roles. Added to this, both Daesh’s ideology and the victory in Kobanê have accelerated the momentum of the female fighters.

Before the YPJ were formed, women were key to the revolution in Rojava; they took up important roles in the Asayiş, in local councils, communes, and decision-making bodies (Serhat and Servan 2015). YJA has founded women’s academies in every city in Rojava (ibid). Power is distributed equally between men and women at all levels, and women organise themselves autonomously. This made mobilisation for the YPJ easier in December 2012, but there were still traditional societal structures that acted as obstacles for many women.

Ocalan strongly advocates women’s involvement in the military. He posits that “a woman’s army is not only a requirement of the war against the patriarchal system but is also a requirement in opposition to sexist mind-sets within the freedom movement” (Ocalan *quoted in* Nurhak n.d.). His principle of legitimate self-defence is crucial for the YPJ. Meryem Kobanê, a commander of the YPJ, talks about this:

There is nothing in nature without mechanisms for its own self-defense…Throughout history, how are women described? ‘Their nature is opposed to war’. Yes, of course this is true of wars of domination. But self-defense is different…[it] is a fundamental natural property.

(*quoted in* Serhat et al 2015).

We see here that a central tenet to his philosophy is that women should not rely on anybody else to protect them; they should organise and defend themselves. They do not have to trust their security or life to the hands of others. While Ocalan’s ideology is of course important, Daesh have also influenced the motivations of women joining the YPJ. They are fighting a radical struggle against societal patriarchy, as well as breaking Orientalist stereotypes of women in the Middle East. Daesh have waged a war on women, targeting and dehumanising them in all areas they attack (Human Rights Watch 2015). They represent the epitome of societal patriarchy; they characterise misogyny and fascism, and they stand in stark opposition to what the Rojavan revolution strives for. Furthermore, it is reported that if a Daesh fighter is killed by a woman then they will not go to heaven (Gündem 2015). As Daesh symbolise women’s oppression and the YPJ symbolise their freedom, we can see that the YPJ are not only engaged in a physical fight, but an ideological one too.

This ideological war was made no clearer than in the liberation of Kobanê in January 2015. The canton was under attack from Daesh for over a year, but in September 2014 the offensive intensified (Kobanê *in* Gündem 2015). After months of heavy fighting, Kobanê was liberated by the YPG and YPJ, but it was the YPJ that received a lot of the recognition. Kobanê became a symbol of Kurdish women’s resistance, and as a result it had the highest percentage of female fighters in Rojava (Kobanê *in* Gündem 2015). The sacrifices that were made there have also considerably influenced the high number of women that have joined the YPJ, especially Arin Mirkan. Mirkan, a YPJ commander, was the first woman to blow herself up in the fight against Daesh, and she has since become to signify women’s tenacity, bravery, and freedom (Serhat and Servan 2015).

In October 2014 women comprised 35% of the Defence Units (Taştekin 2015), but when interviewing a YPJ commander in Rojava in May 2015 I was told that this number is ever increasing. When volunteers join the YPJ they first have military training before attending an academy for their compulsory education in Ocalan’s political thought (Apoism), which is based largely on democratic autonomy and self-defense.[[5]](#footnote-5) There are YPJ centres in every city and they are active on all defence and social fronts (Taştekin 2015). They not only fight alongside men but also die alongside men too, with two hundred out of seven hundred YPG martyrs in 2014 being women (ibid). The Protection Units are separated by sex, but how does their internal organisation differ?

The military structures of the YPG and the YPJ are very similar, with only a few notable differences in terminology in their “Internal System” descriptions[[6]](#footnote-6). For the YPJ more emphasis is placed on their social role and the specific patriarchal assaults they face: “in order to expel authoritarian patriarchal systems…the legitimate power of woman, carries out the struggle for women’s freedom” (YPG 2015). They are designated the role of protecting women’s values and defending gender freedom; the focus is not just on their military capabilities. In both systems, women are described as the leading force in the revolution. The YPG refers to them as “the pioneers for the path to reach the objectives of the YPG”, and the YPJ hail themselves as “the vanguard force” (ibid). Equal attention is paid to the principle of legitimate self-defence and the sworn statements for both Units mirror one another.

This chapter has provided a macro-analysis of Rojava in order to understand the importance that the YPJ have in society. The YPJ cannot only be defined as a female military unit fighting a common enemy of the West.[[7]](#footnote-7) They represent years of cultural and gendered repression; they are breaking traditional barriers for women in the military, and they are in the vanguard for social change in Rojava and the entire Middle East. Whilst such a structural analysis is necessary to understand the factors that have led to the YPJ’s emergence, this research is interested in studying the private social interactions within the military units so micro-analysis is also required. The following chapter will describe the methodology that has been constructed from the chosen analytic frames, which made this possible.

**4 Methodology**

This chapter will outline the research method of this study and explain my choices in regards to research design, data collection method, and analysis procedure for investigation in a war zone. I will also address the challenged I encountered and the limitations I subsequently faced.

**4.1 Research Design**

As stipulated in the theoretical chapter, this research revolves around the symbolic interactionist assumption that social reality is constructed through discursive processes. The meso-level perspective taken requires that the interactions between individuals and structures are analysed. I argue that the way in which the ideological foundations of the female fighters are being dramatised in private settings is influencing the process of collective identity within the women’s unit. The focal unit of analysis are female fighters in the YPJ, but in order to understand how structural factors – such as cultural values and societal norms – are affecting their performances, it is integral to also look through a macro-level lens. This must be done using a multifarious methodological approach.

Firstly, before being able to understand the ideological performances of the YPJ, their ideology, history, and culture must be identified and the context set. This was presented in the previous chapter, and was conducted through document analysis. To deepen my understanding of the YPJ’s interpretations of their ideology and culture, I also conducted contextual interviews. Secondly, the ideological performances of the YPJ are observed. This requires a multi-layered approach; open-source data allows me to observe their public performances, and participant observation allows me to observe their private performances. These same methods of interviewing and observation are used in the third stage of analysis, which concentrates on the collective identity construction portion of the research.

**4.2 Sampling**

I use purposive sampling for all of the research. The time-frame, conflict context, and access presented obstacles in the use of random sampling; the conflict context being the catalyst for the other obstacles. Rojava is an incredibly volatile region of Kurdistan where stability can at no time be guaranteed, so I was unable to conduct research for an extended period of time. For the same reasons our access was limited; we always had the protection of local police, a translator, and a trusted driver with us. This reliance and volatility inevitably restricted the agency we had in deciding where we could go, and for how long we could stay there for, whilst in Rojava. So although random sampling would have provided a more accurate representation of the YPJ in Rojava, purposive sampling had to be used.

**4.3 Method**

Prior to the research trip I ensured that I had a thorough understanding of the political, social, and cultural context, which is set out in the previous chapter. It was essential to contextualise the socio-political environment in Rojava given the ever-changing situation in the region, and the sensitivity that the research required. Everybody we met had been deeply affected by the conflict, so in order to talk to informants it was important that I knew the situation. This involved content and document analysis. Given that the revolution in Rojava is still a relatively recent phenomena, there is a lack of academic literature that has been published; as a result this data is mostly gathered from news articles and journalistic reports. This was not limited to a chronological reading of the Kurds in Syria and the current context, but also of their ideology. To observe and analyse the YPJ’s ideological performances it is, of course, important to have a strong understanding of their values and beliefs.

Researching ideological performances requires multiple stages, especially as I am using Fuist’s categories of private conscious and private unconscious performances to guide me. In order to operationalise “private ideological performances” the following sub-questions will be answered:

1. How do the YPJ consciously attempt to dramatise their beliefs, values, and allegiances to an audience in a private setting?

2. What messages do the YPJ unconsciously convey through their appearance and manner in a private setting?

Participant observations and interviews gives me access to private performances. During interviews – alongside my use of a recording device – I also took raw field notes of non-verbal cues such as body language, tone of voice, clothing, how they interacted with one another, objects used, the reactions they had to myself as the researcher and audience, space and so forth. These are reflexive notes of my immediate interpretations of the social situation. Later, when re-watching the recordings, I took more reflective and theory-specific notes. I also transcribed the interviews soon after they were conducted.

As has been made clear, this research is concerned with the private performances of the YPJ. However, it is necessary to also look at their public performances in order to consider the differences and similarities in the external and internal identities they display, and the standards the women are expected to live up to. To do this I use open source data. Due to the extensive media coverage that the YPJ are increasingly receiving, there was plenty of online data to utilise. I mostly use their social media account, the YPG’s YouTube channel, propaganda films, the official YPG and YPJ website, and documentaries. Statements and documents from the YPJ helped me to identify their values, beliefs and allegiances so that I can distinguish their “ideological” performances.

The second analytic frame of “collective identity” will be foregrounded in the data analysis stage. In order to do this, I have decided on these two sub-questions as I deem them to encompass the most significant and relevant elements of the analytic frame in the given context:

3. How are meaning systems constructed and sustained through the YPJ’s private performances?

4. What factors contribute to a shared sense of “we-ness”?

The first question is concerned with social interaction, and the second more with individual and collective performances. They both illustrate the processual approach to collective identity construction.

**4.4 Data collection techniques**

My research engages with three data collection techniques: content research, interviews, and participant observation. I will now explain why all three were essential for different stages of the study.

Content research “collects and analyses data from messages that are communicated by newspapers, books, and other physical media and increasingly by digital forms of communication” (Curtis and Curtis 2011: 195). This technique is used most extensively for the first stages of the research prior to undertaking the fieldwork. It is the most appropriate way to contextualise the political, social, and cultural situation in Rojava as it involves using multiple sources, which ensures its reliability. Having a sound understanding of the context allows me to more accurately observe how the YPJ interpret and portray their ideas and beliefs.

The second method that was used is interviews. Kvale (2007 *quoted in* Curtis and Curtis 2011: 47-48) describes the interview as “a form of conversation where knowledge is produced through the interaction”; knowledge being constructed through participant discourse. This social constructivist description influenced my choice to use fluid frame interviews with loose themes guiding the conversation. To research how private ideological performances are effecting collective identity I am most interested in how the women I was interviewing portray their visually and verbally portray their beliefs, what elements of their ideology they emphasise the most, how they identify, and how they interact with one another. Thus, some of the loose themes I used are “knowledge of ideology”, “personal philosophy”, “relationships within the YPJ”, “views of women in Rojava”, and “society’s reactions”. I also asked practical questions about the training they received, ideologically and militarily. Interviews allow for the acquisition of rich information, and the fluid structure that I employed meant that un-anticipated points arose but still based around the loose themes. Present at all the interviews were two male researchers, one other female researcher, our translator, the respondents, and myself.

Finally, and most importantly, I made use of the ethnographic method of participant observation. Ethnography is a qualitative research method that aims to deepen our understanding of the social life of humans. It is crucial for this research because it is a holistic method that observes behaviour, symbols, interactions, societal values, and material practices (Curtis and Curtis 2011: 78). It involves observing participants in their natural environment in order to gain rich insight into their real-life behaviour (ibid). The researcher usually participates in the everyday life of the informants for several months. However, time constraints, unpredictability, and access restrictions meant this was not possible so techniques from the method were borrowed, namely participant observation.

The chosen analytic frame requires observing conscious and unconscious performances. Interviews are necessary to research conscious ideological performances, and participant observation is crucial in observing the unconscious means they used such as their behaviour, facial expressions, reactions, tone and so forth. Participant observation is not only concerned with the ways their informants present themselves, but it is also important how the researcher does too. Curtis and Curtis consider how the researcher must adapt herself according to the situation, asking “Which one of *your* multiple identities would be most appropriate to emphasise?” (2011: 85 emphasis added). When entering social situations during fieldwork, my identity as a student researcher would always take precedence though sometimes my identity as a woman – or simply as a human being – became the superordinate. I also made the conscious decision to not be a neutral observer but to share my political and personal opinions as this enabled me to develop stronger relationships with the informants, and thus gain a richer insight.

Fortunately, with the exception of the youth academy, I was able to video record the interviews. This allowed me to concentrate on interviewing participants, and then afterwards I could watch the performances because, as I found, it is difficult to do both simultaneously.

**4.5 Data analysis**

To analyse the data, and identify how collective identity is being constructed, sustained, and adapted in the YPJ, I have been influenced by Melucci’s practical method. He proposes three steps to research collective identity: (1) observing behaviour; (2) analysing organised representations and framing activities; (3) quantitatively analysing collective events (1995: 55-58). I chose to use elements of this pragmatic and cohesive way to study collective identity because it complements the analytical frame of performance theory, in that they both take a social constructivist approach. Melucci’s theory centres round the processual nature of identity, performance theory being the chosen way to research that process in action.

The first step of this method is the data collection stage of participant observation. After writing notes on the performances I identify patterns and themes in the data. I try to use analytical induction which means variables develop as data is analysed, not prior to (Curtis and Curtis 2011: 43). This coding process is also essential for the second stage, but the data I code is from that collected through interviews and content analysis. After transcribing all of the interviews, and then carrying out the same coding process, I reflect on the data. I try to identify the “meaning systems” that the YPJ present themselves in through their public performances, and see how this compares to the “meaning systems” that they perform in private interactions. Analysing the differences and similarities between external and internal representations draws on Polletta and Japser’s work on collective identity (2001). I am not using Melucci’s third step of quantitatively analysing collective events because my research focusses primarily on private performances. Analysing external representations and the framing of the YPJ is sufficient to draw comparisons between the public and private identities displayed without also doing quantitative analysis.

**4.6 Challenges that arose in the field**

**4.6.1 Security**

Although the political situation in Rojava was detailed in the previous chapter, the security situation and the implications this had for our research was not elaborated on. Though fluctuating in intensity throughout the different cantons, the bloody conflict that Rojava is engaged in against Daesh had profound effect on my ability to do fieldwork research there.

In order to develop a research method that is appropriate for the dangerous setting, many precautions were necessary. Due to the terrorist designation of the PKK, and the presumed alliance of the PYD and the PKK, it is near impossible to gain access into Rojava from the Turkish borders. Owing to the complicated inter-regional politics of Kurdistan it is also incredibly difficult to gain access via the Iraqi borders. Therefore, connections with key individuals are crucial. We established an invaluable contact with the PYD representative for the Netherlands. Had we attempted to do so alone, we would have been unable to enter. Our PYD contact negotiated our border crossing for us, and continued to prove crucial for our data collection. For the duration of our time in Rojava we were accompanied by a translator from the Foreign Relations Commission of the PYD, and by one of their drivers. When visiting hazardous areas we would also be joined by a member of the Asayiş (the local police force) and somebody from the YPG/YPJ to ensure our safety. To further minimise safety risks we ensured we always had access to local news agencies in order to have knowledge of any conflict-related developments.

In addition to these safety precautions, I also made sure I had an adaptable research design. On arrival into Rojava we informed the PYD on the specifics of the research, and they planned the itinerary accordingly. We were aware from the start that the itinerary was not fixed; every day the fight against Daesh was evolving and some areas became less safe, restricting our movement. The methodological flexibility I adopted, therefore, made sure to not rely too heavily on one case study. Rojava is a militarised society so I was able to make general observations of the YPJ daily, but there were two especially important places we visited where I collected data.

The first was a YPJ military barracks near to the front line of Tell Brak. The day we visited there was a conference happening so there were YPJ fighters and youth from around the area, as well as YPJ leadership. And secondly, a Kurdish language academy. Here I was able to interview two girls from the YPJ who were on temporary leave because they had been wounded in conflict. They were at the academy taking courses while they recovered. Other locations we visited that are drawn upon in the study is a youth academy for girls who were unable to join the YPJ due to their young age, a house for wounded YPG and YPJ fighters, and the Women’s Commission. From the beginning, I was prepared to face restraints in accessing the YPJ because from the start of the trip some of our scheduled meetings with them were cancelled as they were sent to the frontlines. However, I was particularly fortunate in that I was allowed access to these different places.

**4.6.2 Ethical**

Ethical considerations of researching in a conflict area also had to be taken into account. Ensuring informant security is important in all research, but is exacerbated in a conflict zone. With a few exceptions, the women in the YPJ that I had access to were all relatively young. At the youth academy all the girls were aged between thirteen and eighteen, but in the other two locations they were eighteen to twenty-five. I had to trust the PYD that all informants were voluntary, and I always ensured that they consented to me interviewing and observing them. Many of the women had *nom de guerres* so concealing their names was often not necessary, and they never objected to me recording their ages. One girl I interviewed in the wounded house did not want to say where she was from because she feared for her family’s safety. In scenarios like this I wholeheartedly respected their wishes.

Personal stories can be difficult for informants to tell, so establishing trust between those women I interviewed was very important. It is not possible to access personal narratives without the informant believing the researcher is honest. My identity as both a woman and a student made this relatively easy. I was often very close in age to the informants, and my purpose was to understand and give voice to these women. It was interesting to observe the hostility we often initially received when we were assumed to be journalists, and the visible ease upon finding out we were students. My genuine interest and admiration of the YPJ, my sympathy for the situation, and my prior knowledge, all contributed to trust-building.

**4.6.3 Moral**

Many moral concerns arise while researching in a conflict field. Arguably, it is not possible to study conflicts without taking sides. The obvious drawback of this is the bias that is immediately introduced. My own political position influenced the collection and interpretation of data. I had to be conscious of this, and reflect upon it during the analysis stage. However, my involvement at the political level also bought with it its benefits. Informants divulged more personal information after realising my political knowledge – especially of Ocalan’s ideas – adding to the credibility of the research. Furthermore, it proved an interesting point of analysis in itself as it blurred the actor-audience binary.

Linking to this identity blurring, is another dilemma. It is fair to assume that the researcher will hear and see disturbing things in this field. Thus, there is the challenge of balancing the required neutrality of a researcher, with the natural empathy and feelings of a human being. This was a personal challenge that I was constantly battling to overcome, especially when visiting the young girls at the YPJ youth academy. As established, it is crucial to gain trust with your informants, but this also means developing relationships. Hearing distressing stories from those I became close to, and trying to distance myself emotionally, was difficult.

The final concern worth mentioning is how to present the personal data collected in an ethical way. Madison (2005: 5) posits that the researcher is responsible for representing those they study, and for ensuring that their safety, privacy or dignity is not jeopardised. Due to my awe and admiration for the prowess and strength of the female fighters I met, I have become very conscious of telling their story well. Furthermore, the informants so often requested that we tell their story to the world. This want for their voices to be heard is apparently very common among marginalised groups (Fielding 2004: 251). Green (1994) says that researchers have the ability to lend their voices to the unheard. So even though I also hope to add to the theoretical discussion around performance theory in social research, first and foremost my loyalty lies with the women I met and studied.

**4.7 Limitations these challenges presented**

I had the opportunity to embark on a unique research project in a very precarious region of the world, but with this came limitations to the methodology and the data collected. Most significant is the bias in the data I collected. As explained, the web of geo-politics that Rojava is tangled up in required that we were in the hands of the PYD for the trip’s entirety. Ergo, we naturally had a one-sided insight into Rojava but this was an inevitability we were unable to overcome if we wanted access, so it is something that just had to be considered throughout. Secondly, my own political sympathies also created a bias in the responses of some of the informants and in how I interpreted data. Curtis and Curtis state: “It is generally accepted that researchers engaged in ethnography cannot occupy an objective position” (2011: 90). In a conflict zone, this objectivity is even more difficult to achieve as political sensitivity is so crucial.

A limitation of my sampling method is that I am unable to generalise my findings to the larger group from which the participants were drawn, the YPJ. Purposive sampling already carries with it limited applicability to a broader context, to increase the validity of this sampling the research must try to avoid introducing bias into the sample selection. This was not, however, always possible because our access to the informants was exclusively organised by the PYD. This negatively effects the reliability of the data as we had one-sided entry, and thus data.

Another limitation was the language barrier. I am unable to speak Kurdish so this presented restrictions. We always had our dependable translator with us but there were times when it was apparent that some questions or answers were lost in translation.

The level of methodological flexibility that was required was also, at times, a drawback. I was aware of this prior to the fieldwork, but not to the extent that I experienced. As the war changed on a daily basis, so did the itinerary. This meant a lack of preparation time so many interviews were conducted on an on-the-spot basis. Fortunately this did not have considerable impact on the data as interviews acted more as a supplementary method to observations, as opposed to an essentiality.

Finally, there are two theoretical limitations that must be considered. Firstly, researching social performances relies heavily on interpretations. This is problematic because what I, as the researcher, saw as significant, may have gone unnoticed by others. To try to overcome this I triangulated data to substantiate my claims. Secondly, in the study I cannot be confident that I was ever observing private performances as there will inevitably always be a level of performativity from actors when they know there is an audience watching. Fuist describes a private performance as occurring in a “non-public” or “limitedly public” setting (2013: 433) – so by his definition I was observing private performances. However, if drawing from Goffman’s “off-stage”/”on-stage” distinction, arguably I would not have been as the YPJ were still aware I was there so were still performing. This could limit the theoretical contributions I make, but it can also be used a point of critique of performance theory generally. In trying to overcome this limitation, Tucker’s spatial symbolism proved useful. I may never have been certain I was witnessing private performances but there were times, however, when I was sure I was observing the settings where private performances occur and, as the theory demonstrates, the aesthetics of performances are very significant.

**5 Examinations of performances**

In the following sections my empirical findings will be presented. Firstly, I focus on the performances of the YPJ. Specifically, I explore how they dramatise their beliefs, values, and allegiances consciously and unconsciously in private settings. In response to my first sub-question, studying conscious private performances, I will look at the social products purposively used by the YPJ to display their ideology; “social products” being social, abstract, and physical objects that have specific meaning attached to them. To observe their unconscious private performances I try to identify what messages are conveyed through their appearance and manner. This is mostly concerned with behavioural acts but I will also consider unintentional meanings associated with some of their conscious acts, for example the symbolism of the clothing that the wearer may be unaware of. The remaining sections will attempt to unravel the puzzle of how these private ideological performances are contributing to the process of collective identity within the YPJ.

Questions I seek to answer are: what meaning systems are being created and how are they interacting? How do external portrayals of collective identity compare to those internally portrayed? What factors are contributing to a shared sense of “we-ness” and solidarity? My analytic frames of ideological performances and collective identity will guide the structure of the analysis, and I will draw upon each performance case where appropriate. Before being able to do any of the above though, brief contextual descriptions of the performances and their settings are required.

**5.1 Context to case studies**

**5.1.1 Tell Brak barracks**

Tell Brak is a city that was occupied by Daesh but which had been liberated by the YPG and YPJ two months prior to our visit in March 2015 (Ahmed 2015). Tell Brak is now a ghostly city, with rubble and war debris strewn everywhere. Nobody has returned to the city yet so there are no civilians living there, only a dozen YPG fighters occupying a pocket of it to provide protection. There are visible signs of previous Daesh occupation. Most symbolic is a large, professionally made road sign with a woman in a burqa on. The sign was in black and white with Arabic writing underneath reading “Your headscarf protects you from evil”. When they liberated the city the YPJ sprayed a white cross over the sign and wrote “YPJ” over the image of the veiled woman[[8]](#footnote-8). This epitomizes the adverse views of Daesh and the YPJ. The frontline is now approximately ten kilometres away from the city. The military base that we visited was in between Tell Brak and the frontline. Although near each other, the barracks for the YPG and YPJ are separated.

The barracks consisted of one central building where the YPJ sleep, eat, and are taught, and there is a large, green outdoor area. Before going to the barracks, girls have to take a lot of ideological and military training courses. The females here go to the frontline every day and they come back to rest. Every day they wake up at three a.m., when they have sports and breakfast, after which they have lectures and are trained on how to use new weapons. Every night there is a group of people who protect the camp, which rotates on a nightly basis.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The day we visited the barracks there was a conference happening so there were not only YPJ fighters present, but also YPJ youth and leadership. Their ages varied: out of twenty-five girls present for the group interview, two were below the age of sixteen and one was above the age of twenty-five, whilst the rest fell within that bracket. On arrival the women and girls were all outside, either sitting in circles under trees or playing together. The social background was informal, and they allowed us to interview them outside under the trees which enabled us to witness a relaxed, relatively private performance. As soon as they saw us approaching they lined up to greet us and shake our hands. This was a cultural formality that we experienced throughout the trip. All the girls were dressed in their combat uniforms, with many donning the traditional Kurdish scarves. We stayed at the barracks and interviewed some of the YPJ women for a couple of hours. At most there were twenty-five women present but they came and went freely.

Tell Brak provided an interesting and appropriate site for research as it enabled me to observe the private performances of the YPJ in their natural environment. They were not publically performing but they were still acting in their role as YPJ fighters. This is in contrast to the following case study.

**5.1.2 Akademiya Celadet Bidirxan**

The second site was the *Akademiya Celadet Bidirxan* (Language Academy) in Derik. Derik is considered a stable and safe city in the Cizîrê canton, and this academy is where Kurdish language and grammar is taught. Although not exclusively for women, a large proportion of the students were female, varying widely in age. The language academy represented the re-appropriation of their identity, and made substantially clear the extent of the repression that Kurdish culture has experienced. We sat in one of their daily lectures where they were being taught the most basic grammar. Although the Kurdish language is spoken everywhere, a lot of people are illiterate because the language was banned in schools and public places (Yildiz 2005: 117). Here, Ocalan’s ideology was not explicitly taught, yet all of the examples used were in reference to his ideas so it was implicitly integrated into the curriculum. For instance, one of the examples written on the whiteboard was “Ku jin azad be, dé jin azad bibe”which translates to “if woman is free, life will be free”, directly linking to Ocalan’s women’s liberation ideology.[[10]](#footnote-10)

We stayed overnight in the academy, males and females separated. One of the teachers, a female PKK member from the Qandil Mountains[[11]](#footnote-11), introduced us to Amara and Jiyan. Amara and Jiyan are two women from the YPJ who were on temporary leave due to injuries. Amara was twenty-three years old, and Jiyan twenty-two. They were awaiting their return to the frontline but in the meantime were at the academy learning how to read and write the Kurdish language, and Ocalan’s ideology on women’s liberation. This was an unexpected encounter, so what preceded was an on-the-spot interview. It was a very comfortable interaction, whereby we all sat on the floor together. We had just collectively eaten our evening meal which contributed to the informality of the interview and provided access to a private performance as we were interviewing them as members of the YPJ but in an “off-stage” setting.

This setting is the reason why the language academy was chosen as one of the performance sites: I could observe YPJ fighters away from other YPJ women and in a site not associated with the military unit. Unlike Tell Brak, which provided an insight into the daily lives of the YPJ collective, the setting of the language academy permitted me to observe and interview Amara and Jiyan away from the influence of the group at large.

**5.1.3 Other sites**

The military barracks and the language academy are the case studies drawn upon most significantly, but there were other places we visited that are noteworthy. Firstly, a youth academy for girls who were too young to join the YPJ but had the desire to be trained ideologically and militarily in preparation for when they were old enough. The academy was situated in Amûda, next to the house that we stayed in for five nights. Walking distance from the YPJ academy was the YPG equivalent. Of all the places visited, this was undoubtedly the most private of all. Ms. H, a woman who was with us in the first days of our trip, worked for the Youth and Culture Commission of the self-administration. She worked closely with the girls at the youth academy and, after we gained her trust, allowed us to visit them with her.

We visited the youth academy on two different occasions at different times of the day. The first time we visited was late at night, the second time was in the afternoon. We were limited in the practical and personal information we could gather about the academy due to their age, and the sensitivity of many of their situations. It was assumed that some of them were there through contextual necessity as many of the girls spoke of family members that were martyred, but this was not confirmed. We learnt from Ms. H that a young Arabic girl was there because her parents had sold her sister to Daesh so she had escaped from her family. This was the only background story we were able to learn.

Secondly, a house for wounded YPG and YPJ members in Qamişlo. Their injuries ranged from broken limbs, to severe brain damage. Despite the injuries, though, everybody at the house was laughing and joking around, seemingly unaffected by their wounds. This revealed itself to be an informal group discussion, yet I was able to conduct a more in-depth interview with a Turkish Kurdish member of the YPJ. Finally, the last notable site is *Desteya Jin* (the Women’s Commission). The Women’s Commission of the self-administration provides advice, education, and protection for women. They have introduced laws and decrees on women’s rights, they have established safe houses for women that have been abused, and they teach society (men and women) about women’s rights.

So, how private are these performances? When using Fuist’s definition of a “private” performance as taking place in a “non-public or limitedly public setting” (Fuist 2013: 433), they all aside the last two can be considered so. The first case study at the military barracks can be conceptualised as such because the public are not allowed to enter unannounced, but neither is it completely closed off; it is “limitedly public”. The language academy is a public space but the performance I observed can be considered private as we were in a room set apart from the rest of the academy, with no other students present; again it is “limitedly public”. The youth academy is unquestionably the most private of them all as visitors are seldom permitted entry, and we had access to where they lived; it is “non-public”. The wounded house and the Women’s Commission are both “public” settings, which is why they are used largely to substantiate my observations, as opposed to being separate case studies in themselves.

**5.2 What’s in a name?****Conscious, private, ideological performances**

The “social product” that this section will focus on will be the YPJ’s *nom de guerres* (“war names”). I argue that the *nom de guerres* provide a “script” for the ideological performances of the YPJ. In performance theory, the “script” is what language is often referred to. Language is central to the essence of being human; it is a “culturally constructed and socially established system” that enables communication within a given society (Charon 1995: 46). It is a key element of symbolic interactionism as it is the means through which meaning is attributed to objects, which in turn gives them symbolic value. Similar to a theatre performance, the language – or the “script” – of an ideological performances takes centrality as it is a means for actors to consciously display their values, beliefs, and allegiances (Fuist 2013: 428). In such performances, “scripts” are cultural narratives that help to create a social plot (Alexander 2004: 91). The YPJ’s *nom de guerres*, can be thought of as the names of the “stage characters”, and their meanings are the “script”; they are a conscious linguistic narrative chosen by the girls to project their social situation. They are also a clear display of their beliefs. Although, arguably, the *nom de guerres* are a public performance, I conceptualise them as private because the girls were committed to them in private interactions too. I will now highlight the symbolic importance of the namesand subsequently suggest that their meaningsprovide a culturally informed “script” by which the symbolic identity of the women are socially expected to live up to.

In most militaries *nom de guerres* are used for security and safety reasons, but for the YPJ they also have far extending cultural implications. It was shown in the second chapter how the Kurds in Rojava have been historically repressed by the powers of the Syrian state, especially how their culture – including Kurdish names – was prohibited (Yildiz 2005: 118). Women are not just assigned a “code” name at random but they are given the opportunity to choose their own, subsequently re-defining their place and identity within Kurdish culture. In this sense, drawing on Alexander’s work on cultural pragmatics (2006: 77), their names can be seen as the metaphoric site where the pragmatic and symbolic elements of a performance are intertwined. On the one hand they have a very practical military use, but they are also a conscious linguistic symbol used to express their newly defined place in society. Knowing the agency women in the YPJ have in deciding their *nom de guerres* leads us to question how these names are chosen and what cultural meanings are behind them.

A representative from the *Komalên Jinên Kurdistan* (Kurdish Women’s Liberation Movement, KJK) told me that the names women chose when they join the YPJ represent a new stage of their life beginning[[12]](#footnote-12). This is echoed in an online public interview for the *Financial Times* with Narin Afrin, a YPJ commander: “By picking a new name, you are separating yourself in every way from your old self and whatever that past may have held before you chose revolution” (*quoted in* Solomon 2014). There is a story behind every name; some are related to nature and some are the names of fallen martyrs[[13]](#footnote-13). When the YPJ women I met introduced themselves, they told me their *nom de guerres* proudly and without hesitation, suggesting that this adopted identity has become an intrinsic part for them. Their names demonstrate a direct connection and commitment to Kurdish history and culture, and are thus an effective linguistic symbol to perform their beliefs, values, and allegiances.

Several of the girls’ names were particularly culturally symbolic. One girl was named *Amara* meaning “one of us”. It is also the name of Ocalan’s native village and a Turkish revolutionary woman in the PKK who died in 1995. Another was named *Leyla* after Leyla Soylemez, one of the three Kurdish women that were infamously shot in Paris in 2013. A third was called *Arin* after Arin Mirkan who is one of the most known martyrs in the fight against Daesh as she was the first female to carry out a suicide bomb attack in Kobane. Not all the names are after martyrs; one girl was named *Newroz* which translates to “new year” and another named *Mariya* which means “warrior”. I myself had also been given a Kurdish name by a member of the YPG. I was named *Beritan* which I later learnt was after a female martyr known for sacrificing herself to the PKK instead of surrendering to the enemy, and for also fighting against gendered relations within the PKK[[14]](#footnote-14). Hence, they evidently have extensive connotations; but to what effect do these conscious, ideological performances have on the women?

Charon posits that linguistic symbols allow individuals to imagine and perceive a reality beyond the concrete. As shown, the meaning of the *nom de guerres* is multi-layered. They signify more than just a display of beliefs, values, and allegiances. They also symbolise the end of one life and the beginning of another; the free expression of a culture once prohibited; and, as I now put forward, a symbolic identity with expectations attached. I suggest that the meanings behind *nom de guerres* give the women in the YPJ a mythologised identity, an imagined standard – or “script” - by which to live. In theatre, actors are given a “script” and the audiences expects their performance to be synonymous with that script. This same idea can be metaphorically applied to the YPJ’s *nom de guerres.* The women from the YPJ chose a “character” (the *nom de guerre*), are given a “script” (the meaning attached to the *nom de guerre*), and the “audience” (society) subsequently expects them to act accordingly.

In order to substantiate the claim that there are high social expectations placed on the YPJ, I interviewed and observed external reactions to the YPJ to see how society treat and see them. One of these examples is from *Desteya Jin* (the Women’s Commission). On one of the pamphlets given to us on our visit there is an image of Arin Mirkan (the YPJ woman who heroically blew herself up in Kobane), and there are photographs of YPG/YPJ helping, what looks like, refugees.[[15]](#footnote-15) There are four photographs on the pamphlet in total, three of which are of YPG/YPJ members. This implies they hold the military units in high esteem. In an interview with the head of the Commission, however, I asked her whether they had any relations with the YPJ; her instant response being “No!” She insisted that “The YPJ are very powerful and educated, they are very strong. In two years they have never had a YPJ member come with a problem.”[[16]](#footnote-16) She spoke about them as though they were undefeatable, immune to the psychological effects of such a bloody conflict. This invulnerability was mirrored when we visited a house for wounded YPJ and YPG fighters. When attempting to ask on of the YPJ fighters about possible psychological trauma they experienced they completely denied it. They said that physically Daesh may have hurt their bodies but their minds cannot be attacked.[[17]](#footnote-17) Both of these instances validate that some members of society view the YPJ as somewhat invincible.

These societal expectations and perceived roles attached to the “script”, can be seen to create a “social face”. To re-iterate Goffman’s “face-work”, the “face” is the image of the self that is presented (1967: 5). An individual is “maintaining face” when she is consistently portraying this self (ibid: 7), and when she is inconsistent in doing so she is in “wrong face” (ibid: 8). Being in “wrong face” can occur when she is surprised or unprepared, or when there are external influences that discredit the “face”. The “social face”, then, is made up of the impressions and images that an actor is expected to live up to by those around her. The individual internally and externally regulates this self which is perceived by others and acts accordingly (ibid: 9-10). It is similar to the pygmalian effect, or the self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby the greater the expectation placed upon somebody, the better they perform. Let us now apply Goffman’s “face-work” to the “script” behind the *nom de guerres* and see what effect this has on their behaviour.

The “social face” of the YPJ is one of fearlessness and strength; this can be seen in their public performances where they often portray themselves as strong, brave, courageous, and so forth. In an Australian documentary *Kurdish Female Fighters Against ISIS,* a YPJ Commander says that “women can kill the enemy of humanity” and “[i]n every fight women prove their true strength and ability” (60 Minutes 2014). In the same documentary an injured female fighter claims “No I wasn’t scared, why would I get scared?”, and when asked whether she will return to the frontline once she has recovered she replies “Yes I will go back to fight, I will keep fighting until we’ve won”. In an RT documentary *Her War: Women Vs. ISIS,* a YPJ fighter says “[e]verything’s in our hands, so there’s nothing to fear” (RT 2015). On their Facebook page the YPJ released a message on World Refugee Day from their General Command which read “We had earlier promised, and we renew this vow; as long as Daesh terrorists’ oppression continues to press the society, we will not stop our efforts”. This same narrative is written on their official website under the explanation of how their “Internal System”*[[18]](#footnote-18)* works when it lists the key features of the YPJ as “brave and active…with strong initiative” (YPG 2015). These are all examples of the YPJ’s “script” being consciously performed in public in order to project their “social face”. Polletta and Jasper (2001) hypothesise that external and internal displays of identity differ, the former being stronger, so how do the private performances of the YPJ compare? And are they successful in “maintaining face”?

At the language academy, when interviewing Amara and Jiyan, I was taken aback at their reply when I asked if they would sacrifice themselves for their friends in the YPJ. Despite their young age they both said – without delay or thought – that they definitely would. In spite of the visible injuries that they showed us, they both said that although they miss the YPJ they *really* miss the frontline. Jiyan said that she “feel[s] very strong fighting”[[19]](#footnote-19). At the barracks in Tell Brak, when asked of the reasons behind joining the YPJ, one of the informants said: “to get revenge for our martyrs, for our friends that have been killed”; and to “defend, protect, all human values in all the world”. Another woman from the YPJ said that “We are [society’s] background, we defeat Daesh” [[20]](#footnote-20). Both exemplify this “social face” of tenacity and courage attached to the “script” of the *nom de guerres.* This shows that these women interviewed were successful in “maintaining face” and that there is a level of continuity between the private and public conscious performances of the YPJ, refuting Polletta and Jasper’s hypothesis.

To summarise my argument thus far, the *nom de guerres* provide the YPJ with a culturally informed “script” that influences how they consciously perform. The “script” can also be considered the “social face”. Attached to the YPJ’s “social face” is heroic imagery and societal expectations; openly showing weakness would be an antithesis to this “face”. The conscious, private performances of the women I interviewed at Tell Brak and the language academy, were successful in acting out the “stage character” written into their “scripts”; they were “maintaining face”. Not all of the private performances I observed, however, showed the YPJ women “maintaining face”. The following section is going to focus on the unconscious, private ideological performances of the YPJ in order to observe how the conscious performances of the “social face” relates to the messages unconsciously conveyed through appearance and manner.

**5.3 Actions (and symbols) speak louder than words: Unconscious private ideological performances**

This section is going to argue that the unconscious private ideological performances of the YPJ informants were not always synonymous with their conscious performances. As Fuist argues, “a performer may be communicating certain impressions consciously and other impressions unconsciously in a single performance” (Fuist 2013: 31). This is not a criticism of their performances, rather it illustrates their multivocality. Similar to a stage performance, the “script” of an ideological performance is not sufficient in convincing the audience of the story; the costumes, aesthetics, and the quality of the performance are all of great importance. For Fuist, unconscious private ideological performances are concerned with the messages conveyed to the audience through appearance and manner, specifically their behaviour and use of props (2013: 436). With regard to appearance, I will mainly focus on their clothing. What one wears is a seemingly conscious choice, but the implications that these modes of appearance have can also be seen as unconscious as the symbolic meaning attached to them may be unintentional or unknown. Analysing the manner of the YPJ relies on my observations of their behaviour. The visit to Tell Brak will be the focal point of analysis as it is where I was most able to observe private social interactions between the girls.

**5.3.1 Appearance**

In the literature on performance theory it is widely agreed that appearance plays a considerable role. Alexander argues that actors need material objects to make the invisible visible (2006: 35), Goffman calls one’s appearance their “costume” and argues that they are a stimuli for the actor to tell the audience of their social status (1959: 34). Fuist, referring to clothing as “props”, finds that they can portray one’s ideology unconsciously and can signal cultural membership (2013: 438). Physical appearance instantly enables the audience to place the actor within a meaning system because of the symbolism attached. For example, the meaning associated with wearing a cross around one’s neck assumes an association with Christianity, whilst a ring worn on the fourth finger of the left hand signifies marriage. In their public performances, the YPJ are seldom seen without their combat clothes on, conveying a narrow message of military identity. How did their appearance in their private performances compare, and what messages did they convey?

At Tell Brak all of the girls present were wearing their combat clothing. Aside from its practical use for camouflage, combat clothing is an image used to portray a corporal entity (Hunt and Benford 2004: 439). In South Kurdistan (Northern Iraq), there are multiple Peshmerga forces that are fragmented by political affiliations (Devigne 2011: 48). Between the different factions multiple war fatigues are worn. Regardless of how they operate, this mismatch identity portrays the visible image of a complicated and uncoordinated force. The YPJ, on the other hand, are always seen to be wearing the same digital camouflage print. This symbolises a more unified and organised force, and a detectable collective identity. From my own observations at Tell Brak and from the before mentioned documentaries, YPJ leadership are also seen to wear the same combat uniform, their appearance reflecting horizontality in the units. Although the YPJ do operate on a hierarchical structure it is mainly for practical reasons. In the YPG/YPJ all leaders are democratically elected. One YPG commander, when speaking about this process, said “We all get together and we run elections from within and then elect who the comrades think is good for the job” (Ahmad 2012). In their internal structure it states that “Each member of the YPJ has the right to follow and criticize their Leadership” (YPG 2015). Furthermore, there is a high mortality rate of commanders.[[21]](#footnote-21) These are all illustrative of the YPJ’s unconventional approach to leadership and helps to explain why they wear the same attire.

The YPJ women I met were not always wearing combat clothing. In their private performances I often observed them dressed in dark blue *shirwal* (traditional baggy Kurdish trousers) and a light blue shirt. The girls at the youth academy were wearing these in the evening, as were many of the YPG and YPJ at the house for the wounded fighters, and Amara and Jiyan and the language academy were wearing the shirts. Although not confirmed, this appeared to be their informal wear as all the women I observed wearing them were “off-duty”. These clothes are thought of as guerrilla clothes, and they bear striking resemblance to the clothes the PKK guerrillas wear[[22]](#footnote-22). The significance of these clothes was made apparent when interviewing Amara and Jiyan at the language academy. They were both injured so they were not active fighters, and they were temporarily living at the academy so were not in a YPJ compound, yet they insisted on wearing their light blue shirt. After the interview I asked them if there was any significance in their choice of clothing. Amara said, that if she were permitted to, she would wear the *shirwal* too but her teacher at the academy would not allow her because it “is a civilisation place, not a military place.” This demonstrates that these traditional Kurdish clothes are associated with the YPJ as the teacher clearly links them to the military. For Amara and Jiyan, they are an ideoligical performance as they convey the message of loyalty and allegiance to the YPJ.

Aside the guerrilla clothing, the Kurdish scarf has also become synonymous with the YPJ. I propose that the scarf is a form of material culture that is being used as a “prop” by the YPJ to regain control of their cultural identity. As with the *shirwal* and shirts, the scarves can also be seen to be ideologically performative as they are a visual expression of values, beliefs and allegiances. Colourful and floral with red beads woven into the tassels, I was told that the scarves are a traditional Kurdish folklore pattern and only made by the YPG and YPJ.[[23]](#footnote-23) As mentioned previously, expressions of Kurdish culture have long been forbidden in Syria and Kurdish identity repressed. According to Tsosie, material culture goes further than merely “art”, but can also be a means of cultural survival (2003: 9). The scarves, then, can be seen as a symbol of the re-contextualisation of the broader emancipation narrative that is being constructed by the YPJ. The fact that both the YPG and YPJ wear the scarves is significant because it not only exhibits a performance of culture, but it also envisages gender equality on the frontline; an integral element of Ocalan’s ideology on women’s liberation. So far the unconscious messages conveyed through appearance “props” have been tantamount to the conscious performances of the “script”, both highlighting military and Kurdish identity. The final element of appearance will focus on a contrasting performance of appearance that I continuously observed.

When at the Tell Brak barracks, one of the girls I interviewed was wearing a symbol traditionally associated with femininity: a pink bow in her hair. She was not unique. Most of the YPJ I met had braided hair and some also wore similar accessories. The braided hair is largely practical, but it is often at the focus of mainstream Western media, feeding into their fascination of the fighters as being “’badass’ Amazons” (Dirik 2014). This is where the multivocality of the YPJ’s ideological performances can begin to be seen. Thus far, the “script” and the “props” used have performed the expected attributes associated with the military: bravery, courage, fearlessness and so forth. The pink bow conveys an alternative message that femininity and militarism can be compatible with one another[[24]](#footnote-24). There is the pre-assumption that the two are in opposition; this is not unqualified because the military has historically witnessed persistent male dominance (Sjoberg 1979: 234-235). In much of the literature on gender and conflict, femininity is thought of as being under the control of the masculinised military structure, but the YPJ are defying this. As is seen in this performance, the YPJ are not taking on a masculinised appearance in order to be accepted in the forces, but instead are visibly displaying symbols of femininity. It is perhaps a tenuous conclusion to be drawn from such a seemingly insignificant symbol of appearance. Hence, the manner – or the “acting” - of the YPJ will now be turned to in order to substantiate the claim.

**5.3.2 Manner**

The manner of the YPJ is most demonstrative of the multivocality of their ideological performances. As has been conveyed, in both their public and private conscious performances the YPJ have displayed military professionalism and valour. The messages conveyed through their behaviour, however, is not always synonymous with this image. The literature on performance theory tends to agree that the quality of the performance is an integral part of its success. No matter how captivating the script is or how well-crafted the aesthetics are, the performer must act well to ensure success. On a theoretical level, my argumentation that their “acting” does not match their “script” or “costume” suggests a criticism of their performances. Referring back to Goffman’s “face-work” he argues that when the actor is not maintaining their “social face” they are in “wrong face”, but this is not the case here. Rather, I suggest that these unconscious private gestures – when the YPJ are seemingly not “maintaining face” – contribute more significantly to the process of collective identity than the public displays of their “social face”.

At Tell Brak there were moments that perfectly demonstrated the parallels in the YPJs performances. During the interview we all sat in a loose circle and the girls freely came and went. The informal setting allowed the girls to act in a natural way. They were joking amongst themselves, nudging each other, and laughing. They all appeared very close; constantly embracing each other. There was one particular instance where these parallel “faces” were most pertinent. Halfway through our interview a group of YPJ fighters returned from the frontline. In combat clothing, a Kalashnikov slung over her shoulder, and a Kurdish scarf wrapped around her head, one woman approached us. Despite these conscious ideological performances of appearance, when she arrived she hugged her friends, sat down on the grass, and proceeded to play with flowers on the ground and whisper with other YPJ members. The sororal manner of this woman was in contradiction to typical military characteristics. She did not feel obliged to maintain the heroic “social face” but openly acted in a sisterly and feminine way. These unconscious performances convey the message that the YPJ are comfortable with their femininity and feel as though they do not have to adopt features of masculinity to be accepted in the military. This paper is concerned with ideological performances though, not gender performances, so how can these unconscious performances of femininity be thought of as such?

I propose that these acts of femininity are a visible display of the women’s liberation ideology that the YPJ are largely built upon, and a response to the gendered subordination that Kurdish women have long experienced. On International Women’s Day in 2014 Ocalan had a message for Kurdistan. He said that “Women have a unique quality”, and he called on women to “Trust [their] femininity” (*quoted in* Rojhelat 2014). These quotes demonstrate the agency that Ocalan places on women. His ideology has gender equality at the forefront of its thinking, and due to their historically subordinate position in the region, women must be the focus to achieve this. While interviewing Cemil Bayik, a member of the PKK leadership, we asked him how the war against Daesh has influenced the role of women in the PKK and if it has increased the focus on women’s liberation ideology. He answered:

Yes you’re right, it has changed. Daesh attacked women; it attacked, enslaved, kidnapped and sold women…[it] is an enemy of women…and now Daesh is against women and against life. It is a duty to go and fight against Daesh. [[25]](#footnote-25)

Bayik’s reply suggests that the war Daesh has waged on women has increased their motivations to fight, and he confirms that the war is increasing the attention on women’s liberation ideology.

The first point was echoed at Tell Brak when I asked someone from the YPJ whether membership has increased recently in light of the current conflict and she said that it is always increasing. I asked why and she replied: “[because] female can be in the frontline, can be fighters, can be side with man in the same place.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The growing number of women joining the YPJ, and the performances of femininity, can be seen as a reaction to the hyper-masculinity of Daesh. As has been explained, Kurdish women’s oppression is multi-layered. They have been marginalised for being Kurdish and for being female. I have shown how the current power vacuum occupied by the Kurds in Syria has allowed the YPJ to freely express their Kurdish culture – seen through their *nom de guerres* and Kurdish scarves. In the same vein, it is possible that the exceedingly patriarchal values of Daesh has had the adverse effect intended and has led to the YPJ being empowered by their female identity. This offers an explanation for the messages of femininity conveyed through their “manner”, and shows how such performances of femininity are ideologically motivated.

This sub-section has shown that the unconscious private ideological performances of the YPJ are not always correlative to their conscious performances. They consciously dramatise their beliefs, values, and allegiances through the symbols associated to their *nom de guerres* and traditional Kurdish attire, portraying themselves as intrepid and bold. The messages conveyed through their behaviour, seen through the way they interact with one another, is gentler and more effeminate. Now the discussion turns to the latter part of my research puzzle to try to answer how these conscious and unconscious private performances are contributing to the process of collective identity within the YPJ.

**5.4 Collective Identity**

This section will focus on how the private ideological performances of the YPJ locate themselves and others in meaning systems, and how this leads to feelings of “we-ness”. To recap, the definition of collective identity has been formulated as follows: a discursive and interactional process in which individuals situate themselves in meaning systems depending on their cognitive, moral, and emotional connection to a broader community and, through a sense of “we-ness”, create a unified social actor. “Meaning systems” are the “’meaningful worlds we create with others” through the use of cultural symbols, knowledges, language, aesthetics, and interaction; they are what identities are elaborated on (Fuist 2013: 428). Cognitive and moral connections are similar to values, beliefs, and allegiances. Using a Fuistian framework I have been able to show how the YPJ’s ideological performances are strongly linked to Kurdish culture and women’s liberation ideology – these can be thought of as the “broader community”. To address the emotional connections, I will try to identity what and how performative factors contribute to feelings of “we-ness” and solidarity. Firstly, the conscious performance of the *nom de guerres* will be analysed, followed by the unconscious performances observed in the YPJ’s manner.

The *nom de guerres* provide a clear example of how interaction, knowledge and cultural symbols can create and sustain meaning systems. As has been shown, the *nom de guerres* all carry a specific meaning. Their names connect to a “script” that only those audiences with the relevant social and cultural knowledge will understand. In this sense they are multivocal. Previously, multivocality has referred to the performer conveying different messages through the same performance and to the same audience. Here, multivocality is referring to a performance projecting different meanings to different audiences depending on the meaning system the audience is placed in (Fuist 2013: 434). For example, had I met these women with no former cultural knowledge I would not have known or been able to understand that these names had extended meaning. Through interactions with members of the YPJ and PKK I was able to learn their meanings and recognise their significance. When I introduced myself with my Kurdish name – that I was honorarily given by a member of the YPG – I placed myself, as the audience, into this shared meaning system with the informants. This illustrates that meaning systems are not static but are created and reshaped through interaction.

Within the YPJ, these names are cultural material; their identities are expressed through them. Although these names are individually chosen, they are all taken from the same body of cultural knowledge. A meaning system is a “’meaningful world” we create”. The *nom de guerres,* in a very literal sense, provide a new identity for the women who join the YPJ, but they also create a symbolic world that encourages a sense of “we-ness” within the units. “We-ness” evokes the ability to recognise and be recognised as belonging to a social unit. The *nom de guerres* clearly do this. The names also show commitment to the YPJ. The more committed an individual is to their identity, the higher the likelihood that their performance reflects those societal values associated with the identity (Stryker 1980). In their public performances their *nom de guerres* are used for safety but even in private performances, where security did not require their use, they still preceded to. This shows commitment to the names, and suggests that this adopted symbolic identity has become engrained in how they identify. Thus the names are not only a conscious ideological performance of values, beliefs, and allegiances but also contribute to the process of collective identity through the shared cultural meaning system they create; the recognition from others that they arouse; and the commitment they encourage. This is an example of the YPJ’s conscious performance. I will now turn to how their unconscious performances are contributing to the process of constructing meaning systems and “we-ness”.

It is the unconscious messages of femininity in the YPJ’s private performances that adds depth and uniqueness to their collective identity. So far it has been shown how the *nom de guerres* create a collective cultural identity. In the former section it was described how the YPJ’s combat clothing produces corporal unity, and thus a visible collective military identity. The messages of femininity conveyed through their manner unifies the women through their female identity. This meaning system they are creating is significant because it demonstrates that they are not masculinising themselves in order to fit into the traditionally male dominated world of the military. Feminine bodies in the military normally conjures up images of vulnerability and weakness (Welland 2010), hence why the YPJ’s unconscious private performances are of such importance. The sisterly acts observed in their manner – playing with and braiding each other’s hair, as well as hugging, joking and whispering together – shows how they are reshaping the gendered militarised body.

Polletta and Jasper question whether “the identity a group projects publically [is] the same one that its members experience” (2001: 285). This is not the case, and they agree. But they predict that a group’s public performance of identity will appear more unified than what members experience (ibid). On the contrary, this appeared to also not be the case for the YPJ. Publically, their identity is often reduced to the military. This unified, yet simplified, identity is due to their clothing being the most significant visible symbol of the meaning system they situate themselves in. In their private performances, however, the meaning systems are multiple and their sense of “we-ness” is multifaceted. As has been shown, they are visibly united through their appearance, ideologically united through Ocalan, psychologically united through their common aim to defeat Daesh, and femininely united through the agency they have as women. Together, these factors all create a sense of “we-ness” among the women I interviewed that appeared stronger than that portrayed in their public performances. Of course this is subjective to my interpretations, but the conscious and unconscious private performances I have analysed suggests that their collective identity goes far beyond that of just fighters.

This chapter has shown the importance of private ideological performances in the process of collective identity. Both the “script” of the *nom de guerres* and the “acting” of femininity create meaning systems that symbolise layers of identity not apparent in their public performances, but that nonetheless play a substantial role in their feelings of “we-ness” and solidarity. This challenges Polletta and Jasper’s claim that, publically, a groups’ identity is more unified than what is felt internally. At the end of his piece, Fuist suggests more research needs to be conducted that connects private performances at the level of social interaction with the ongoing process of collective identity formation. Here, an empirical example has been given which attempts to build this bridge. Before drawing conclusions from the analysis presented, the following chapter will first reflect on some of the limitations of the data and consequently suggest further research that could address these.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this research has been to understand how the ideological performances of the YPJ are influencing the process of collective identity within the female military units in Rojava. Analysing the YPJ through the concept of “ideological performances” has allowed for a focussed discussion on how symbols of beliefs and values, performed at the level of interaction *within* the YPJ, contribute to group solidarity and unity. I have focussed primarily on their conscious and unconscious *private* ideological performances, centrally arguing that such performances play a far more substantial role in the process of collective identity than the image conveyed externally through their macro-scale public performances.

The first section looked at linguistic symbols in their conscious performances, contending that the YPJ’s *nom de guerres* provide the women with a symbolic identity that they are expected to live up to. As the “script” attached to the *nom de guerres* comes from brave and well-acclaimed martyrs, and culturally significant Kurdish places, they prescribe that the women act in synonymy with these images of prowess and heroism. In their conscious performances the YPJ were successful in acting out the “script”, but it was through their unconscious performances where their behaviour was not correlative with this mythologised symbolism.

The second section focussed on these unconscious performances, namely the feminine messages portrayed through their manner. Rather than trivialising the YPJ’s observed “femininity” to traditional connotations of feebleness and vulnerability, it was instead postulated that they are empowered by their female identity because of the hyper-masculinised group they are fighting against, and because of the female-focussed, democratic society they are fighting for. It has been essential to study their unconscious, private performances in the process of collective identity. Without doing so, only the narrow image of a military identity would have been visible, and the ideology, relentless solidarity, and feminist consciousness of these women would have continued unnoticed.

In response to Fuist’s theoretical recommendation that more research is done that connects private performances with identity formation, I have highlighted how integral it is to observe unconscious private performances; it is through these that the YPJ’s multifaceted shared identity is made visible. And, in response to the YPJ Commander Sozda, who said “We don’t want the world to know us for our guns, but for our ideas”, I have looked beyond their undeniable military capabilities and begun to fill the empirical hole surrounding their ideas, aspirations, and motives.

**Further Research**

As was made clear in the methodology chapter, there were inevitable challenges and limitations in this research paper. There are undoubtedly many questions that are left unanswered and, while these do limit the validity and reliability of the argument, they can also contribute to further research.

This research focussed on the effect that the YPJ’s ideological performances are having on the collective identity of the YPJ themselves. Initially, my aim was to study their effect on women in Rojava in general. This was beyond the scope of the project due to methodological restrictions. Doing so would require an increased sample population, I would have to engage in a longer-term participant observation, and make extensive use of interviews and surveys. Extending the research to women in Rojava could produce valuable information on how equality on the frontline really effects equality in society. The question could also be extended to women in the entire Middle East. When I was in South Kurdistan female Peshmerga units had recently been established, supposedly as a public relations move in response to the unprecedented attention the YPJ had been receiving. The female units, however, were not given the opportunity to fight alongside men on the frontline. It was also rumoured that women in South Kurdistan were requesting self-defence lessons from the PKK, again, allegedly due to the reported victories of the YPJ. Exploring whether these developments really are because of the public performances of the YPJ would be worthwhile as it would illuminate the broader effect they are having on audiences constructed across geographical borders.

Another area of interest that I was continuously drawn to was what effect the YPJ performances are having on the YPG, especially the youth members. I intended for the YPJ youth academy to play a far more significant role in this paper than it has but, once again, the time and the length of the paper did not permit it. When I visited the YPJ and YPG youth houses I was struck at the contrast between the two. The YPJ girls were enthusiastic, free-spirited, confident, and unified; when I walked into their house there were moments when it was more representative of a summer camp than a military training academy. The YPG boys, in comparison, were noticeably shyer and reserved. I wonder what implications the highly female-focussed ideology is having on these young girls and boys. For the older members of society, where sexist mind-sets are more entrenched, women’s liberation ideology is needed in order to balance the gender inequality. But in these young members, where patriarchy is far less engrained, could it have an inverse effect? Especially as teenagers are more easily influenced by what they are taught.

And, finally, a comparative study of the YPJ and other female units of revolutionary movements would prove interesting. It would be particularly insightful to study revolutionary movements where the armed struggle has come to an end in order to see how women’s position has improved, or whether it was not at all, in a post-conflict setting. This could provide important lessons theoretically in the field of gender and conflict, and for the YPJ.

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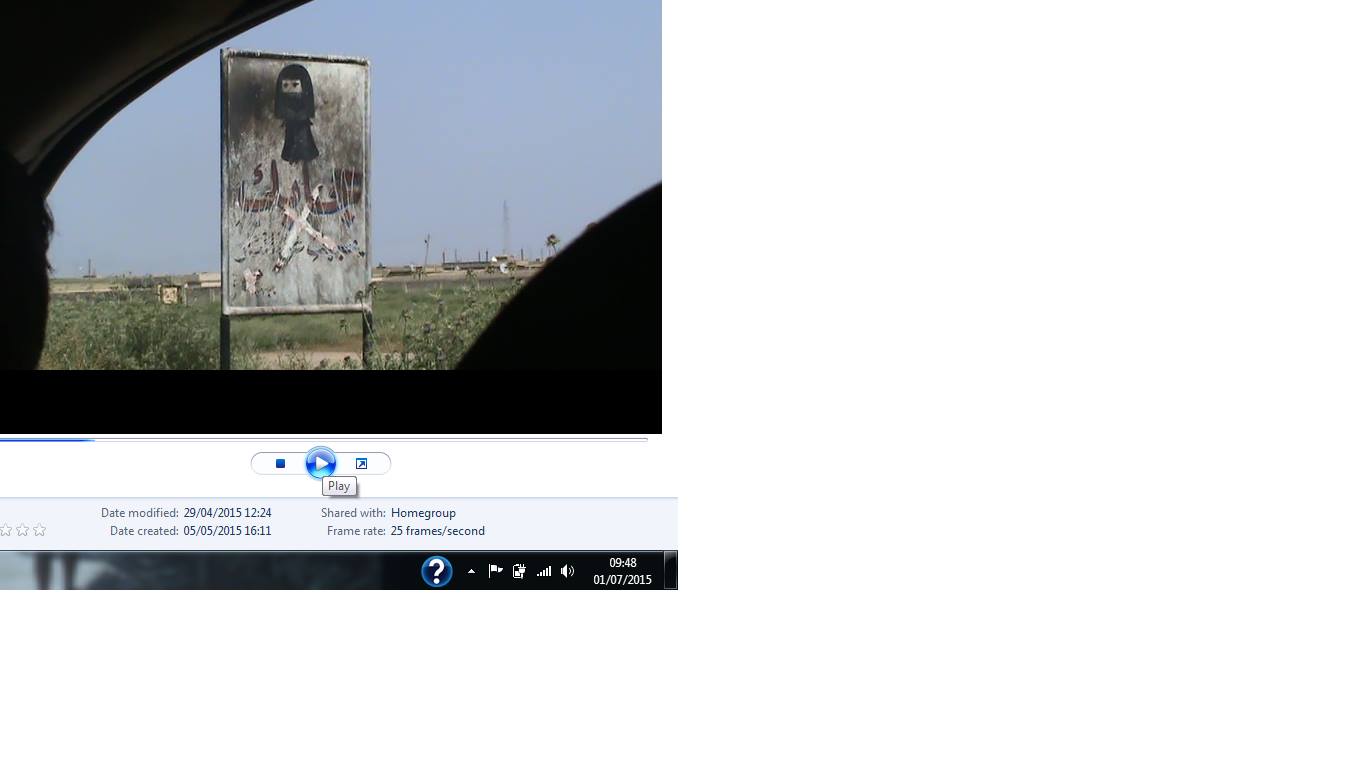
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**Appendix 1**

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1. Sozda is a YPJ Commander in Amûde. This quote is from *Ever wondered what happened to the (women) liberators of Kobani?* by Dilar Dirik. Available: https://undercoverinfo.wordpress.com/2015/05/30/ever-wondered-what-happened-to-the-women-liberators-of-kobani/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zilan Diyar is a Kurdish female guerrilla fighter. This quote is from *The Whole World Is Talking About Us Kurdish Women,* written by Diyar. See bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Conscious that “femininity” in the military conjures up images of vulnerability and weakness, I instead hope to show how the YPJ are destabilising these traditionally held notions and re-shaping new meaning to the word “femininity” in itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Author’s interview with Cemil Bayik at Qandil Mountains in South Kurdistan on 16 May 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Author’s interview with YPJ members at military barracks in Tell Brak, on 30 April 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Their “Internal System”outlines the YPJ’s organisational structure, the military system, their regulations, membership rules, tasks and functions, values, and disciplines. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is the way they are often framed in mainstream Western media. Due to politics, their ideology or link to the PKK is seldom mentioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Appendix 1 for photograph [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Author’s informal talk with women from the YPJ, prior to the interview at Tell Brak on 30 April 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In Ocalan’s pamphlet *Liberating Life: Women’s Revolution* he states that woman is “the most oppressed race, nation or class: no race, class or nation is subjected to such systematic slavery” (2013: 11) and argues that “[i]f we want to construe true meaning to terms such as *equality, freedom, democracy* and *socialism* that we so often use, we need to analyse and shatter the ancient web of relations that has been woven around women” (ibid). In his 8 March International Women’s Day message in 2014 he said: “for a people cannot be free if the women are not free. A revolution is not a revolution if it cannot liberate women. An organisation that cannot organise women is not an organisation” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Qandil Mountains is the ideological, military, and organisational base for the PKK in South Kurdistan (Northern Iraq). Many women from Qandil Mountains came to Rojava at the onset of the revolution to educate society about Ocalan’s ideology. A lot of these women, however, are originally from Rojava and left for Qandil when they joined the PKK. PKK geurrillas also came to train the YPG and YPJ in Rojava. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Author’s interview with Zin, representative of the KJK in Erbil, South Kurdistan, on 5 May 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Author’s interview with Esma, Zekiye, Nudem, and Charchel, senior members of the KJK in the Qandil Mountains, South Kurdistan, on 15 May 2015. The women’s names from the KJK were also of symbolic importance. *Esma* means “high”, *Zekiya* “clever”, *Nudem* “new era”, and *Charchel* is a mountain with four branches. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Author’s interview with Zin, representative of the KJK in Erbil, South Kurdistan, on 5 May 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On our visit to *Desteya Jin,* Amina Omer gave us multiple documents including their basic principles and provisions for women, their rules of procedure, and two pamphlets with information and photographs on. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Author’s interview with Amina Omer, Head of the Women’s Commission, in Qamişlo on 26 April 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Author’s interview with women from the YPJ at a house for the wounded, in Qamişlo on 24 April 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Their “Internal System”outlines the YPJ’s organisational structure, the military system, their regulations, membership rules, tasks and functions, values, and disciplines. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Author’s interview with Jiyan and Amara, wounded members of the YPJ, at the language academy in Derik on 22 April 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Author’s interview with YPJ members at military barracks in Tell Brak, on 30 April 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Most known is Hebun Sinya, a senior female YPJ commander killed in Kobanê in February 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Our translator and some of the informants referred to them as guerrilla clothes. All of the active PKK guerrillas we met in Makhmour and Qandil Mountains were wearing their trademark *shirwal* and shirts. In their public performances YPJ fighters can be seen to wear the khaki guerrilla clothes too. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I was told this during a visit to the YPG youth academy, the neighbouring building to the YPJ youth academy. It was here where we were given our Kurdish names and Kurdish scarves. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I am wary of using the word “feminine”. In light of traditional understandings of femininity, to describe the YPJ as “feminine” and “girly” sounds patronising and unworthy. Associated with the word are the assumptions that women are peaceful, weak, vulnerable, in need of protection, and so on, and this is particularly true for femininity in the military (Welland 2010: 5). I hope to convey how the YPJ are disrupting these traditional understandings and, in turn, redefining femininity and what it is to be a woman in the military. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Author’s interview with Cemil Bayik at Qandil Mountains in South Kurdistan on 16 May 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Author’s interview with YPJ members at military barracks in Tell Brak, on 30 April 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)