Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2019, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1-10
https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/240

ISSN: 2149-1291

Kurdish Diasporic Matters: Signaling New Epistemologies of Difference

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Abstract: Kurdistan and Kurdish diasporas are often conceptualized in singular, essentialized, and monolithic terms. Instead of working through essentializing terms, this article intervenes to insert difference within the category of Kurdish diasporas. By engaging with Lisa Lowe's (1996) conceptualization of "heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity," the article looks at the ways through which Kurdish diasporas differ both in relation to other diasporas and within itself. While engaging with the emergent and growing literature on Kurdish diasporas in Europe, this article introduces new destination sites for Kurdish diasporas that force us to engage with new epistemologies of difference operating within diasporic communities. In the process, this article challenges the ideas of Kurdish diasporas as a coherent, knowable object of study and stresses the need to engage with the fluidity of Kurdish diasporas. Finally, this article introduces the articles for this special issue on Kurdish diasporas.
Keywords*:* Kurdish diasporas, North America, Europe, migration, Kurdistan, identity.

The pounding of busy and rushed feet, the conversations about day's events, multifarious smells of food coming from so many food booths, the loud orders for food, and the shuffling of luggage encompassed New York's Grand Central Station during rush hour. It is here that I met two Kurdish undergraduate exchange students from Turkey. Kuvan[2] and Rekan were studying at a major university in the state of New York; they had completed their study abroad experience and were heading back to North Kurdistan (Turkey) in a few months.

Although my ethnographic project began with Nashville's large Kurdish community, I was beginning to collect some data with the Kurdish community in New York City and in the northeastern United States. I was eager to converse with Kuvan and Rekan. Once we picked a gate to meet at the bottom concourse level, I offered to buy them food. They chose Indian food and we looked around for a place to sit, eat, and start the interview amidst the chaos that is Grand Central. Unable to find seating in the covered area at the bottom floor of Grand Central, we found a table with three vacant chairs in the open seating area on the other side of the "Hale and Hearty" eatery. We sat eating Chicken tikka masala, a beef dish, biriyani, and an order of saag paneer along with three bottles of water. As we started to eat, I realized that the din of rush hour softened as Kuvan and Rekan shared with me what the last few months of being an international student meant. Both spoke with excitement about their student experience in the U.S. university, their life histories, and their links to Kurds across the United States.

Kuvan self-identified as secular while Rekan identified as religious but not orthodox; they were both Sunni Muslim Kurds. While Rekan offered a few comments, it was Kuvan who really dictated the conversation. In particular, with such pleasure on his face, Kuvan expressed his desire to go to all the major Kurdish diasporic spots in the United States, especially the one in Nashville. Here I smiled and mentioned to them that I had spent 5 years in Nashville and knew several of the South Kurdistanis (Iraqi Kurds) and East Kurdistanis (Iranian Kurds) there. Before returning to Turkey, they intimated to me their aspiration to travel to Nashville. Kuvan and Rekan wanted to know more about and connect with the largest Kurdish community in the United States found in Nashville. In fact, they had tracked the Nashville Kurdish community through virtual means.

Kuvan had an active Facebook page and we got to talking about the postings for the Newroz (Kurdish New Year) festivities from across the world, including New Zealand, Australia, Poland and other parts of Europe, and various parts of the United States. He expressed his surprise with the Newroz festivities in Nashville. Something in the background at the festivities had caught his eye. Eager to know more, I asked, "What was surprising about them?" He replied, "They celebrate certain Kurdish heroes and politicians." This included many photos of Nechervan Barzani (head of the Kurdish Democratic Party [KDP] and head of the Kurdish Regional Government [KRG]) alongside other KDP leaderships as well as a picture of Jalal Talabani (leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [PUK] and first post-U.S. invasion President of Iraq). I inquired, "So why does that matter?" Kuvan explained, "They celebrate Kurdish politicians that we do not celebrate [in North Kurdistan]. [laughing] They [South Kurdistanis in Nashville] are more conservative."

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[2] I provided informed-consent forms to all participants and use pseudonyms for all my interlocutors to maintain confidentiality.

Kurdistan, the home land of the Kurds, is often imagined and experienced in diasporic settings with symbolic shared traditions (like Newroz), some common language use, and histories of displacement (King, 2013; Klein, 2011; Ugurlu, 2014). Yet, something else is taking place in the vignette above that questions how we conceptualize Kurdish identity. What we evidence above is not a monolithic, essentialist performance of Kurdish identity. Instead of an equivalent, uniform, and monolithic Kurdistan and Kurdish diasporas, the vignette above points to the "heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity" (Lowe, 1996) in Kurdish diasporas. Instead of creating a singular representation of Kurdistan and Kurdish diasporas, the special issue examines Kurdish communities in new destination sites, their many forms of identity formation, and the complex transnational terrain of diasporic negotiation of self. Kurds across many diasporic settings, as we will see, employed multifaceted ideas of Kurdistan and Kurdish identity in relation to various forms of violence, settler-colonialism, and displacement in West Asia. Practices of Kurdish identity are not about only mediating life in host countries but also, importantly, the relational, transnational and transhistorical negotiation of Kurdish-ness.

Kuvan provided a version of Kurdish identity through his lived experiences in Istanbul that differed from the Kurds in Nashville. Through his own practice of "hero-making" (Arnaldo, Jr., 2016; Thangaraj, 2015a; Thangaraj, Arnaldo, Jr., & Chin, 2016; Verdery, 1999), he created a pantheon of political heroes in virtual spaces through which he delineated competing renditions of Kurdish identity formation (Mahmod, 2016). His surprise at the people being celebrated in Nashville's Kurdish community highlighted the multiple ways diasporas took shape with conflicting, competing, and shifting claims to identity. In this instance, his mention of "conservatism" was just one means by which cultural practice and political affiliation showcased the heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity, and difference within Kurdish diasporas. Kuvan's points illuminated the contested and fluid terrain of Kurdish identity.

Kurdish Studies, has a field has grown, especially with the formation of the Kurdish Studies Network, established by Welat Zeydanlioglu and Ethem Cobam, and an explosion of historical, literary, sociological, and contemporary examinations of both Kurdistan (Gunter, 2016; Rafaat, 2018; Schmidinger, 2019) and of Kurdish diasporas. Yet, the important work on Kurdish diasporas is often limited to those communities in Europe (Eliassi, 2013; Demir, 2013; Keles, 2015). Through this special issue, scholars critically engage with the expansive transnational and transhistorical scales in order to see the diversity of Kurdish diasporas in many locations. Therefore, several of the articles in this special issue highlight Kurdish diasporic communities in the United States, Canada, and even with symbolic ties to India. Through a critical analysis of these new destination sites and a variety of Kurdish actors, including Zazakis, Yezidis, and Alevis, we can theorize how Kurdish identities are framed across contradictory vectors, including political affiliation, gender, religion, and geography.

With the global refugee crisis, migrant crisis, increased authoritarian ethno-national populism across various sectors (Thangaraj, Ratna, Burdsey, & Rand, 2018), and the global war on terror, this issue engages with a population often elided from historical and contemporary analysis. Even though the "Middle East" is a national obsession in the United States, United Kingdom, France, and other western nation-states, there is little engagement with Kurdish diasporas as a result of the hegemonies of "Arab," "Turk," and "Persian" as representative of the "Middle East."

North Kurdistani International Students and Diasporic Identity

Kuvan's construction of Kurdish identity and subsequent cultural practices, which Lisa Lowe (1996) theorized as "hybridity," are based on his relation to capital, educational access, mobility, and lived-experiences of Kurdish identity in Turkey. Thus, Kuvan's cultural practices of Kurdish identity must not be seen as equivalent across Kurdistan or in the Kurdish diasporas. For one thing, through his educational status and his secularity, Kuvan located himself as embodying greater progressive politics than the Kurds in Nashville. Part of this sentiment stemmed from the monumental role of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in southern Turkey (known as North Kurdistan). Abdullah Ocalan, one of the founding members of the PKK, advocated for radical forms of cooperative living, alternate types of social organization outside the framework of a nation-state, and emphasized a certain kind of secularity in opposition to the Sunni Muslim presence in Kurdistan and in Turkey.

Kuvan cherished such ideologies and philosophies of the PKK. Furthermore, both in the literature, such as the work of Orit Bashkin (2012) and Diane King (2013), and in the diasporic imagination among North Kurdistanis, South Kurdistan was imagined as fairly backward and less civilized than other parts of Kurdistan (Bochenska, 2018). Mohammadpour and Soleimani (2019) correctly pointed out that the use of "tribal" and "tribalism" dominates the discourses concerning Kurdistan, especially South Kurdistan. Although Kuvan is a Kurd, his own socialization in Turkey created ideological points of difference that mapped South Kurdistan through tribalistic discourse. Therefore, the North Kurdistani performance of identity for Kuvan implicated a positing of (civilizational and political) difference from South Kurdistanis.

However, one must not fall into creating monolithic representations of Kurdish diasporas by privileging one diasporic subject or one diasporic migration narrative. Thus, I bring in the voices of South Kurdistanis in Nashville to add complexity to these diasporic formations. In particular, I include the work of artist Nuveen Barwari alongside the

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
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https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/240

ISSN: 2149-1291

poem of high school student Sumaya Muhammed. Through their voices and their art, we see their own politics, voices, and identity in Nashville that adds to the wide landscape of Kurdish diasporas. In the process, these two young women offered interpretations of displacement, refugee resettlement, racialization, and embodiments of Islam that demanded an engagement with refugee migration and localized experiences of racialization in Nashville, Tennessee.

Even though I met Kuvan in New York City, which is considered the financial, cultural, and emotional heart of the United States and the center for histories of immigrants and refugees (Matthew 2005), the largest Kurdish community is in Nashville, Tennessee. The Nashville Kurdish community embodies a variety of politics, which are on contradictory poles of progressive and conservative. As the Kurds in Nashville have long been supporters of the Republican Party and vehement supporters of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq, it might be easy to position them as "conservative" within the U.S. political spectrum of conservative-liberal. North Kurdistanis, as a result of the U.S. support of Turkey, were much more critical of U.S. foreign policy and might be interpellated as progressive through American epistemologies of political alignment. However, a deeper historical and ethnographic examination challenges such binary, dichotomous, and shallow reading of Kurdish diasporas in Nashville and in Istanbul, Turkey.

Although I have ethnographically charted the Kurdish diasporic community in the northeastern United States, my original fray into Kurdish diasporas began in 2011 when I began my research on the South Kurdistanis in Nashville. Through my immigrant and refugee rights activism in Nashville, I got to know Kurdish American activists in organizations such as Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition and the Nashville International Center for Empowerment as well as those on Mayor Karl Dean's New Americans Advisory Council. With time spent working alongside such devoted activists, I conducted an ethnography of Nashville's Kurds with a focus on the lives of female Kurdish activists during this time of the "global war on terror." In particular, as U.S. media used conservative representations of Muslim women to justify military and economic presence in Iraqi Kurdistan (Alsultany, 2012; Nguyen, 2011), the lives of head-scarf wearing female Muslim Kurdish American activists challenged such essentialized and racialized renderings of Kurds. Their embodiment and performance of politics did not align neatly with the U.S. Republican party's mantra against Muslim Americans, especially during this era of the Trump Presidency.

While these Kurdish activists are recognized immediately in their community and across many Kurdish diasporic locales, at the Newroz festivities in Nashville celebrated and memorialized certain men who were leaders of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and some figures associated with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Several of the early Kurds who moved to Nashville in the late 1970s have ties to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and especially the KDP. On the other hand, Kuvan grew up in Turkish Kurdistan and lived in Turkey, his rendering of "radical" heroes was based on the organizations and individuals who challenged the enduring Turkish state violence against the Kurds. The collective memorialization and commemoration of Ocalan among North Kurdistanis did not operate equivalently across Kurdistan or, in the case of this special issue, within the many Kurdish diasporas.

Kurds in Nashville and South Kurdistani Diasporic Politics

The young Nashville South Kurdistani American activist women were key figures in the community, seen as heroes by Kurdish youth, and respected in the larger Nashville and middle Tennessee communities. Their form of politics and their practices of self, as mentioned earlier, were informed by the particularities of migration, refugee status, relation to capitalism, relation to U.S. imperialism, and to categories of race, gender, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, and nation. For Kuvan, his secularity and affinity to the PKK were signs of his politics and a performance of modernity. Most the South Kurdistani activists in Nashville were pious Sunni Muslim women. Piety, for these women, was a realization of their self, an intimate connection to Islam, and a space for social justice work (Mahmood, 2005). While Kuvan distanced himself from Islam to foreground his Kurdish identity, the Kurdish activists foregrounded their Muslim identity as part and parcel of their Kurdish identity. Nuveen Barwari's art and installations also complicate these simplistic renderings of migration, religion, gender, and diasporic social formations. Her work underscored the way Islam and being Muslim provided important political critique during this time of the "global war on terror" and rising Islamophobia. Instead of positioning Islam and Kurdish identity as polar opposites, she collapsed them in nuanced ways. In her "Let's Face It" installation, Barwari aimed to shed light on "the struggles that Muslims in America and other parts of the world deal with every day." (https://fufucreations.com/lets-face-it-installation/) While simultaneously addressing the "stereotypical bias against Muslims" in both western contexts and within the Kurdish diaspora, she captured the dialectical relations of power through the different scales of diaspora, nation, and the global flows of people, ideas, and politics.

Nuveen Barwari complicates our understanding of the Muslim woman in hijab through her art by articulating the various affective economies undergirding Kurdish communities, Islamic identity, and transnational flows of ideologies (Zein 2019). In her installation, a variety of images of Muslim women in hijab circulates, mediates, and

differently and differentially narrativizes the site of the gallery and the Muslim body. Barwari explains, "Each hijab is wrapped in a unique style, and different color." While mainstream media and political pundits essentialize the clothing even failing to account for the differences between hijab, niqab, and burkas, they also fail to attend to the agentive practices employed by women in how, when, and what types of head-covering they practice (Peek, 2010; Khabeer, 2016). Counter to these mainstream discourses, the artistic installation and sophisticated imagination of Nuveen Barwari asks us to think and "imagine otherwise" (Chuh, 2003) about a sense of subjectlessness that enables both a critique and understanding of different relations of power by putting in conversation both the hijab wearer and the audience gazing at the pious Muslim woman.

Barwari stresses, "These pieces are in honor of all the women around the globe, east to west who face very different types of oppressions yet are in so many ways sharing a similar struggle." Whereas the case of the "oppressed" Muslim woman is used to support western imperialism and occupation of West Asia/Middle East (Nguyen, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 2013), the category of "Muslim woman" is not stable, fixed, or uniform. Rather, mainstream media and discursive productions interpellated the Muslim woman to simultaneously construct the contours of Muslim masculinity and Muslim femininity both in and out of Kurdish social contexts, whereby Muslim masculinities are expected to commit violence upon the latter through Islamic patriarchy (Alsultany, 2012; Ratna, Samie, Jamieson, & Thangaraj, 2017; Inhorn, 2012; Thangaraj, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

In fact, with histories of Arab settler-colonialism, Turkish settler-colonialism, and Persian settler-colonialism, diasporic Kurds with nationalist desires often insisted upon a pre-Islamic identity grounded in Zoroastrianism as a way to distance themselves from Islam, which some Kurdish nationalists considered as Arabized. In this manner, Zoroastrianism acted as a foil for modernity and civilization while displacing racial meanings of barbarism upon Arabs and Islam (Eliassi, 2013). Zoroastrianism, with a longer history than Islam, additionally served to lay claim to land colonized by Arabs, Turks, and Persians. In a way, Kuvan's mention earlier about Kurdish Nashville integrated his own lived experiences with the dominant ideologies circulating about Muslim women to offer his verdict of Kurdish Nashville as conservative.

Nuveen Barwari asks the audience to push back against such representations and systems of meaning orbiting around Muslim women. Barwari provided an explanation for the structure and design of the installation: "The faces are covered in reflective sheets, so when the viewer walks up to it; one will see bits and pieces of their own reflection in each face. This symbolizes the beauty of how the hijab is an outer representation of what these women stand for, but the inner beauty is bits that only you can see if you get close enough." Here, both subjectification and objectification exist in the same space of the Muslim woman's face. Instead of isolating the practice of wearing a hijab in a social vacuum, Barwari pushed the image outside of simplistic renderings while concurrently providing a critical understanding of the context of power and agency of the women in hijab.

In Figure 1, Barwari offered one particular example of the "Let's Face It" installation. We see the hijab covering the reflective face and then spreading across space, almost like a western bridal dress. "Face" is a critical point that must be extrapolated as several important questions emerge. Who is she facing? What does she want us to see? As she faces forward, she also seems to crouch ready to pounce upon the stereotypical depictions of Muslim women. Furthermore, the ways in which the hijab flows beyond just her face intimates the multiple persons, communities, and meanings that inhabit this wide space, both in and out of the hijab. What do we see when we look beyond her? How can we look at her to tell us about how we face certain realities of diasporic life? What do we have to face when we look? What do we face when we choose not to look? I see the expanding of the hijab as also an intervention that claims place. It is an act of place-making. It is, as I see it, an expansive claim to Kurdistan, Kurdish identity, and Islam that is once expansive and outside the territorial limitations and hegemony of the nation (Gopinath, 2018). In a way, the spread hijab offers a reading of Kurdish "regions" that are always interlocked with various types of movement, shifting ideologies, and structures of power (Gopinath, 2018), yet offering an everlasting critique of the nation and its powers of (il)legibility.

In this instance, "Let's Face It" is a request to directly engage, with theoretical honesty and empirical depth, with the dominant, western representations of the Muslim woman. It is also a request and a demand to interrogate the longer histories of "Orientalism" (Said, 1978) that govern not only western representations of Muslim women but also how they are represented within minority Kurdish communities. In that way, "Let's Face It" untangled the relation between the viewer and the subject/object of the western gaze. Through such an exhibit, Barwari reclaimed Muslim identity with Kurdish communities. "Facing it" demands that we then see how the west constructs and sustains itself as a liberal, democratic entity through the production of the enslaved, barbaric, and non-modern "Middle East" Muslim "Other" (Alsultany & Shohat, 2013). Finally, "Let's Face It" is an invitation to render how the process of "Othering" involves intimate connections between race, religion, and gender.

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2019, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1-10
https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/240

ISSN: 2149-1291

Figure 1. Muslim woman with hijab with reflective material. Adapted from "Let's Face It" installation. By N. Barwari (2018)

"Let's Face It" challenges us to think about West Asia and West Asian diasporas in non-essentialist terms. What Barwari offered was a refusal to fix subjectivity, rather she demonstrated the multiple forces and the larger social context through which the figure of the hijab-wearing woman emerges. Likewise, the opening piece in this special issue is a poem by a Kurdish Nashville high school student, Sumaya Muhamed. In her poem, Muhamed (2019) centers the lives of young Kurdish Americans in the diaspora while projecting both into the past and future. Through such temporal and spatial shifts, she decouples dominant nativist rendering of Muslim (Kurdish) women as always victims and as racially ambiguous (Thangaraj, 2015; Ho, 2015) through interjecting her own experiences as a young pious Kurdish Muslim woman in Nashville. Muhamed also weaves seamlessly the Kurdish curation of history and their indigenous claims to land—Kurdistan. Yet, instead of just celebrating a certain Kurdish history, this high school student provides a radical critique of dominant representations of Kurds both in their ancestral home and in the host nation. We see Nashville and the Bible Belt emerge at the same time that Kurdish identity expands notions of belonging across West Asia. Through such a critique, Muhamed offers a space for social justice work that can unite all quadrants of Kurdistan while implicating the Nashville Kurdish community and younger generation of Kurds as the agents of change. When we couple the poem with Nuveen Barwari's art, we then have nuanced localized experiences of diasporic life and more expansive understandings of Kurdish diasporas.

Why Kurdish Diasporas Matter

As we can see, each member of these diasporic communities has different relations to violence, exclusion, migration, capital, and mobility. The mainstream dictates and hegemonic understandings of identity and migration are reconceptualized and "creolized" (Mercer, 2003) within each host nation through the interaction between diasporic communities, the politics of the host nation, and the longing for home (Hall, 2003; Louie, 2003). Diaspora, accordingly, becomes a multiply inflected, interjected, policed, and regulated space (Thangaraj, 2015a). Diasporas borrow across various routes of migration and have different relationships laterally with other marginalized communities and to the center (Clifford, 1997; Bahri & Vasudeva, 1996). Just as the experience of meeting the North Kurdistani students disrupted my own understanding of Kurdish diasporas and the multiple internal politics and contestations, this special issue hopes to simultaneously converse with the seminal scholarship on Kurdish diasporas while opening spaces to interrogate such academic and social formations. For example, the North Kurdistanis in the United States that I got to know arrived through student visas, business opportunities, and professional openings while the significant majority of South Kurdistanis in Nashville arrived as refugees and illiterate farmers with their young children. Thus, in this special issue, while engaging with Kurds in Turkey and Europe, we also have important articles from new and understudied sites in the United States and Canada. This issue proves important as diasporas become critical sites to see how Kurds manage, mediate, and negotiate the crisis in Kurdistan alongside the rise of Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL), the denied referendum for Kurdish statehood, the increase in state violence against Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Syria, and the everyday practices of desire and pleasure.

As Aynur de Rouen and I were conceptualizing this special issue while in conversation with Yuksel Serindag, we wanted to not only complicate Kurdish identity but unravel hegemonic understandings of Kurdish diasporas. With the close proximity and relationship of Turkey to Europe and the EU, there have been longer and more substantial migrations of Kurds to various European sites (Demir 2013). While we attend to Kurdish diasporas in Europe, we aim to additionally illuminate Kurdish diasporas in other parts of the world. The movement out of Kurdistan takes place through numerous cartographic locations; thus, centering Europe with Kurdish diasporas fails to account for other exit and arrival points. Kurdish communities spread throughout the globe, in both the global north and the global south. In addition to the United States, there are growing communities across Australia, New Zealand (Aghapouri, 2018), Canada, Africa, India, and other locations. Accordingly, each specific physical location provides very important historiographies, social locations, and diverse lived experiences for diasporic Kurds.

As Kurdistan exists within the frameworks and epistemologies of nations constructed through the French-British colonial mandates, especially the 1907 Sykes-Picot Act, Kurdish diasporas have generally been swallowed through hegemonic taxonomies of "nation" and "citizenship." Thus, this special issue intervenes theoretically to engage with the conceptualizations of "diaspora" while offering a wide range of interesting methods and forms to unpack Kurdish diasporas in new destination sties. With my own interest in Kurdish diasporas in Nashville and New York City, the sheer dearth of research has demanded new types of archival and oral history. We must, for example, investigate if earlier generations of Kurds came to the United States pre-1978 through dominant national classifications as "Turks," "Iraqis," "Iranians," and "Syrians" (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Gualtieri, 2009; Maghbouleh, 2017, 2013). Even the literature on Middle Eastern America, thanks to the pioneering work of Alexi Naff (1998, 1993), is being pushed beyond the Lebanese and Syrian communities with the nuanced work of Neda Maghbouleh (2017, 2013, 2010 [Iranian Americans]), Nadine Naber (2012 [Palestinian America]), Evelyn Alsultany (2012 [Muslim America]), Louise Cainkar (2009), Pauline Homsi Vinson (2008), Sunaina Maira (2017), and Umayyah Cable (2013). Similarly, we aim to push the agenda on Kurdish diasporic studies with the aim to disrupt any notions of a canon while hoping to use the work on diasporas as a way to trouble dominant epistemologies and forge new kinds of critique. The relationship between history, memory, migration, and community building in Kurdish diasporas remains nuanced and complex. On the one hand, it offers ways to think about long histories of resistance and challenge to setter-colonial societies back "home" and to their racializations in the United States. On the other hand, it also offers us ways to talk about the complexities and problematics of community building that may inadvertently and intentionally create its own sets of subjugation, abjection, and exclusion.

Through established and emerging theoretical perspectives, and original empirical studies, the volume provides a (re-)examination of the roles that new locations and social histories have in differently inflecting Kurdish identity across various diasporic sites. Some of the questions used for our call for papers and the ones influencing this special issue are: How do multiple lived experiences and different forms of migration inform the production of diaspora and homeland(s)? How do localized performances of Kurdish identity and host national identity facilitate imaginaries of "home" within the diaspora? In what ways do these new locations facilitate the construction and articulation of "new ethnicities" / diasporic Kurdish identities? How are femininities, masculinities, queer identities and other forms of intersectionality articulated through Kurdish communities? What are the implications of the "War on Terror", empire and neoliberal politics for citizenship and community building in the Kurdish diasporas? What are the creative and

ISSN: 2149-1291

many performative ways of expressing Kurdish identity across categories of race, gender, sexuality, language, class, ability, and ethnicity in the Kurdish diaspora?

Special Issue Article Outline

We received many interesting and provocative submissions for this special issue. We begin the special issue with the articles by Jowan Mahmod, Ozan Aksoy, and Duygu Ors who stress "multi-vocality" and "multi-locality" (Gupta & Ferguson 1997) in the mediation of Kurdish diasporas in London, Sweden, Germany, and Turkey. Mahmod adds to the innovative scholarship on virtual worlds and identity formation (Boellstroff, 2015). The virtual worlds provide a way to transgress and yet talk explicitly about place and lived experiences of exclusion through new technologies. In this sense, we see the ways that Benedict Anderson's (1991) work on nationalism and the creation of "imagined communities" through the printing press and print capitalism is rethought through virtual worlds and their respective symbolic and affective components of diasporic community. Virtual worlds compress space and time thereby linking up members across different spaces and times while opening up a venue to contest the dominant underpinnings of Kurdish identity. While multiplying Kurdish identity, these virtual sites reveal the constant "regulation" and "reiteration" (Butler, 1993) through the policing, shaming, and management of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Ozan Aksoy provides an important intervention in Kurdish Studies, Social Movement Studies, and Ethnomusicology. Using multiple sites in Turkey and Germany, Aksoy underscores the role of music among Kurdish Alevis in identity formation, affect, resistance, and the sustaining of social movements. Aksoy simultaneously engages with the understudied realm of music in Kurdish Studies while paying attention to Alevi life. There has been little research done on Alevi identity and Aksoy adds to this realm but also demonstrates how music becomes a key site for social movements in Kurdish diasporas. Through music, we see the ways in which historical and contemporary violence and trauma are negotiated while providing an important mode for storytelling (Byrd, 2015). Music, often seen as whimsical, provides one instrumental forum for the life of Kurdish communities and the creation of communal histories. In this instance, like Mahmod, Aksoy illustrates how community and identity formations involve transnational scales.

Duygu Ors proposes a way to think about the enormous Kurdish diaspora in the city of Istanbul, Turkey. While the dominant language of "tribalism" (Mohammadpour and Soleimani, 2019) limits theorizing about the literature, knowledge production, and intellectual economies of Kurds in Kurdistan or in the diaspora, Ors answers this important call. Ors theorizes the formation of a Kurdish diaspora in Istanbul and in the geographically Kurdish areas through cafes, intellectual capital, and knowledge production. In this instance, we become privy to the intricate and sophisticated ways that Kurdish diasporic actors and intellectuals theorize, understand, and interact with their world.

When theorizing Kurdish diasporas in North America, the histories of migration and settlement patterns illustrate the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity within these diasporas (Lowe 1996). In her article on Nashville, Demet Arpacik provides a much-needed intervention in Kurdish Studies by examining the largest Kurdish diaspora in the United States. Arpacik engages with a multi-generational approach to critically evaluating racial marginalization in music-city USA—Nashville. Of utmost importance to her study is the thematic focus of her research—education and youth. Through the realm of education, Aparcik extrapolates the processes by which Kurdish Americans, children and parents, not only talk about their histories of trauma and migration but also the experience of marginalization in a racially stratified U.S. society. Instead of the classroom being the site of assimilation and enculturation, it becomes the understudied site of marginalization, negotiation, and various forms of resistance (Hale, 2016; Lee, 2005).

Aynur de Rouen explores a Kurdish community that has also been in the United States since the 1970s. Yet, this community, as a result of its small population and small-town setting, is not part of the literature on Kurdish diasporas. She investigates the historical memory and community formation of South Kurdistanis in Binghamton, New York. The size of the community and its physical location raise important questions about how Kurdistan and Kurdish-ness is facilitated and managed in sites without vibrant ethnic enclaves in major cities. Through participant observation and oral histories, de Rouen extracts the rich, complex history of Kurds that foreground trauma as a site of connection.

With the ISIS onslaught against Yezidis, Mija Sanders offers a transnational look at the Yezidi community in Arizona and their relationship to Kurdish identity, Hinduism, and India. In this instance, Sanders's analysis excavates longer transhistorical, transnational ties between Kurds and South Asians. As a result, "India" appears as a key part of performing and managing identity for Yezidi Kurds during this time of increased ISIS violence against their community and the rise in Islamophobia across the globe. The ties to India through various cultural artefacts and religious symbols then provide, as Sanders illuminates, ways to stress a Kurdish Yezidi identity as distant from Muslim identity.

As the Zazaki speakers are an understudied community within the larger Kurdish community, Sevda Arslan provides an instrumental intervention to studying Kurdish diasporas. Through the place of language and linguistic acts, Arslan inserts difference within Kurdish communities. In the process, Sevda Arslan demonstrates the fluctuating, unfixed, and shifting links between Zazaki speakers and the larger Kurdish community. Of great importance here is how through the case of the Zazaki we see the contentions with Kurdish communities while staying attuned to the very hegemonies operating with the category of "Kurd."

We finish off the special issue with important work on the Kurdish diaspora in Canada. In this piece, Abdurrahman Wahab explores the connections between memory, conceptions of "home," and localized experiences of identity in Canada. With nearly 17,000 Kurds in Canada, there has been little to no scholarship on the Kurdish diaspora in Canada. Wahab fills in this important gap while engaging systematically with the conflicting and shifting processes of transnational identity formation. In particular, Abdurrahman Wahab conceptualizes Kurdish identity across transnational scales while accounting for the particularity of Canada's multiculturalist policies.

Elif Genc then offers our final critical reading of Kurdish diasporas in Canada. Whereas Wahad studied the South Kurdistani community in Canada, Genc critically engages with the North Kurdistani community in Toronto, Canada. In particular, Elif Genc illustrates the politics of place and belonging through the Kurdish cultural center. Of special interest here is the way that North Kurdistanis bring some of their histories and politics to create new types of political formations through the community center that challenge the power of the nation-state. Combined with the poem by Sumaya Muhamed, the articles in this special offer a reading of the heterogeneity of Kurdish diasporas that challenge ideas of equivalence. Thus, going back to the meeting with Kuvan and Rekan, we see not only difference operating within the category of North Kurdistanis but across a wide swath of Kurdish diasporas. These articles push the boundaries of critical theories of diaspora through the histories and narratives of Kurdish diasporas. At the same moment, we hope this is also a call to push further with research on Kurdish diasporas by looking at new sites in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

As Kuvan desires to explore the wide swath of Kurdish diasporas, his own pontifications provide us a gift to think critically about Kurdistan and Kurdistan diasporas. Thus, we are tasked with producing scholarship to engage with the long, complicated, and contradictory histories of Kurdish diasporas in so many parts of the world. In order to see power and resistance in the working of identities and in the formations of communities, diasporas prove pivotal to our theorizing. Through Kurdish diasporas, we offer reprieve to the hegemonic hold that "nation" has on identity while showcasing the various acts of hybridity and multiplicity. In the process, by using such comparative realms, theorization of Kurdish diasporas serves to refuse essentialist frameworks for identity.

Through a critical interrogation of history, literature, music, virtual spaces, art, and the social sciences, the special issue provides rich understandings of diaspora as one way to offer critique and demand more in the name of social justice. Furthermore, instead of working with the dominant epistemologies of the "Middle East" that demand legibility based on nation status, nation-states, and hegemonic ethnic categories (Arab, Turk, Persian), scholarship in the United States, Canada, and Europe would greatly benefit by critically analyzing Kurdish diasporas. First, the scholarship disrupts the very racial logics and "Orientalism" (Said, 1978) that governs scholarly work on diasporas. Second, it gives a much broader and necessary framework for thinking about migration that allows a sophisticated theorization of settler-colonialist regimes in West Asia/ "Middle East" as well as in North America. Third, instead of centering just ethnicity by itself in understanding diaspora communities from West Asia, western theories would have to account for the racial formations that operate outside of the North American and European context. Fourth, at this point in global history with such extensive histories of displacement and refugee crisis, North America and Europe are key sites for refugee resettlement. If the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and hybridity within West Asia/ "Middle East" and within Kurdish communities are not theorized properly, a one-solution-fits-all program for settlement would only further marginalize, disempower, and negatively impact Kurdish communities. Fifth, the Kurdish diasporas provide important spaces to think about the "nation" and its functioning. Through these articles, we see the fallacy and failed promises of the nation. Diasporas become critical spaces to demand more than the nation and nation-state as a solution for statelessness and displacement. In a way, they provide, what Monisha Das Gupta (2006) has theorized, a possibility for a "transnational complex of rights" not either dependent or guaranteed by the nation-state.

Acknowledgments

I am thankful for the Faculty Fellowship Publication Program at CUNY, with special thanks to Shelly Eversley, Matt Brim, and Maryann McKenzie. In this program, I got a chance to showcase my initial ideas. The comments and suggestions by Nivedita Majumdar, Brais Outesleon, Bill Ryan, Erin Mayo-Adam, Steven Swarbrick, Angela Ridinger-Dotterman, and Jill Rosenthal were far-reaching, influential, and expansive. Their voices weave together so many parts of this article. All errors are solely mine. It has been such a pleasure to work with Aynur de Rouen in putting together the call and assembling the papers. I thank Yuksel Serindag for his support and vision. Hasan Aydin's

ISSN: 2149-1291

comments, suggestions, and leadership have been helpful and brilliant from the very start. I am grateful beyond words for Jeya Evelyn Thangaraj and Louis Abraham Thangaraj.

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