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Special Issue: Kurdish Diaspora

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Special Issue Editorial Notes:

We are delighted to publish a Special Issue on Kurdish Diaspora for of the Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies (JECS), a refereed international journal. We received many interesting and provocative submissions for this special issue. We begin the special issue with the articles by Jowan Mahmud, 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. Mahmud 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 Mahmud, 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 & 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, Arpacik 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 Wahab studied the South Kurdistanis community in Canada, Genc critically engages with the North Kurdistanis 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.

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