Editor’s Introduction:
Kurdish Culture as Resistance, and the Rise of Global South Epistemologies

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Introduction

This special issue, long in the making, explores and celebrates aspects of Kurdish culture. Particularly in the Kurdish contexts of dispossession, war, genocide, ethnic erasure and myriad forms of oppression, the existence, perseverance and strength of culture in any and all its forms is in itself an act of resistance, an act of survival, an act of reclamation. This is literally culture produced in times of death, proof of life when it is suppressed by the modern nation-states that bear responsibility for the Kurdish lives that exist within their borders. States that legislate the non-existence of Kurds, and prefer to call them things like “mountain Turks,” while making Kurdish language, the indigenous naming of children, and even the Kurdish national colors illegal. Living in these contexts, daring to create, to interpret, to be Kurdish, to encompass both resistance and genocide, glory and horrors, such extremes of the human experience, contradictions that are the very opposite of natural, specifically constructed by historical forces and relations of power, these plights of the Kurds and of all the world’s most embattled and assaulted, stand as an indictment — not of the abject and the oppressed or their resistance, but of those in power, the billionaires, the 1%, the multinational corporations, the international financial institutions, the Bretton Woods institutions, our neo-liberal global ‘order’, the Davos and the DC/New York axes of power, their think tanks and mainstream media exponents, all the industrial complexes, and the capitalist world system most broadly, all together bearing responsibility for producing the conditions in which Kurds have found themselves in recent decades, and continue to. Culture and survival are not optional, but they are exceptional, for people who, to paraphrase Audre Lorde writing in another context, “were never meant to survive.”

Kurdish studies and representation are important in their own right, but they are also important in their relationalities to parallel struggles and cultural/political issues in other parts of the world, especially the Global South. In many ways, partly due to the context of statelessness and all that this entails institutionally and in terms of power, Kurdish Studies and Kurdish cultural issues remain a kind of subaltern discourse even within Global South studies. A less-known case among the colonized, a stateless people of more than 50,000,000 souls, now strewn across the world but still also largely based in their ancestral homelands, the mountains of the Mesopotamian highlands. There are also signs that this is slowly changing, and we hope and also believe that this collection makes a contribution to that important process. Marginalized and often brutally oppressed in their homelands, at the margins of the contiguous post-WWI nation

1 Lorde 1979.
states of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, Kurds have been systematically underdeveloped, and this is reflected in their absence and/or underrepresentation in the academy, particularly vis-à-vis the ethnic majorities in those same states. Differences of power resulting in underrepresentation in the social sciences and humanities, and in the academy in general, translate into a lack of indigenous representation in the production of knowledge, and these dynamics are not unique to the Kurds; though we would argue that these schisms are particularly heightened in Kurdish contexts.

At the same time, the small but growing global Kurdish scholarship is also subject to particular “systemic” interests, especially those of regional states and those with former or current imperial reach and influence. As some Kurdish regions have gained increasingly solid geopolitical significance through protracted struggle and strategic opportunity, the growth of a more establishment Kurdish scholarship is also discernible, focused on a variety of disciplines, altogether representing collective efforts to fill gaps caused by statelessness, lack of institutions, and insufficient self-representation. Some of this reflects regional state formations, and some of it is attached to world powers active in the region. For instance, we can identify the Mustafa Barzani fellowship in American University (Washington, DC), the Talabani scholarship and Endowed Chair at the University of Central Florida (UCF), or the increasing frequency of high-level diplomatic exchanges between KRG leaders and US/Europe, Turkey, Iran, Russian and Arab world leaders. All of these indicate important developments towards capacity building and institutionalization of Kurdish scholarship, but it is generally more top/down in nature than the kinds of organic Kurdish voices emerging from below. The top/down growth is boosted by advanced geostrategic partnerships between Kurdish actors and the West, based solidly on military-security orientation. Also subject to contestations of power, these academic spaces are subject to intense relations and constraints of power, making our work as scholars of Kurdish scholarship all the more complex to critically discern.

Knowledge Production and Issues of Representation

The last decade has seen a pronounced increase in the scope and scale of Kurdish Studies and Kurdish institutions of research. In parallel to the growing geopolitical significance of Kurdish regions and communities, the global presence of Kurdish political representation has become substantial, and this is the context of expanding research in Kurdish studies. Numerous conferences have taken place with the participation of prominent academics and also practitioners, along with the creation of the first Kurdish Studies Program in the United States, at UCF in 2015. The volume and quality of participation in Kurdish Studies improved substantially in this period, compared to a past in which few if any Kurdish PhDs and professors could be counted across many social science and humanities disciplines in the US. Growth and change in this scenario can be seen in the recent series of major conferences and symposia held in places like Yale, Brown, and Northwestern. Europe has been somewhat more advanced in its nascent Kurdish Studies, but it too is seeing rapid parallel growth.

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2 Rodney 2018.

3 Said 1979, and Benjamin 2007.
The rise of Kurdish Studies is led by the growing and undeniable presence of Kurdish students and scholars across the social sciences and humanities in Western institutions of higher learning. Another substantial institution beyond these developments is the emergence and rapid growth of the Kurdish Studies Network, which represents a global collective where scholars of Kurdish Studies continuously and increasingly interact and share their questions and research, and in which the call for papers for this volume was circulated. Although the historical lack of infrastructure and institutional development faced by Kurdish regions and communities has been a substantial challenge in the development of Kurdish scholarship and studies, the recent wave of abovementioned efforts constitute a key step in closing the long-term gap for Kurdish academia, a primary aim which several authors in this volume address. This collection serves as a contemporary scholarly example and as a source for the growing Kurdish Studies field, contributing particularly to issues of culture, language and politics in what continues to be a tumultuous era for Kurdish individuals, groups, communities, regions and society.

**Contributions of this Special Issue: The Importance of Kurdish Specificity**

This special issue is intended as a contribution in this context of emerging and solidifying new scholarship that is of direct importance for Kurds and for Kurdish studies, but also for scholars of the global south and its emerging societies generally. We begin the issue with Kamal Soleimani’s new empirical historical work on a key Sufi leader who has been erased and misplaced in extant historiographies. This important reclamation and reinterpretation shows the power of historiography and the need to consider the likely intersection between issues of representation or subjectivity and the production of knowledge. Too often, the exclusion of indigenous or local voices means the erasure of whole interpretations and perspectives. We are proud to include this corrective essay as our opener. Next, emerging scholars Sona Kazemi and Berivan Sarikaya expand the boundaries and understanding of disability studies by examining Kurdish cases of torture, hunger strike, death-fast, and their aftermaths. For too long, these areas of inquiry have been artificially held separate, but these authors’ groundbreaking work, sometimes based on personal experience, and always characteristically Kurdish in its specificity, provides a bridge that repairs and expands this divide, with implications that range far beyond the case studies reviewed here. Intersectional Disability Studies is at the very cutting edge of critical thought, and it is not accidental that the subaltern presence of Kurdish experiences, rooted at the level of the body and in the prison, are the source of important new clarifications and theoretical elaborations. Huseyin Tunc also weighs into charged but neglected terrain, working to discern the nature and history of Kurdish nationalism and the ways it is or is not separable from Kurdish identity. In the process, Tunc makes a major contribution to the scholarship of Kurdish nationalism, being the first to fully delineate it from the broader proto-national collective identity term of Kurdayeti. In conclusion, the authors tells us that we need to use the two concepts more precisely as they should not be construed as interchangeable.

Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah further charts new scholarly territory, with her extensive meditation on the cultural significance of art in Iraqi Kurdistan. Perhaps only in Kurdistan could the former site of Anfal torture, colonial surveillance and carceral torture be revisioned and manifested as one of art, curation of history, the frontal memorial of a modern chemical weapons
genocide, and thus constitute both a new national museum and a new national identity that simultaneously looks forward while standing upon firm recognition of the past. This important ethnographic account, the first of its kind as far as we know, showcases the need for non-bourgeois art in the service of broader communities and their issues, no matter how charged or explosive. Extending prior studies of the PKK’s engagement with Newroz, Axel Rudi’s work goes beyond just reformulations of the ancient tradition in its political context of struggle, to look at how this refashioning reveals deeper cosmological ideas about agency, time, social formations, and the eventuality of freedom. Also based on ethnographic fieldwork, at the site of cultural production, Rudi expands anthropological conceptions of the role of death in culture, showcasing the ways in which non-Western epistemology opens keys to post-colonial conceptualization and the decolonial agenda. Via ‘the martyrs’ the dead remain present and become transformational figures in an emerging social order. It is notable that as we make the final edits to this special issue, we are observing Newroz 2019 during the vernal equinox, and triumphant high-tech drone video images of its mass celebration in the Kurdish mountains of Iran are circulating virally on social media — perhaps the subject for a future issue of this journal. Our special issue is rounded out by Andrea Novellis’ meditation on the rise and nature of feminism in the PKK, again analyzing the cultural meaning of what is by definition almost necessarily a subaltern space that therefore receives all too scant attention in the academy. Yet, the issue of feminism within the guerrilla liberation struggle remains central in the social lives of millions living in the Middle East today, at the forefront of social upheavals and recalibrations, particularly in the fragile and hard-won liberated zones of recent struggles and spaces left by failed states. Novellis traces the initially tokenized feminist project within the PKK to the rise of the Women’s Army of the Oppressed in which a deeper gender revolution was practiced once it was controlled directly by women in power and within their own autonomous spaces.

Conclusion

Collectively, these essays illustrate the intense connections between knowledge and power, and the ways in which representation and epistemology are intricately related. Subjectivity and identity are closely linked to the production of historiography and sociology/anthropology, with implications that are urgent within the growing field of Kurdish Studies, but also much further afield, across the majority of the world which is confronting a broader Global South Studies and its implications in terms of praxis in the contemporary order. Palestine is an interesting parallel case to consider, as it that of any non-state actors existing on a large scale inside of states ruled by others, such as the Oromo in East Africa. In the case of Palestine, the exemplary body of work conducted by Edward Said charts paths for academic, political and discursive shifting of the production of knowledge, which we would do well to consider. The nuances and specificities of Kurdish cultural struggles against the conditions created by statelessness, assaults on indigeneity, subsequent decolonial struggles, and the prevalence of complex multivalent identities in these turbulent contexts give rise to insights of value to people engaged in similar struggles throughout the world. It is high time for comparative frameworks to begin more closely integrating Kurdish

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4 M’Bow, Davies, and von Lates 2014.
examples into their considerations. Our authors collectively showcase the deep significance of art, culture, identity, representation, and historiography in the claiming and assertion of presence and identity.

We wish to express our deep appreciation for the patience and solidarity of our contributors, during a prolonged period of set-up for this journal, and while the journal editor tended to unexpected personal issues. Thanks are also due to Pluto Journals, its founder and staff, for similar understanding and support. Finally, congratulations are due to Djene, who is absent as we finalize this issue, due to the birth of his son. May he, and may all our children grow to see a better world for the Kurds, and for us all, as we reach the Newroz celebrations of future years.

References


