Guest Editor’s Introduction

Critical Artwork, Critical Actions, and the Inclusion of Difference

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Welcome friends to this special issue of the *Journal of Intersectionality*, “Making Spaces: Art, Culture, and Difference in Iraqi Kurdistan.” It is both a professional and personal honor for me to be able to return, for a second time as a guest-editor, to this unique space that has been dedicated to understanding and applying “intersectionality,” Kimberlé Crenshaw’s groundbreaking framework for understanding the impacts of overlapping, interconnected and interdependent social categorizations. As a space that has allowed for the expression and exploration of complex categories of social identities, the *Journal of Intersectionality* has continued to promote the radical inclusion of voices, subjects and authors too often excluded. Almost five years ago, in the space of this journal, it was my pleasure to introduce the predecessor of this special issue, the fertile ground from which “Making Spaces” has emerged — “Making Faces: Art & Intersectionality in Iraqi Kurdistan” (2018). This groundbreaking interdisciplinary issue broadly examined contemporary Kurdish art forms in Iraqi Kurdistan, within the fields of Visual and Conceptual Arts. It was the first, if not the very first, special issue of an academic journal that directly addressed contemporary art in Iraqi Kurdistan. It looked at the ways in which Kurdish artists and the art forms produced in Kurdistan are situated around and negotiate multiple intersections of interconnected and interdependent social categorizations, such as nation, ethnicity, gender, class, language, sexuality, education, and culture. Because the *Journal of Intersectionality* was willing to take a people-centered approach, they placed a premium on first-hand accounts from those living contemporary histories. They also demonstrated that they valued other ways of knowing. This enabled us to present direct accounts from those artists who are working on the front lines of conflict inside Kurdistan that would have been screened out of a more traditionally conceived publication. “Making Faces” engaged with first-hand accounts, interviews, social criticism, and analysis from Kurdish artists as well as attendant essays from scholars and practitioners working in Iraqi Kurdistan that addressed intersectional research and research in the arts.

Crafting “Making Faces: Art & Intersectionality”

The special issue had its origins in the early relationships that I had built with some of the most engaged Kurdish artist-activists in the arts capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, the city of Sulaimani, and

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1 See: Crenshaw 1991.
2 See: Cleveland 2008.
3 See: Harris ed. 2007.
through my own early field interviews conducted in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. Extended field research conducted in tandem with my husband, Meriwan Abdullah, over consecutive months and years spent visiting and living in the region, yielded conversations with local Kurdish artists that presented a picture of a diverse group of visual artists who were not simply making art for art’s sake, but who were deeply conflicted and struggling with the realization of a Kurdish ethnic identity as a national identity and its relationship to human rights and social justice. Working at the myriad intersections of art, culture, nation, gender, class, privilege and conflict, these artists engaged themselves with art-making as their own form of activism, in order to create dialogues and responsive spaces for such dialogues about social and cultural reform and a greater inclusion of a plurality of voices in Kurdish society. The title “Making Faces” was intended to express this plurality and note that this special issue would be taking a look at a Kurdish national identity, not as a monolith, nor as a given, but as an intersectional identity with a number of different, overlapping and contravening identities. In Jungian terms, the issue was particularly interested in the many personas each of us inhabits. Our social self, the one we present to the world, but one that is formed and shaped through the complicated systems of relationships of the individual to their world. It was only later, in the final stages of copy-editing, and after naming the issue, that a mentor introduced me to Gloria Anzaldúa’s edited volume, “Making Face, Making Soul Haciendo Caras.” I immediately recognized the resonance between the two works. Anzaldúa succinctly clarified the broad arrangement of themes that I was seeing presented within the “Making Faces” special issue, “The masks, las máscaras, we are compelled to wear, drive a wedge between our intersubjective personhood and the persona we present to the world,” and that, “These masking roles exact a toll.” There it was! There was the conflict! Anzaldúa was describing in painful detail the very conflicts these artists were discussing throughout the pages of the special issue. The conflicts being presented were the collective struggles of individual citizens with personhood inside an emergent Kurdistan. The masks were Kurdayati, tradition and nation that had been saturated with internalized oppressions. Those spaces and places, as Anzaldúa put it, the “interface” where these “multiple-surfaced” selves intersected and interconnected were the sites for contestation.

Anzaldúa describes these sites as “interface.” In my own work I talk about them as “frontlines.” This is a borrow from an artist interviewed in William Cleveland’s book entitled, “Art & Upheaval: Artists on the World’s Frontlines,” who used the term, “frontlines,” to denote arenas in which artists were engaging with conflict for social change. In an arena where conflict was

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4 Author’s Note: My first field visit to Kurdistan was in 2012, though I had begun to study the region a bit earlier.
5 See: McDowall 2021: 661.
6 Cockrell-Abdullah 2018.
7 Jung 1968.
8 Anzaldúa 1990.
9 Ibid.: xv-xvi.
10 “Kurdayati” or “Kurdiness” is that sense of ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness defined by a shared culture, language, territory, symbols, memory and experience, as well as future political aspirations. (See: Brenneman 2007: 3; Sheyholislami 2011: 47 Kindle Edition.) Increasingly, “Kurdayati” has constituted the stuff of Kurdish nationalism inside Iraqi Kurdistan and across borders in states where there have historically been Kurdish populations and diasporas since the mid-1990s. (See: Van Bruinessen 2000.)
11 Cleveland 2008: 2.
being waged in the name of social change, a “frontline” seemed an apt metaphor to describe the intersections at which the artists were working and the work that was being done. Indeed, Kurdish artists stand at the vanguard of a number of such critical conflicts inside Kurdistan. As I wrote in 2018 in the Guest Editor’s Introduction to “Making Faces,” “Towards a Greater Understanding of Contemporary Kurdish Art and Aesthetics”:

In Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish artists stand at the frontlines of a number of critical conflicts. Some of these conflicts are direct, military conflicts with external forces such as ISIS. Some are potential, internal conflicts between Kurdish political parties. Other conflicts take the form of struggles to write the history of their people and struggles between traditional patterns of leadership and the need to include a broader range of voices. Still other conflicts take the form of fights for access to the tools of power; fights to be recognized within the international community; and fights for the independence to choose what happens to their future. Wherever we find conflict, we find struggle. Where we find struggle, we also find the opportunity for change. At these intersections we find artists speaking about any number of different struggles. More importantly, we find individuals who are imagining a way forward that does not involve direct, violent conflict and who are creating powerful symbols to rival such violence.

There are two important points here. Firstly, in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, we have a unique opportunity to learn about the distinct, but related, processes of nation-state emergence and Kurdish nation-building, at the local level with individuals and groups. At this level of analysis, we have an opportunity to consider how individuals and groups nourish a civic life for Kurdish citizens that goes beyond the establishment of legitimate legal, governmental, and civic institutions, to include the cultivation of an all-important culture of democracy. Understanding these things through the lens of culture and observing intraethnic and intracultural conflict that arises from the politics of ethnicity is made more difficult in the Kurdish case in Iraq because we are faced with a significant gap in our understanding of the sociocultural lives of Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan. Greater cultural research conducted at the local level, from which we could produce a nuanced study of the role of culture in the emergence of the Kurdish (quasi)state in Iraq, would greatly benefit the scholarship. But where should that research begin? For the authors of this special issue, it is art and art’s ability to create spaces for resistance. The frontlines, therefore, the sites that should be the focus of our inquiry, are not necessarily going to be found in the places we might think.

Secondly, and more importantly, if we are to be invested in a holistic understanding of the

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12 Ibid.
13 Cockrell-Abdullah 2018 (2).
14 Ibid.
15 Elder-Vass 2010; Avruch 2008; and Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018.
16 King 2014; McDowall 2021; Kılıç 2009; Ciçek 2012; and Kennedy 2007.
17 Gruenewald 2021.
emergence of the Kurdish nation-state, we should be initiating lines of questioning and generating research in this arena in ways that such work is able to critically consider the relationship of social progress to that of social justice. Thusly, “Making Faces: Art & Intersectionality in Iraqi Kurdistan” was born out of the desire to address the socio-cultural causes at the root of violent conflicts whose sources may be obscured from easy view. Framed in this manner, there was an explicit understanding in the development of that special issue that the making of art is a dynamic engagement with the very building blocks of culture and that contributing artists were producers of culture concerned with making their creative work widely meaningful to their communities, seeking to reach beyond the limits of the art market. There was a collective understanding of conflict amongst the authors of the special issue that understood conflict as an inevitable part of social change. As such, the contribution was imbued with the spirit of the kind of social change that can lead to a process of conflict transformation and an understanding that conflict can be waged effectively in non-violent ways. Artists appearing in that special issue demonstrated the need to be deeply critical of the social relationships, cultural beliefs and traditions that served to support and perpetuate forms of cultural and structural violence within Kurdish society – pointing directly at culture as the source of conflict – with “space” as a way to see the socio-cultural intersections where conflicts are being made manifest. “Making Faces: Art & Intersectionality in Iraqi Kurdistan” remains unique as a scholarly work that addresses contemporary visual and conceptual art in Iraqi Kurdistan at the local level, and which promotes art’s unique role as interlocutor to conflict.

**COVID-19 and Research in Lockdown**

Early in 2020 we were poised to return to Kurdistan to pursue this new line of questioning that was revealed through the work on “Making Faces.” Then, in March of 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, and all over the world public spaces shut down, borders closed, and societies went into lockdown. Iraq and countries surrounding the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) closed their airports and borders. Accordingly, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) closed all governmental organizations along with major routes of travel and commerce, except for those that were key to maintaining security. Kurdistan was now out of reach. Prior to the rise of the COVID-19 virus, the Kurdish Region of Iraq was struggling with various financial, medical, and social challenges. The poor condition of the healthcare system and financial turmoil had a hugely negative impact on the response to the pandemic. Thankfully, through social media and often spotty cellphone calls, my husband, Meriwan, and I were able to stay in contact with our family in Kurdistan and with many of the community of artists there during lockdown. Things were very hard there.

Professionally, things were difficult for me at home. As a researcher who relies heavily on ethnography, distance invariably comes to influence the work. Ethnography is founded on proximity

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18 Cockrell-Abdullah 2018 (1); Cockrell-Abdullah 2020; and Louden 2017.
21 Ibid.
and the benefits that closeness provides. However, the lockdown imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic made international travel and physical proximity an impossibility. We all began to settle into the “new normal” of life at home. For me, this included anxious gardening and a near-maniacal purging of closets, cupboards, and garage spaces. I began to revisit my field notes and past publications – even my dissertation! I kept thinking about how I could possibly continue the positive momentum created by the “Making Faces” project and make up for not “being there.” A bit of serendipity arose from having no commitments on my time and an extended opportunity to reflect on the work of the artists I had been working with and writing about. I turned to thinking deeply about the themes presented in “Making Faces,” particularly the theme of space. “Alright,” I would say to myself, “So, artists are talking about social issues in publics spaces. So what? What is particularly revelatory about that observation?” This line of questioning repeated over and over again in my mind. I began to consider more seriously the invisible work of artists being conducted within the arts, cultural and heritage spaces in the city of Sulaimani, alongside the subjects presented in the artwork being produced. “What work is there being done that we don’t see?” I would ask myself. With this frame, I began to see outlines of the intellectual activity that framed the artist’s thinking about the creation of works of art that were the antecedents to the expressions of the art presented in the public art shows. Patterns emerged and I began to see that, in a sense, public art shows were conversations between the individual artist and Kurdish society. These dialogues were about meaning and about ideas wherein artist-activists working within public arts and cultural spaces were solidifying street-level social issues into intelligible and referenced arguments. Still, there was another level – certain spaces were intentionally being used for shows because of the particular and locally-held beliefs, ideas, and cultural practices surrounding these places. Subsequently, the place itself became a component of the art, and important element of the artist’s social critique. Artists were functioning as public intellectuals.

I talk more about artists as culture producers and public intellectuals in the final essay of this issue, “Civic Engagement, Public Intellectualism and Art.” For now, it should be understood that “Making Spaces: Art, Culture & Difference in Iraqi Kurdistan” was created from these observations that demonstrated that artists were functioning as both culture producer and public intellectual. Meriwan and I began to reach out to the core members of our community of artists, with whom I had now been working for several years, and asked them if they would be willing to write short essays on their thoughts about the intersection of their art, space, and conflict in Kurdistan. What emerged are the essays presented here for you in this special issue of the Journal of Intersectionality.

Making Spaces: Art, Culture & Difference in Iraqi Kurdistan

In the spirit of collaboration and exploration, “Making Spaces” presents a selection of personal histories of individual artists who operate from diverse locations within Kurdish society. All histories, in one way or another, are subjective narratives. We cannot hope to capture fully the panorama of subjects visual and conceptual artists in Iraqi Kurdistan are engaging with, nor all of the artwork

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22 Käihkö 2020.
24 Ibid.
being produced. Yet, we can present a selective and highly subjective account that acts as a starting point for future inquiry. The subjects addressed in this journal reflect the authors’ own, sometimes discordant, dialogues with a number of categories of marginalization that have come to define them.25 “Making Spaces” was created to bear witness to these struggles and to probe the potential hinderances to alliance-building amongst and between individuals and groups within Kurdish society in Iraqi Kurdistan. The special issue is presented as a series of testimonials. It is laid out in a way that reflects broad ideas presented by each author but that maintains continuity through overlapping themes, to include our frames of intersectionality and space across the broader scope of the entire work. It is intended that the reader should do the work of piecing the essays of this journal together themselves. As topical focus shifts from essay to essay, and from author to author, we ask you, the reader, to join with us in connecting the dots, finding meaning in your own way.

Ismail Khayat at his studio. Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, 2016. Photo by A. Cockrell-Abdullah

Like its predecessor, “Making Spaces: Art, Culture and Difference in Iraqi Kurdistan” continues the work of trying to find new ways of reading and understanding the cultural nuances of the contemporary cultural world of the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan. One important way that it does this is by presenting artist’s essays-as-testimonials, wherein the artists are talking about subjects that are close to them in their daily lives. They do not take on the stance of distance or objectivity but offer themselves, rubbed raw by the friction generated by the multiple personas each must wear. Each essay is an act of vulnerability that witnesses the individual and collective acts of contemporary Kurdish artists making sense of their own lives in a historical moment that is characterized by rapid economic, social, and political change. Documenting these testimonies, in an effort to share them

with communities outside of Iraqi Kurdistan, has been a heavy labor of love on the part of each artist-author. Artist-authors, each with their own unique challenges made more difficult by a world in the grip of a global pandemic, had to make decisions about being involved with this project that included serious considerations as to how the publication of their work would impact them at home. Transforming silence into language is a transgressive act that could be viewed negatively and impact those important social and political relationships that are critical to everyday needs for their family and themselves. Authors, for whom English is not their mother tongue, made themselves, their thoughts, and their work vulnerable to translation and critique in that foreign language as a medium for expression. For non-white, non-native speakers of English, we must acknowledge that these artists-authors’ relationship with English is a complex and fraught relationship laden with memories of an abusive colonial past, racist ideologies, and privileged modes of being. As author Halgurd A. Baram points out in his essay, “The Impact of the Evil Side of the English Language on My Life as an Artist,” appearing here in this special issue, Baram states, “English has become one of the most vibrant languages in the world and some say it is the language of science and technology. We can see the power of the British and American culture industries at work making English the language of business and the global economy, creating millions of people as speakers of English,” while at the same time, “Kurdish people are citizens of the world interacting with a highly global, highly interconnected reality where language becomes a political tool.” Artist-author Nuveen Barwari whose essay, “Painting Without Paint: Four Sisters, Three Dresses,” also appears in this special issue, addresses this difficult relationship through a quote from feminist poet and essayist, Adrienne Rich, “This is the oppressor’s language, yet I need it to talk to you.” Taken together with the difficulties of translation from the Kurdish Sorani dialect into English, I consider the inclusion of their voices in this issue as another important and multi-layered form of activism. I thank each of the contributors for sharing the precious gift of their lived experiences, observations, fears and critiques, in addition to their time, talent and patience, which was required to produce this issue. Inviting participation from the community in this way activated a social interaction that has deeply enriched my own understanding of the street-level social issues on the ground inside Kurdistan, while offering an unexpected way to re-connect with these artists in a way that is still unclear to me but that has created a different sense of investment in the people themselves and the work still to be done.

Although it opens with an introduction, “Making Spaces” has no formal conclusion, nor do there appear any summative closing statements in the artist-authors’ essays. Some readers may find that the scholarly contribution of this special issue is lacking without formal conclusions and that the scholarship would have been improved by the addition of such that gave a sense of closure or that provided “the meaning” of all of these first-hand accounts. I realize, too, that the open-ended nature of the essays may be seen to further confuse “the point” of the contribution being made. I struggled greatly with these ideas and with the specialized ways in which research is supposed to interact with academic journals. I realized, however, that these very characteristics presented an opportunity for ethnographic storytelling that aligns with the exploratory spirit of this research, and which allows us to ground the work directly in Kurdistan with the people and their art. Furthermore, the use of respondent essays as an atypical method for ethnography, more

26 Ibid.: xx.
traditionally conceived of, allowed us to celebrate the productive tensions that emerged during the development of this special issue, and to innovate the use of space provided in this publication as a space that could serve as a valuable tool, helping others to imagine the journeys through which these artists have traveled.\(^{28}\) In the end, I decided that the open-ended nature of the essays was a strength, and that an attempt to sum up their significance would have been an act to contain the power of the story and the author, ultimately reducing both.

As individual histories “told from below,” the essays become accounts that attend to the particulars of individual activist-artists and their everyday lives in terms of powers and strategies utilized by these artists to navigate and resist increasingly narrow political and cultural conceptions of Kurdishness, and to those contests and arguments that are present in these everyday negotiations.\(^{29}\) Participation in this special issue becomes itself an activism conducted to resist the historical destruction of the material culture of the Kurdish people and the historical memories embedded therein.

**Overview of Essays & Frameworks for Thought**

On the cover of “Making Spaces: Art, Culture & Differences in Iraqi Kurdistan,” angry, almost feral, eyes strike out at the viewer from an androgynous figure whose body is pressed close to the wall. “What do you want? Stay where you are! Don’t come any closer!” the eyes seem to warn, looking out as if to confront the viewer. This figure appeared in Avan Sidq’s “The Passivists,” a large installation that was part of the 2016 art show, *Visible Body / InVisible Body*, held in the basement at the National Museum at Amna Suraka in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan. “The Passivists” was created by participating artist and curator of the *Visible Body / InVisible Body* show, Avan Sidq, who is interviewed later in this special issue. “The Passivists” was comprised of a series of life-size human figures painted on plexiglass. The figures were suspended from the low-hanging ceiling and are arranged in a manner that gives the viewer the feeling that these individuals are all part of a group that is witnessing – something.\(^{30}\)

Each figure is rendered in incredible, naturalistic detail, demonstrating the delicate fold of fabric draping over a pushed-out hip or the hint of shadow on a turned head. All of the figures, except the one appearing on the cover, are depicted with their backs to the spectator. Interestingly, when one examines the opposite side of the figures, you are met, not by a face or the converse side of the figure, but instead you meet the same figure with its back turned on you. The viewer becomes a participant in the impromptu gathering and is able to move freely through the “crowd” of figures. In a bit of whimsy, each individual figure, suspended on wires, would move slightly out of your way as you pass by. Surrounded by these figures with their backs presented to you, gently moving out of your way as you encounter them, is an odd sensation of being completely ignored by fully living people. Only one figure is presented as looking directly at the viewer, and that figure appears on the cover of this special issue. Moving through the plexiglass crowd adds a dynamism

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\(^{28}\) Elliott & Culhane eds. 2017.

\(^{29}\) Abu-Lughod 2008.

\(^{30}\) Portions of the description and discussion of Avan Sidq’s “The Passivists” previously appeared in Cockrell-Abdullah 2018 (1).
and tension to the experience, compelling the viewer to turn and search for the faces of the figures, yet there are none. Walking through the installation, the audience member is forced to turn around in the short, cramped corridor that only holds one person at a time, and to come back through the plexiglass crowd. Upon turning around, you are confronted by the hard eyes of a young person, who at first seems masculine, yet bears the distinctly feminine facial profile of the female artist who made him/them, looking over their shoulder at you. This individual was located at the end of the corridor, in what was described as a prison cell once used for solitary confinement. It is well-known that prison conditions inside Amna Suraka were overcrowded, filthy and inhumane. To give a better sense of perspective and size of the space, the small cell this individual occupies is just enough room for one person to walk about three or four steps along its length. There are no windows and no running water of any kind. Often times, cells such as these would be packed in excess of what it was designed to contain. Prisoners would be packed in so tightly that they could not sit down. Accounts by detainees at the time recall having to take turns sleeping or sitting down.31

In “The Passivists,” Avan Sidq presents a group of individual figures that seem to be witnessing a particular event. Interestingly, each figure is set apart one from another and alone. None are coupled or grouped together in any way. While the whole group may, indeed, be witnesses to some unnamed event, they are all posed in such a way that makes them seem as though they are intentionally attempting to “not see” whatever it is they are seeing. What then are we to think about that one lone figure who does look out and “sees?” Will they be in trouble? Will they be made to suffer in some way for bearing witness? Why are all the others looking away and what are they trying not to see? This is but one example of the powerful subjects and compelling questions Kurdish contemporary artists are presenting to their audiences. In the pages to follow, we hope that these dialogues with contemporary Kurdish conceptual and visual artists will offer up both challenges and helpful guidance that can provoke us to reinterpret, to rethink and to continue to problematize our current and future narratives about the role of culture in conflict.32

In this issue, we utilize numerous Kurdish words and names. The Kurdish language utilizes both Arabic and Latin scripts. In this special issue, Kurdish words and names are transliterated from Kurdish to the closest spelling in English, without the use of Kurdish diacritics. Transliterated spellings of the same name often have multiple spellings. For example, the Kurdish city of Sulaimani may also appear as “Slemani,” or by its Arabic pronunciation, “Sulaymaniyyah.” When quoting another author, spelling remains as it appeared in the original text or as spelled by the organization using the term/name. A number of the essays and interviews appearing here were first written by their authors in Kurdish and then translated into English. At this point, the translated essays were organized and edited. During this process, there were follow up discussions with the authors to make certain that the newly translated and edited piece still retained the author’s original message and voice. I take responsibility for any mistakes or inconsistencies in transliteration.

Our first essay, “Painting Without Paint: Four Sisters, Three Dresses,” by Nuveen Barwari, opens with an original poem by the artist entitled “Gulistan.” The essay that follows uses the multiple layers of the jilli Kurdi (Kurdish dress) as a metaphor for the multiple layers of a Kurdish diasporic identity. Using Édouard Glissant’s concept of opacity to frame one “diaspora kid” understanding

31 Ibid.
32 Cartiere and Zebracki 2016.
of the layered garment, Barwari’s essay reads like a love letter to the jilli Kurdi describing it as an apparatus that “works in opposition to transparency,” protecting the unseen, while resisting a colonial gaze. Quoting the author, “Kurdish dresses have taught me everything I know about collage, material culture, and protest. The Dress-as-collage and as an expression of protest has taught me everything I know about my motherland, my mother tongue, and my mother.” In Barwari’s hands, the jilli Kurdi is transformed from a mundane garment into a protective, private space made of fabric and textiles that a Kurdish woman might wrap around herself in a new country. Barwari’s essay hints at the notion that a diasporic community like the Kurds in Nashville, Tennessee use material culture brought from the homeland in order to create a private space of memory and sharing of culture for themselves that is not intended to be transparent or easy to understand to those outside the community.

This notion of “opacity” links Barwari’s treatment of the jilli Kurdi to our second essay, Halgurd A. Baram’s, “The Impact of the Evil Side of the English Language on My Life as an Artist.” Baram seems to suggest that “opacity,” as an antonym of transparency and as an acceptance of the “right of opacity,” to not be understood nor to be compelled to make oneself transparent and understandable, is a right that has not been afforded to the Kurds. Discussing the English language and its difficult imposition into Kurdish life in Iraqi Kurdistan, Baram positions the Kurdish language as the boundary that marks Kurdish cultural space. He places Kurdish speakers in a precarious interrelationship between globalization and its negative effects, the endangered nature of the Kurdish language, and its preservation as key to the cultural survival of the Kurds, and the English language as a problematic tool necessary for interactions with a global community but laden with imperialistic, anti-Middle Eastern, and anti-Islamic meanings. There is an angry tenor to Baram’s essay that conveys the pain and frustration of having been violated by the forced imposition of the English language, but also Arabic, Turkish and Farsi, on ethnically Kurdish people who have been subjects of decades of brutal oppression, forced assimilation and genocide. For Baram, the Kurds do not seem to have the choice to be opaque, but are forced into a world system that puts them in a near-constant state of lose-lose scenarios.

Our third essay, “The Cycle That Brought Me, This Self, and Art Together,” by Niga Salama and Bzhwen Jamal, brings us into the highly personal space of the self that is at once both private and public. “Being a woman meant being fragile and soft. I did not want to be classified as that,” recounts Salama and Jamal, “I would not let them classify me as that. Instead, I was this super masculine girl who was misogynistic in all the stereotypical ways of a man, ready to reduce the other sex. Regardless, I was still educated about how to be that woman that I was refusing to be.”

This account details one individual’s struggle with the social construction of womanhood in Kurdish society, those roles that females are taught – misogyny and self-hatred – that she sees deeply imbedded in Kurdish society. Connecting her artwork to her private self, Salama opens up the space of her personal struggles with gender identification and being queer, “It took me more effort to fit in with girls than it did to fit in with guys. It didn’t take me long, to learn that I might have a ‘condition’ because I felt like a man,” writes Salama. This highly personal process is reflected through publicly displayed artwork that demonstrates a continuum of moments in her

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33 Britton 1999.
34 Ibid.
personal process of self-discovery, juxtaposed with displays of societal views through audience interaction with the works.

The essays forming the bulk of the special issue are bisected by two interviews conducted by Meriwan Abdullah. In “A River of Light: An Interview with Behjat Omar Abdulla,” artist Behjat Omar Abdulla discusses his most recent projects, “What if Life is Black and White” and “From a Distance,” work that focuses on reflecting on identity, belonging, migration and citizenship, along with the founding of Abdulla’s River of Light project. In “Highlighting the Invisible: An Interview with Avan Sidiq,” Sulaimani-based artist, Avan Sidiq, talks with Meriwan Abdullah about her involvement with the project Nawi Min Nawi Daikama, an activist project working to change the laws regarding the carti nishtinmanî Iraqi (Iraqi identification card) for cases of children who are born after rape, abuse, or abandonment. “When someone has pain, they take medication, and the problem will be solved quickly,” says Sidiq. “Art doesn’t work in this way because art is working with different tools. When society has complex problems, the task is harder. No, art is not able to get even one piece of bread for a poor person, but it can show the essence of the problem. Art has the ability to show the audience the invisible and the ability to make that audience change the angle of their viewing to reevaluate the subjects.” Sidiq discusses what she thinks are the biggest challenges facing the art world in Kurdistan and her view of the role of the artist in Kurdish society.

In our fourth essay, “Space in the City’s Memory: An Example of Statues in Sulaymaniyah,” by Zamoa Daraga, the author begins by introducing the reader to the many gardens, parks, and public art works around the city that are one of its most admired features. An important hallmark of these public spaces are the statues of famous historical personalities who are remembered for serving the city, particularly those who were martyred for the sake of the Kurdish nation and were important figures of the Kurdish revolution. Despite their significance to the history of Sulaimani, these statues, and the public spaces in which they exist, are being reshaped and removed, at worst destroyed, to make way for new developments in the city. Noticeably, public spaces where contentious moments of Kurdish history that took place in the period of time from 1991, when the Kurdish Regional Government was formed, through the mid-1990s during the Kurdish Civil War between the PUK and PDK, are being erased, as exemplified by the removal and destruction of the city’s statues. Daraga contends that this act is an effort on the part of Kurdish authorities to erase less savory pieces of a collective Kurdish history in the city, changing the citizen’s relationship to their city and inadvertently destroying pieces of Kurdish art history in the process.

“Public spaces are greatly important for the enjoyment and exercise of human rights in general, and are particularly relevant for cultural rights,” states the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner in their 2019 report, “The importance of public spaces for the exercise of cultural rights.” Daraga’s essay presents us with an opportunity to consider a variety of issues pertaining to public spaces as they are relevant for cultural rights. Daraga’s essay and our fifth essay, “Civic Engagement, Public Intellectualism and Art,” share an interest in how individual citizens and groups engage with public spaces. In this fifth and final essay, I revisit two art shows, Clamor and Tekist, that I previously observed in 2016 and 2017. In my initial analysis of these shows, I considered how the artists presenting at the Clamor show at the Fine Arts Institute

and the Tekist show at the Museum of Modern Art utilized these specific sites for public art shows in order to engage a citywide audience in critical reflection and questioning of the significance of these sites and the meanings brought to these spaces. In that early analysis, I considered these public arts shows as efforts at capacity building, utilizing frames of space and place and a critical consideration of the site of production, the site of the image itself and the audience. In this updated treatment, I revisit my earlier thinking about public art shows as capacity building in order to add a consideration of artist activisms, and artists who are functioning as public intellectuals, in order to create sheltered civic space in Kurdish society that allows for open discussion of social problems.

Largely, the pieces included in this special issue are bound together by a loose conceptual framework that engages “intersectionality” and “space.” As a framework for understanding, “Intersectionality” has aided a generation of scholars to better see the compounding layers of social identifiers that reflect overlapping systems of disadvantage. Within the scope of this special issue, the framework of intersectionality invites us to think critically about the ways in which our intersectional identities create social spaces of inclusion and exclusion, are defined and (re) constituted through social structures and cultural practices, and ordered as ways of knowing the world and ourselves within our deeply held beliefs. We continue to explore these complex and intersectional social categorizations by adding the lens of space through the consideration of the spatial composition in which art is created and in which artists work. We focus on reexamining the mediums through which Kurdish national stories are transmitted and those “other” modalities and spaces where marginalized narratives may be found, and how the occupation of a space can allow for strategic constructions of meaning. When I first asked the artists to write about their art as it intersected with space and conflict, it was a way to bridge the distance between myself and them that had been imposed upon us. Throughout the process I realize that I thought of this approach as an ethnographic method being improvised for use at a distance. I must also admit that when I was thinking of space, I was most often imagining physical spaces in which art was being produced and thus, was limited by my own understanding of space and place as referring to arrangements and interactions (space) as well as the (place) lived, dynamic locations where different people, social agents or powerful actors come together.

Leave it to a group of artists to expand the ways in which we can think about a subject! The spaces and places that you will encounter in the essays to follow include those physical, public spaces that seem so familiar, but also those private spaces of the individual mind, one’s physical body, and those spaces that cut across nations and states. Consider for a moment the numerous spaces you might move through during the course of your day. For example, on a daily basis, I move from the privately held space of my home into my car that occupies space on public roadways, that then takes me through the gas station on my way to campus. Each of these spaces has their own set of norms and rules that govern who may enter that space and how they are expected to conduct themselves while in those arenas. If we are, as Nato Thompson, author of *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-first Century*, suggests, “the result of the spatial compositions we reside in,” then considering space in this way gives us the capacity to view an array of intertwined local relationships of power that constitute a community. Focusing on space, “Making Spaces: Art, Culture & Difference” seeks to recontextualize space as a medium that Kurdish artists of diverse

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36 Hasso and Salime eds. 2016.
social categorizations are utilizing to give expression to their own experiences of what it means to be Kurdish, while at the same time negotiating and creating Kurdish forms of group identity that carefully balance practices, values and identities to create an aesthetic that is uniquely Kurdish in its expression. In recontextualizing the space in which art is created and in which artists are working, we can ask, how do users inhabit these spaces and places while encountering others within the confines of those spaces? What are the meaningful ways of interpreting such encounters? What sort of relation exists between intellectual life in the public sphere and the unique spaces and places the artist-activist-intellectual is able to inhabit? What is the relationship between local communities, regional identities, and the politics of nation-state building?

Some Editorial Notes on
“Making Faces: Art, Culture & Difference in Iraqi Kurdistan”

This special issue is but one offering of scholarship about contemporary Kurdish art and artists in Iraqi Kurdistan. It most certainly is not the definitive work on the subject, yet it is my hope that interest for future research and publications might come forth from this group of essays that will enliven and enrich both the scholarship and our understanding. Research about Kurdish art in Iraq should be considered urgent research, particularly with regard to the cultural products of a historically marginalized and stateless group, whose culture has been systematically erased and destroyed through decades of dictatorship, oppression, and war.

Painted rocks by Ismail Khayat, Iraqi Kurdistan, 2016. Photo by A. Cockrell-Abdullah.

38 Cockrell-Abdullah 2018 (3).
39 Damluji 2015.; and Bozarslan 2012.
The sense of urgency becomes even greater with the loss of our elder artists, as with the recent death of Mamosta Ismail Khayat, who died on October 20, 2022 at his home in Sulaimani.\textsuperscript{40} My husband, Meriwan, and I were honored to have known him. He was both a mentor to me and a friend; I am now finding it very difficult to put into words all that he was and what he means to the Kurdish people and to the world of Kurdish art. People have referred to him as the “grandfather of Kurdish art,” and even as “the Picasso of Kurdistan.” \textit{Mamosta} (teacher) Ismail, “mamosta” being an honorific to denote Khayat’s high social status in the art world to include the fact that he was a teacher or inspiration of many of today’s artists and an icon in Kurdish art circles. Mamosta Ismail was a self-taught artist whose career spanned more than fifty years. Born in 1944, he had seen it all. Mamosta Ismail’s life and career spanned from the overthrow of King Faisal II and the establishment of the Republic of Iraq, the Ba’athist coup of 1963, the rise to power of Saddam Hussein, the Iran-Iraq war, the Kurdish genocide, the first Gulf war and subsequent creation of an autonomous Kurdistan, the Kurdish civil war that later ensued, the disposing of Saddam Hussein, and an ascendant Kurdistan.\textsuperscript{41} All of these events impacted the spirit that infused his work and was reflected in the products of his art. He was a visionary who did not shy away from experimentation or difficult subjects.

During my first year of conducting fieldwork in Kurdistan, I had a number of opportunities to engage with artist Ismail Khayat and his wife, Gaziza, an acclaimed actress, writer and director in her own right, on several occasions both at his home studio and out at public art events. During early visits to Kurdistan, when I asked which artists I should be working with for this study, Ismail Khayat’s name was the very first to come up. I first met him at his home studio. A small but open place with honey-colored wooden floors and plenty of sunlight. This great man and I sat on the floor like kids and he brought out pieces that he had been working on, one-by-one. I remember the quiet awe on Meriwan’s face as he attentively watched every move Mamosta Ismail made. Of course, it would take me a bit longer to learn exactly who this gentle older man was, but even once I understood the historical figure that was, and is, Ismail Khayat, I was completely charmed by how he would offer pieces of candy and cups of tea, would listen to me and my questions attentively and answer them with complete sincerity. Over the years, he would make the effort to reach out to check on me and my continued study of Kurdish art.

The loss of Mamosta Ismail entails a major loss of a source of Kurdish art. He was known for his larger installations, like the large painted boulders in the Pirar region of Kurdistan, that carried the message of peace at the height of the Kurdish civil war. However, my memories of him were of the small pieces he would sketch while traveling or slumped down on the stairs to his house, sketching furiously, over any piece of available surface when an idea came to him in the moment. When I knew him, he would utilize materials that had been discarded, like old paper, old toilet paper rolls he saved from a hospital stay in Germany, bits of wood and, most famously, rocks for his canvas. These small rocks he would collect from anywhere and everywhere he traveled, and he had numerous international exhibitions all over the Middle East, the United States, France, Germany, Japan, Sweden, South Korea and even the former Soviet Union. When we came home, Meriwan and I started collecting interesting little rocks to bring to him the next time we were there. Now our little collection of rocks, the one that is sitting on my desk at home, will be delivered not

\textsuperscript{40} In Kurdish, the term “Mamosta” means teacher.

\textsuperscript{41} See: Gunter 2008.
to Mamosta’s gentle hands, but instead to his gravesite in Kurdistan. The loss of Mamosta Ismail Khayat does constitute the loss of a human life, but, at the same time, it constitutes a significant piece of Kurdish history and Kurdish art history now forever lost to us.

Like all collaborative projects, this special issue would not have been possible without a wide range of support from many individuals and institutions. Firstly, numerous images of beautiful artwork appear throughout the issue that have been photographed and supplied by the artists themselves, for which we are very grateful. I would like to extend my deep appreciation to Dr. Jesse Benjamin, Editor of the Journal of Intersectionality, for continuing to champion the telling of Kurdish stories and allowing us a bit of creative license to tell those stories. Thank you to Pluto Journals for supporting accessibility to new work such as this for dialogue and learning. Support for translation and writing of this special issue that was conducted over the summer of 2022 was given through the Internal Research Fund through the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Georgia Southern University for which I am thankful. Many thanks to Meriwan Abdullah for his work in interviewing and translating questions for “Highlighting the Invisible: An Interview with Avan Sidiq,” for translation of the essay, “Space in the City’s Memory: An Example of Statues in Sulaymaniyyah,” by Zamoa Daraga, from Kurdish into English. In addition, I would like to thank Allison Appelfeller for her work assisting with aspects of the literature research utilized in this special issue. Many thanks to the Department of Political Science at Agnes Scott for seeing the value in the production of this special issue, allowing me the time during the Fall semester of 2022 to devote to this work. Thank you to Managing Editor Aajay Murphy, whose design work and scrupulous attention to detail enhances our reader’s ability to easily interface with the scholarship, and to the diligent staff of copy editors with the Journal of Intersectionality, whose tireless work made this special issue possible. Thank you to each of you for the gifts of your time, talents and support!

References


"Guest Editor's Introduction" — Cockrell-Abdullah


