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Making the Invisible Heard: German-Kurdish Cultural Organizations and Transnational Networks

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Making the Invisible Heard: German-Kurdish Cultural Organizations and Transnational Networks

Abstract

The increasing corpus of theoretical literature on transnationalism remains to be applied to many of the transnational migrant communities which have developed since the advent of modern globalization. This literary essay seeks to provide a perspective on the German-Kurdish community in Berlin, and how they fit into the larger European and Kurdish contexts. It illustrates the convergence of opportunities and disadvantages that German-Kurds face in Berlin, while also investigating what it means to be a Berliner-Kurd. The literary essay accordingly explores the role of language, cultural organizations, and regional networks. In doing so, it is hoped that topics about German-Kurds and transnationalism can be highlighted for further study.

Keywords

transnational migrants, German-Kurds, Kurdish organizations, Kurdish language

Disciplines

Eastern European Studies | Ethnic Studies | European Languages and Societies | German Language and Literature

Comments

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**Amongst the Unheard:
German-Kurdish Culture and Transnational Networks**

By: Drew A. Hoffman
International Bridge Course
Fall 2014

An Egyptian Dialog?

He was clearly upset about what the guest speaker had been saying. "How can you call a government elected by more than 50% of the people undemocratic?" was the opening statement of M.'s long challenge to Dr. Yanni's portrayal of events in Egypt. Half tirade, half question, the middle aged man had lit the torch of a very heated debate in our small circle of global citizens; one which easily took form in the typical German *Diskussion*, something that requires a great deal of historical analysis and negotiation of more viewpoints than there were people seated in the room.

It was a cool October 15th night in the vicinity of Hermannstraße in Neukölln, Berlin. The small room that we occupied was located, not one, but three courtyards behind the main street which bore the address. Under the title, "*Über Grenzen hinweg*,"¹ the International Pastoral Center had invited the public at large to a dialogue-table, or *Dialogtisch*, to talk and discuss (Germans consider the two different actions) with Dr. Maged Yanni about the violence that was at the time spreading in Egypt following the military coup.

For a Coptic Christian such as Dr. Yanni, all of this oppression was traceable to former President Morsi, who after becoming Egypt's first democratically elected president, had shut down the power of the courts months before and monopolized power into his own hands. The military coup of General al-Sisi reversed all of that. A secularist, al-Sisi eventually outlawed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood and put likeminded secularists and religious minorities into a center of power not felt since the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Now Yanni's family was safe once more, despite the increasingly violent resistance of the Muslim Brotherhood underground.

But this entire reality was something that M., one of the members of the dialogue group, sought to contest and even shatter, as he started asking his questions in German to the doctor, who only spoke English and Arab. Morsi was the legitimate president after all; how could anyone support the ouster of

¹ German for "Crossing the Borders"

someone who was put in power by a majority of the "people?" The majority got the final say on where the center of power fell and how deep it penetrated society, and Morsi *was* the majority, not General al-Sisi. Undoing what had been wrought by democracy was ripping out the heart of the progress and sacrifice of the Arab Spring Revolution. To go back was not only immoral, but an act of oppression against the Muslim "majority."

Dr. Yanni was taken aback by this turn in *his* dialogue. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine the same debate at the time in Yanni's home village in Egypt at such a public space. Further discussion between M. and Yanni conceded that both the secularists and the Islamists had experienced periods of being in and out of the centers of power of society. Yet, both claimed the role of representing the majority in the debate. Which one was correct?

As I sat in the circle listening to the ping-pong match folding out in front of me, I could not help thinking what my Kurdish language instructor - *Mamoste* - would say about Yanni's homeland and its violent conflict. At least Dr. Yanni had a homeland to point to on a map. Egypt, though still an important international phenomenon, was not what I was focused on that night at 24a Kranoldstraße.

An American undergraduate college student with grant money to study transnational German-Turkish cultures and identities in Berlin, I had traversed more than 4,000 miles in order to look for the transnational identities that I had already spent two semesters learning about back at Gettysburg College in rural Pennsylvania. By this time in my stay in the city, I was beginning to understand why arrows had pointed me to Berlin to understand this 21st Century term of 'transnational culture.'

In Egypt, depending on which party was in power, either Dr. Yanni or M. could have been arrested, become victims of vandalism, or been attacked by a mob for voicing their dissenting opinion so vocally and publically. Such debates had been oppressed by both Morsi and al-Sisi. Yet, here in Berlin, in a crowded upper-story room stuffed with chairs was a stage safe from discrimination, violence, or even politics. Everyone sitting in the circle were equals including M., Dr. Yanni, other Berliners, and

even me. This was and still is a quality of large regions of Berlin, where entire districts of the city-state can be defined by *Migrationshintergrund*.² The German capital is a multicultural location and space in the European Union that simultaneously manages to bring together and question indefinable and hyphenated identities to those who inhabit it.

M. was not the only one in Berlin, let alone the quaint circle of our *Dialogtisch* participants, that dealt with the freedoms and challenges of having this *Migrationshintergrund*. I was a migrant, as well, being a non-native speaker whose home was across the Atlantic. As I was later to find out, one could find migrants that had cultural roots from across the world in Berlin including Turkmenistan, Bosnia, South Korea, Syria, Greece, and Kurdistan as well. As one of the largest migrant groups, the Turkish population of Berlin made the German capital the second largest Turkish city in the world, following only Istanbul.

But, who can remain Turkish when one like M. can argue with the meandering and relentless depth that every German recognizes as his or her God-given right to proclaim to the world? Concurrently, not every German citizen would consider M. one of their own simply because he shares their language skills and argument style. Indeed, M.'s opinion of the Morsi fall from power differed greatly from most of the other Germans in the circle, and some even displayed visible distaste at his overly energetic delivery. Left out of the reach of the host (German) world and home (Turkish) world, M. was instead firmly in hold of that space in between the home and host. The space of negotiation that took place that night between M. and Dr. Yanni is Berlin.

I smiled as I left the *Dialogtisch*; M. was not the only one in Berlin in between spaces, identities, cultures, and nations that I had met. In fact, I was already acquainted with an entire community of such people. However, rather than Egyptians, they were Kurds.

² German for "migration background"

I had first met Herr Aktas more than a year prior to that night at the *Dialogtisch* during a short field trip organized by one of my professors at Gettysburg College. A friendly and intelligent man, it was impossible to feel not at home upon visiting him at his office at the KKH, or *Kurdische Kultur-Hilfsverein*.³ The most immediate example was the cup of hot black tea, offered before one has had the time to think to take off his or her coat.

During the field trip, my classmates and I had the opportunity to ask Herr Aktas about the German-Kurdish community in Berlin. Now as I began my own search for a clearer understanding of transnational cultures and identities, I eagerly made contact with Herr Aktas once more and secured an appointment. I was surprised to learn that since my last visit, the KKH had moved their main administrative office from their instructive facility in the heart of the noisy and dynamic district of Kreuzberg to a new location tucked into the corner of a nondescript apartment in Neukölln further to the southeast. It was in fact so nondescript and unassuming that Google Maps didn't even know the correct location of the address of the building, insisting that one must master the art of entering a building through the benches of nearby bus stops before arriving at the office.

Currywurst Winds

I nervously looked at my watch as the U7 underline pulled into yet another station. Satisfied that I was making ample time, I glanced through the train window etched with yellow Brandenburg Gates at the station name built into the wall at the far side of the station: Karl-Marx Straße.

Karl-Marx Straße is a major artery of the forever windy district of Neukölln, a part of Berlin few tourists choose to visit, which sits southeast of the historic downtown near the Landwehrkanal. This major waterway and the River Spree just blocks away are often thought to

³ German for "Kurdish Cultural Organization"

combine with the proximity of the Baltic coast in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern as the source of all this wind; although that most likely deters only half of the tourists who visit the German capital every year from visiting the district.

The street itself was very claustrophobic compared to the wide boulevards of Wilmersdorf, where I was staying for the semester. Instead, Neukölln seemed to be bursting with life at the seams. Every meter of street front was an entrance to a Döner Kebap stand, money changer, scarf shop, coffee house, or apothecary. Every crooked side street had several branching courtyards where one might find residential addresses as well as bakeries, tea shops, and craft vendors selling their own wares. On top of this was a large construction site right in the middle of Karl-Marx Straße, with wooden ramps and roped-off machinery everywhere, which made it too easy for the constant stream of people walking these streets to clog up the entire traffic system; something that would probably give any German a heart attack, were this a metaphor for his or her heart.

The orchestra of harsh jackhammer melodies from this construction competed for the ear's attention with the shouts of all manner of pedestrians walking by, bicycle rings at those not one with the bike path, honking of nearly homicidal Mercedes cab drivers, and barking of countless dogs. Added with the odd smell that is the combination of discarded cigarette butts and spicy Döner Kebap, it can be quite a lot to take in for the first time; with the wind, it is almost overwhelming.

Perhaps the real reason Neukölln is not a popular destination among tourists is because it is so crowded. Indeed, one can find an amazing constellation of Berliners from around the world there. Even within just the Islamic community, one can observe women liberal enough to

wear no veil, and conservative others with veils that reveal only their eyes. Yet, these different choices in attire mattered little as these polar examples attempted to pass each other on the same side of the street.

As I struggled to witness as much as possible as I made my way down Karl-Marx Straße, I noticed that there was a park up ahead at the end of the block. The small area of trees, benches, and even a gazebo was a border that kept the intense liveliness of Neukölln from spilling over into its *Rathaus*.⁴ At the corner of the block before the park began stood a very sizable Döner stand for Karl-Marx Straße standards (it had chairs) named "Rathaus Grill."

Hungry and having already discovered for myself the cheap yet divine taste of Döner Kebabs, I elected to purchase one and enjoy the bright autumn day eating lunch at the park. As I waited for the delicious German-Turkish specialty to be made, I looked over some of the other things that they had listed on their menu. I was quite surprised to find *Türkische Currywurst* listed as one of the entrees. As any Berliner will tell you, Currywurst is the universal medium of Berlin culinary identity. There were hardly any fast food stands in the city that failed to offer it in one form or the other.

That the Rathaus Grill had taken something so completely German and redefined it into their own dish was a complete validation of what I sought here in Berlin: a unique position in Berlin employed the agency that melded the old and new together on the cultural, or in this case culinary, field. It challenged the definition of what a Currywurst was. By doing so, the *türkische Currywurst* changed what it meant to own a Döner Kebap stand from an outlet of Turkish culture to a space of negotiation between the German majority and Turkish minority,

⁴ German for: council chamber

and therefore into something that was neither, but rather a composite of the two. This change was just as palpable to take in as the dogs barking or the smell of decaying cigarette butts. The thought occurred to me as I sat gorging on my Döner that perhaps I had at last found out why it was so windy in Neukölln. They were winds of change. And if this was the winds of change that could be found from places such as Rathaus Grill, I couldn't imagine what gales awaited in the future as I made my way forward on the U7 train deeper into the district of Neukölln.

A Ship in the Maelstrom

The U-Bahn finally reached the Grenzallee, my destination. A quarter of the neighborhood that lies below Karl-Marx Straße, yet manages to be just as crowded. As I got off of the U-Bahn, I noticed that I was far too early for my appointment with Herr Aktas even by German standards. Accordingly, I sat down at one of the unassumingly gray benches along the platform to pass the time. My gaze wandered to a set of black and white murals mounted on the wall opposite the tracks that, had I thoughtlessly carried on my way like everyone else, never would have noticed.

The one directly across from me had the dark motif of an old sailing galleon being tossed by a violent storm in a vast sea with thrashing and rolling waves, much like the sky in *Starry Night*. Dark rain clouds dominated the upper horizon, dumping sheets of rain throughout the work. On the ship itself were a series of Arabic words and letters, some of which literally formed the oars that drove the vessel forward despite the brutal headwinds. Stationed near one of the masts was the black silhouette of a face, which kept all but a pair of sad eyes opaque. Additionally dispersed in the turbulent sea were three more identical faces hidden in the same way. Yet the gazes of these imperiled faces did not race back to the safety of the

galleon, but instead into the serpentine abyss. Only the face left on board the ship of words and time continued on against the maelstrom.

I pondered this work of art for some time. Before leaving, I was confronted by the universal U-Bahn bakery and of course the increasingly familiar Neukölln wind that still defied any intimacy. The address number for the KKH office was not to be found at street level, but rather on a small plaque mounted on the 3rd (2nd in the German system) floor wall. Beneath this plaque was at last the basement entrance of the staircase that took one up to the KKH office.

As I Herr Aktas offered me tea and welcomed me into his new airy office that offered such contrast to the dark contours of the Kreuzberg location, I set about explaining my project to Herr Aktas in German, the only common language that we shared. After carefully listening to what I had to say and reflecting for a moment, Aktas suggested that the best way to meet actual Berliners in the German-Kurdish community was to take the *Kurmanci Kurs*⁵ that the KKH offered. It would be a way of staying in contact with the KKH, while also gaining a window into Kurdish language, culture, and identity; all the while creating a much needed degree of trust among the members of the organization. After all, I admitted, I knew very little about Kurdish culture at this point. He also informed me of a list of multiple events open to the public that the KKH was sponsoring that dealt with migrant cultures.

In less time than expected, our talk grew more relaxed and turned to other topics that we shared a mutual interest in. At one point, he asked me, "How do you like Berlin?" "I love it," I automatically replied, "It is a wonderful place, not like American cities, for example New

⁵ Kurmanci is one of four dialects of the Kurdish language. Kurs is German for "course"

York. I actually feel safe here. Don't you?" As if I had brought dark news, his eyes turned quite sad, and answered, "It is not safe for us here." I felt ashamed. I had assumed that Berlin is the same place and space for each of the millions within its borders. Herr Aktas shared with me stories of German-Kurds being left unprotected against *Ausländerfeindlichkeit*⁶ in part from police apathy, but also street crimes, or violence associated with the Kurdish Communist party, the PKK.

It was easy for a white and Protestant male carrying the ultimate symbol of global affluence in the small blue book in my pocket that identified me as an American - to be safe in Berlin. Danger wasn't visible, let alone noticeable, for an American who spoke enough German to get around and had already been to Berlin before as I had. However, despite some individuals knowing more German than I might ever know - and often a native speaker, violence in the German capital was as much a reality for some German-Kurds as the sunlight that was shining through Herr Aktas' office windows, or the tempting Döner Kebap stand across the street. How could someone who grew up more than 4,000 miles away from Berlin be less at danger than those who considered Berlin to be their *Heimat*, or homeland? The radical PKK could not be the only answer for these storm clouds, as the actual conflict against the Turkish government had cooled since the 1990's. At the heart of the problem, insisted Herr Aktas, was the relationship between the German majority and the migrant minorities, estimating that, "20% at least" of Germans were racist, even 80 years after the events of World War II. Discrimination was still a daily reality for many minorities in Germany that did not share "German" values or identity.

⁶ German for "xenophobia"

The direction of the conversation shifted course once again as we talked about the ongoing civil war in Syria and the autonomous region that Kurds had carved out in the Northeast of that state. When I asked what he expected would happen to this region in the future, Herr Aktas reflected with a hint of cynicism that only the great powers of the US, Russia, China, and the UK had a real say in what anything would look like after the dust finally settles in Syria.

Being stateless, it was not up to the Kurds whether or not their new zone would gain independence or even continue. Without vital interests at stake, the greatest powers including the US, however did nothing substantive to intervene. The greatest irony, however, lay in Germany herself, where al-Assad obtained the vast reserves of chemicals needed for his poison gas stockpile and threatened to push Syria into international war. Now Chancellor Angela Merkel's government had agreed to admit 5,000 refugees from the growing crisis in Syria. However, this too was something that Herr Aktas felt only exacerbated the *Ausländerfeindlichkeit* in German society, as newspapers talked of the camps that were to be set up in a park.

His was a ship that was navigating a maelstrom through forces of the German majority. And, like in the mural in the U-Bahnhof, not all the Berliners in the minority were navigating the storm successfully. I may not have been able to see it at the time, being so close to the eye of the storm. It remained to me to attempt to brave the winds and gales of rain with those already there. After all, the storm could not be a completely despairing voyage - why else would so many like Herr Aktas embark, set their sails and start the trip at all, if not for the journey?

Into the Courtyard and Beyond

The building near the Kotbusser Tor that houses the KKH instruction facility sits directly on the Landwehrkanal in Kreuzberg, north of the Grenzallee. Across the canal is Maybachufer - a street famous throughout the city for its Turkish market, where one can sit and enjoy a greasy *Boregi* and take in the sounds, smells, and rainbow of colors from the goods, food, and wares being sold. This remarkably open and overt space of German-Turkish culture, which fills the entire street with giant white tents and banners, was almost ironic in its proximity to the KKH, considering Turkish violence during the 1990's regarding the PKK. Here in Kreuzberg, only the small Landwehrkanal and a traffic bridge prevented the Turkish market and all of its goods and bargain-seekers from spilling over to within earshot of the KKH. To any tourists who thought themselves exotic adventurers and decided to explore this famously scenic economic and social beehive, such distinctions might easily remain invisible. Were not all streets with more than one Döner stand and a collage of satellite dishes on apartment balconies a Turkish neighborhood?

The KKH building itself, much like many mosques in Berlin, required the visitor or student to call up a degree of courage before wandering into a gray and seemingly forsaken *Hinterhof*⁷ that doubled as the adjoining bar's smoke den before reaching the door. As I walked up the stairs to attend my first Kurmanci class, I glanced down at my watch: "Three minutes left, they've probably started by now," I worried, remembering the astute punctuality of my German class that I was simultaneously taking at Freie Universität in Dahlem. I was thinking up

⁷ German for "courtyard." While certainly an architectural form found elsewhere in Germany, the sheer number and utility of *Hinterhofe* in Berlin is perhaps unique. One must pass through at times three adjoining courtyards before reaching a destination. One can find mosques, movie theaters, businesses, and housing in the same complex

a good apology for coming late as I walked into the assigned classroom, but forgot every German syllable as I looked about me.

I was standing in a medium sized square room about the size of a doctor's office waiting room with typically solid and large tables for German classrooms, which were arranged in a rectangle with chairs positioned around the perimeter. On the wall hung multiple posters depicting important Kurdish figures in black and white photographs - all of them men whom I had never heard of before in my life. A familiar-looking chalkboard was mounted on an adjacent wall next to an oddly-shaped vase, which I later found out was filled with tap-water and a rag that served as the eraser. Only the room down the hall had an overhead-projector, which rested on a small shelf.

What cut me off from uttering an attempt to apologize was not the classroom itself, but the lack of a class being taught. Instead, those who had already arrived were scattered around the room - chatting, laughing, and talking with the teacher; who stood apart from the rest in the interior of the table-rectangle. In fact, we did not start until 15 minutes after I arrived, which was enough time for a German to grab something at the bakery and return.

It was not apparent to me then, just how diverse the group of people were that looked up at me as I entered. Two had the same first name but came from completely different parts of the city and had family in different parts of Kurdistan. Yet both were in higher education and were seeking a way to reconnect to their lost ancestral tongue, having been born in Berlin. One was an American studying at the same program that I was at the time and had a Kurdish father, while yet another was a German-Kurdish mother who did not know the Kurmanci dialect. A

fourth was a German-Turk, who was interested in learning a language spoken in her home country.

For me, it was the language instructor that I would come to call *Mamoste*⁸ who caught my attention the most. The oldest person in the room, his dynamic and animated personality dominated it. Every word seemingly energized, his approach to speaking German echoed the harmonious and balanced rhythms of his native Kurdish, especially in the ears of an English-speaking American.

After explaining that, no, I was not in the wrong room, I was handed a *Kurdisch Fremdsprache Lehrbuch* and a *Kurdisches Wörterbuch*⁹, both of which I could pay for at any time before the semester ended. After a brief *Diskussion* about the time that worked best for the class to meet, Mamoste got down to teaching the class.

As Mamoste explored what we knew about Kurmanci - one of four Kurdish dialects - I increasingly grew the wool coat of a black sheep in the group. No, I did not know any Kurdish cities (let alone the capital of Kurdistan) or how many dialects of Kurdish there were and their names at that time. No, I was not able to count to ten in Kurdish, or even pronounce the "x" sound correctly. Dressed in out of place clothing from across the Atlantic against my pasty white skin, I found myself quite a minority in that classroom on the Landwehrkanal, more than I ever had before in Berlin. Even the other American student could count to ten in Kurdish. As my confidence wavered, I became more confused about what Mamoste was trying to say, desperately trying to write down literally every word I could while simultaneously translating

⁸ Kurmanci for "teacher."

⁹ My textbook and dictionary, with German-Kurdish translations.

Kurmanci to German and German to English in an attempt to learn what had been said fifteen seconds ago.

All of this was quite visible to the rest of the group in the class as well. Mamoste would often move around the table in order to hear us individually recite words such as "hello" and "question" in Kurmanci. The awkward silences when it was my turn or inability to pronounce a word a certain way was painful. There was a social capital built into everyone else's identities in this classroom that became an immensely powerful asset to which I had absolutely no access. Accordingly, it was impossible to forget or even ignore that I was an outsider here, and no number of Kurmanci lessons would change that. It was a pain that would continue for me as long as I kept on coming to that classroom hidden in the courtyard beyond the rest of the world of Berlin.

As we adjourned for the *Pause* break, I found myself alone with Mamoste in the adjoining room, where our mutually strong respect for straight tea had drawn us to the tea service. As I was finishing washing my tea-cup, Mamoste politely asked me before I left where my *Heimat*, my home, was. My honest reply of rural Pennsylvania surprised him greatly, as he thought that someone as quiet and polite such as myself was rest assuredly English. While not nearly as disorienting as the profiling I experienced in Denmark, where I had been confused for an Afghani, regret mixed into my own surprise that Mamoste should think so. Was it not obvious to everyone that I was an American? Was a male American really "supposed" to be tall, loud, and arrogant?

My splintered identity was further ruptured when Mamoste probed was what my purpose for wanting to take a Kurmanci course. Never before in my life had I been questioned

on the reason why I was at a certain location in space and time. Far removed from the comparably elitist environment of my own cultural home in the United States, I was a cultural community of one - an outsider. As the outsider and the Other, I could not persist in this group of individuals without this challenge. In the confines of this building, the others had a German-Kurdish center of power that reversed what lay beyond the walls. They were the majority, and it was because they were the majority, that someone such as myself felt my status so keenly as the minority. I was not German or Kurdish, and it was terrifyingly disorienting to be in such a center of power with no support from which everyone else drew strength.

As I left the KKH that night and made for the Kotbusser Tor U-Bahnhof that would take me to the security of my *Gast Familie*,¹⁰ I could not help but think that what I had just experienced might be a spatial challenge that was much more a reality for many in Berlin than just me struggling to learn Kurmanci. There were countless examples in just the streets of Kreuzberg and Neukölln alone. Did everyone live with the pains of being an exile that I had felt? As I learned later, the Kurdish dialect Kurmanci helped me understand the experience better.

Voiceless Among the Unheard

The Kurmanci dialect, though spoken by a majority of Kurds, was a language that was far removed from the lingual family that produced English and German. As a language deeply rooted in the natural world, Kurmanci produced sounds that I had never heard before, expressed with foreign letters to the Latin alphabet. I had no idea at first how a *î*, *ê*, or *ç* was supposed to sound. The "xw" sound seemed to have been given the wrong social security card

¹⁰ German for, "guest family."

- its letters were meaningless to the real pronunciation. However, with these strange phonetics came a built-in "balance" to the sentences that had an almost rhythmic flow. This meant that the phrase, "My name is Drew," was smelted into "*Navê min Drew e,*" or *Namemydrewis*.

I quickly discovered that this total unfamiliarity went both ways, as there were also sounds in Kurmanci that the German-Kurdish students had a hard time pronouncing that came easily to me, specifically the "w" sound. Accordingly, rather than having to repeat myself least twice before satisfying Mamoste, I could always count on saying *we*, *ew*, and *wî* correctly the first time. At last I had something meaningful to contribute to the class that connected to the English sounds of my own cultural inheritance. In this way, we students helped each other as the class progressed, as everyone had different skills and knowledge that we had mastered before - it was in short, a communal effort.

The "w asset" came at a powerful price, though: no one but the other American student could pronounce my name correctly. During the first month, I would invariably get a *Dreue*, *Tchru*, or *Drue*, and struggled to respond to all of them. Everyone else had either Kurdish or Turkish names, and could understand the code of phonics that I still excluded me, which prevented me from enjoying the mere identity of my name. Not to have this privilege hurt me much more than I might have thought. A symbol and label of one's own psychological Ego, it had a power over my identity. Thus, such a metamorphosis of something so essentially Ego must have been just as resonating for any migrant who experienced the same ordeal. Both of us were the minority in Berlin. However, by exiting the classroom, it was possible for me to avoid experiencing this reinvention of the Ego - something that was not the case for many of

the other migrants in the city. In that space between us lay the difference of the centers of power of German society.

At the same time, I also struggled to learn their names as well, particularly since there was no written class-roster. The net result was that as we practiced asking and stating each other's name, the casual "*Entschuldige, du bist?*"¹¹ was whispered before reciting quite formally the same question in Kurmanci. Thus, with every round of "her name is _____, what is your name?" every classmate was forced to come face to face with people who were otherwise formally distant co-pedestrians on the streets. Through this repeated negotiation of identity I was able to haggle out a name for myself that I could reliably recognize and did not leave me a complete stranger, just as I learned to spell everyone else's names.

The necessity of this reidentification was surprising at first, as my German host family had never had any trouble pronouncing my name from the day we met; and having studied German before my arrival, neither did I have difficulty pronouncing theirs. Why was it so difficult here in Kurmanci class? It seemed as if there were cultural dimensions of both our identities that prevented us from mutually understanding each other despite our common language of German. Only after considerable time spent meeting each other as human beings every Sunday could we understand both sides of the borders. I became Dtrew just as Mamoste sometimes became Mamosa. However, as our time spent together continued, I was able to correct my mistakes, and my classmates were able to correct theirs.

The renegotiation of identities spilled over even into geography, a topic that might appear seemingly concrete to anyone looking at a map: there the borders, names, and lines

¹¹ German for "Sorry, you are?"

don't change for each copy produced, despite what differences or confrontations might occur in the real world, until the map is updated. Any such person, German or American, might lose confidence in such universal concepts (whatever that means) as I did, when I discovered that Mamoste and other Deutsch-Kurden would draw their world map quite differently. Though not a nation-state, Kurdistan was still a nation - one that had geographical regions, borders, a capital, and therefore its own identity independent of what I or Google Maps thought.

Indeed, for Mamoste, any place inhabited by a majority of Kurds was Kurdistan. Thus North Kurdistan was a real place, just as South Kurdistan was - even though Ankara would call Kurdistan's northern sector South East Turkey and Baghdad would call southern Kurdistan Northern Iraq. This was a nation with hundreds of years of historical memory and culture that managed to create an identity in which some had attempted to repress. At the same time, it defied the territorial definitions of international community. The entirety of this global deterritorialized identity is just as complex and diverse as there are people in it. Experiencing such a nation as an individual via Kurmanci illustrated this point clearly for me.

Subtle nuances existed even from the pronouns used to express people in the 3rd person too. When one wants to say a sentence such as "she is sitting in the chair," the Kurmanci speaker must ask before translating: Where is "she?" If this person is sitting in proximity to the speaker, such as in the same room, then *vê* or *vî* are spoken (depending on gender), bringing with it a sense of closeness and direct application. The subject substituted with the pronoun is often by implication within earshot. However, if one wants to refer to the same person further away in the third person, *vê* and *vî* change to *wê* or *wî*. Thus, the identity to which the pronoun refers is projected beyond the Self, at distances whose medium of

measurement can be meters, miles, or lightyears. It delineates a change in identity between she-righthere and she-faraway, even though she-rightherefaraway knows that she has not been cut in half by departing a house.

English does not make this distinction. Yet does it have to? Kurmanci is a language that comes from a culture that despite such a long history of memory and identity, is at least partly organized into a diaspora that reaches out far from the space of Kurdistan. Indeed, it is a testament to the extent of this migration that I was able to learn Kurmanci in Berlin instead of Turkey. As such, the diaspora could not say it was of the German or Kurdish majority. Accordingly, the duality of distance versus intimacy of existence was very much a part of life for many of the Berliners from Kurdistan. Many in the class had been born in Berlin, but had family spread out from Turkey to California. Whether despite or because of this, Kurds have a national identity that defies even the powers of those with a nation-state. It is a strength that I knew I could never have as an American.

An Art of Expression

Kurdish national identity was hardly confined to the classroom where my classmates and I learned Kurmanci in Berlin. As October turned to November, B. asked me to sit next to him one day when I arrived at the Kreuzberg classroom early. An unusual request that defied the norm of seating arrangements, I had to wonder what the reasoning behind this request was, until he invited me to a *Demo*¹² being held at Alexanderplatz the coming Saturday. It aimed to protest against the discrimination of minority rights in German society. While I was touched at the offer, a warning sound rang in my head from the info session the previous

¹² Demo: abbreviation in German for "Demonstration," often in a political sense

semester at my home college that had advised staying away from such protests as much as possible for personal safety reasons. Luckily I was saved from this dilemma when I remembered that I would sadly already be busy that day, as I was planning on going to the *Rojên çanda Kurdî*, or Kurdish Culture Day celebration. While a little disappointed, B. let the matter go until after class, when he asked Mamoste the same question but got the same answer: he was going to be at the celebration as well.

The following Saturday, as I departed the Hermannplatz U-Bahnhof and turned onto Wissmannstraße on my way to the *Werkstatt der Kulturen*,¹³ I thought of B.'s offer. Was I missing out on seeing the Kurdish-German community en masse and in action? Was I skipping out on a once in a life-time opportunity to witness Deutsch-Kurden coming together in a visible cultural exchange at Alexanderplatz?¹⁴ Would what I found at the *Kurdische Kulturtage* prove a more insightful experience? In truth, I had no idea what to expect as I neared my destination and found the cast-iron gate that had a fist-sized 32 nearby, announcing the address with adroit formality. Next to a playground, there was nothing particularly noticeable about the entrance to the *Werkstatt*. Its nondescriptness felt as if it, too, had been designed to accommodate the forms of the vast diversity of cultural groups that the institution inside serviced simultaneously. It seemed to lack its own individuality.

I found my way up the stairs past the bar to the main auditorium, where the celebration was taking place. In a wide and open hallway running perpendicular to the entrance stood tables with bulletins of the days' events as well as a pile of green and white booklets published

¹³ German for "Workshop of the Cultures"

¹⁴ *Der Alex*, or Alexanderplatz, is one of the busiest hubs of transit in what used to be East Berlin. It is a massive square divided by a large train station in the center, and has been the site of multiple protests in the past.

by the KKH. Walking into the entrance, a tiered platform of bleachers took up much of the center of the room. At the far left-hand side stood an even longer row of tables spilling over with hundreds of different Kurdish novels, textbooks, and other publications by Kurdish authors. A huge projector screen dominated the stage at the far end of the room, where a man sat on a small studio stool to one side. The current presentation was a documentary of Kurdish art - the artist of which turned out to be the man sitting on the stool. The works of art were astonishingly colorful, many rich with connections and symbols of Kurdish history and culture, and encoded stories within their depths.

The most powerful one in my memory remains a multi-media work that depicted the German, Iranian, and Kurdish flags colliding in a swirling and stormy pattern. In the center of the piece rested a many-pointed golden star on the red, green, and white Kurdish tricolor field that symbolized the Kurdish nation. Dark holes ruptured the pattern at both the Iranian and German flags - simultaneously connected via a section of ominous barbed wire setting them apart from the Kurdish flag in the middle. In the space in between these uncanny craters was a collage of egg shells, each with the names of the Iranian spies who during the violent 1990's of the PKK murdered a group of Kurds in Germany and were never brought to justice by the German authorities. Thus the narrative embedded a much deeper condemnation of the injustice on the part of the German majority as well as the Iranian violence. The barbed wire from Iran to Germany became more than political satire and a metaphor for oppression in both states to a story that brought the discrimination of German-Kurds suddenly and quite visibly to the viewer. The golden star seemed far off in the 2-D medium of paint against the powerful focal point of barbed wires that straddled the canvas like a grape vine.

Much like the political *Demo* that B. was attending at the same time, the use of the celebration as a platform to call attention to tales of discrimination was a form of protest against German society. Its immortalization in art refused to be silent or silenced. There was a fight not only for the end of discrimination against minorities, but also a challenge to be heard not as Muslims or Turks, but as Kurds. Indeed, egg shells cracked into fourths and tinier pieces were employed by the artist in other works to represent Kurds living abroad as well. Not entirely whole, the barbed wires that German-Kurds faced were quite real in Germany, just as the lost pieces of egg shell were missing, and made the pains of trying to escape that barbed wire no less painful.

As the exhibit transitioned into the next film, a glance at the bulletin informed me with dismay that the film was in Kurdish with Turkish subtitles. Without the usual ubiquity of English, or even German subtitles to save me, it quickly became obvious that I was not going to be able to understand much of what was being said in the several interviews. Though I did hear "malabat" mentioned, which I had learned as "home" in Kurmanci, I was still too much a foreigner in this Kurdistan place to understand even the topic matter. Frustrated, I leafed through the KKH booklet that I had found outside the entrance before coming in. Casually flipping through the pages of letters, the name of Mamoste popped out to my eyes immediately as I turned the page (a sign of just how much time we had spent together negotiating names since October). In his letter, Mamoste wrote about the purpose of why he taught Kurmanci classes, saying:

"The Kurdish identity as an identity off of the basis of a self-standing nation with its own language and culture is sadly not acknowledged here. The Kurds are being viewed as either Turks, Arabs, or Persians. Precisely this ignorance has caused uncertainty in

Kurdish students. They are always struggling with this question: Who am I? Am I a Turk, Arab, Persian, even a German?"

My thoughts went back to those broken egg shells, scattered across the Kurdish flag far from that golden star that symbolized the Kurdish nation and homeland. For the first time in my life, I was seeing what Kurdish culture meant, looked like, smelled like, and sounded like outside of the classroom. Despite the barbed wire, there was an entire auditorium of people engaging with Kurdish art, literature, and even fashion; at the center of it all was the KKH. I was certainly glad that I had chosen the celebration over the *Demo*.

The KKH had assembled far more resources and exhibitions of culture than my small PA Dutch Reformist church back in the States ever could have dreamed of. It tapped into an identity that defied state borders and utilized its statelessness as a framework from which they experienced the city of Berlin. Mamoste's insight of Kurds being mistaken as Arabs seemed quite ridiculous on the part of the Germans to me. Just then, Mamoste spotted me in the crowd and introduced me to a friend of his who had migrated to the US; his first question: "So why are you here and learning Kurmanci?" My heart hurt again. Like every time I had to defend my reasons for participating in a community in which I was undeniably not a part of.

The Network of the Conversation

I was feeling a great deal of excitement as I looked down at my watch. I found myself once more on the U7 U-Bahn line on my way to the Grenzallee during a dreary and cold January day in Berlin. As the train passed the now more familiar Karl-Marx Straße, I thought back to how much had transpired in the short months since that day spent eating a *türkische Currywurst* in the shadow of the Neukölln *Rathaus*. All the people I had interacted with, the places that I had encountered, and the organizations that I had the fortune to be a part of - it

seemed surreal that so much coexisted with the world of monuments and government buildings of the German capital. Perhaps what made it so disorientating was the necessity of having to so actively search for such things in order to find them.

Relishing the cold blast of wind that greeted me as I left the maelstrom of murals and exited the station, I passed the gate to the apartment building where I had visited Herr Aktas all those moons before in September. Opening the door cost me my peace of mind, as the violently loud clamor of hammers and staple guns cascaded down from above. A climb up the first flight of stairs revealed an entire construction crew remodeling both of the apartments on that story. Extension cords snaked through the dusty and paint-bedecked skeletons of rooms. As I ascended the next flight, I could hear the faint sound of music competing with the harsh construction below. Arriving at last at the second story,¹⁵ I found the KKH so busy that they had forgotten to alleviate other Germans' anxiety by shutting their door. Employees and visitors were rushing in and out of offices, and the soft music that I heard came from a closed door on my left. After asking the closest person where to find Herr Aktas, I was directed to a room much further back in the complex than I had been invited into before in September. The migration of Herr Aktas' office was an improvement from any Western point of view - it was larger and boasted a large map hanging on the overhang of the ceiling. It depicted Kurdistan in golden-yellow surrounded by a very different Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria.

After accepting a cup of familiar warm black tea and a brief chat about my time at the Freie Universität of Berlin, it was time for business. Though I had traveled to the Grenzallee that afternoon to pay for my Kurmanci lessons and books, I had also brought a tape-recorder

¹⁵In the US, this would be considered the third floor.

with me. Herr Aktas was the first, and incidentally the only, person to agree to an interview with me about the issues that I had been seeking to understand all semester. As my research plans first began to come together across the Atlantic Ocean in Gettysburg, they had centered on the scientific collection of data. Interviews had seemed like the most logical route to take. However, I found finding people to interview was something that could not be demanded or even asked, but rather earned. A great deal of trust rests at the center of any interview. A relationship is only accrued with the passage of time. After two full months of Kurmanci classes, few of my classmates seemed interested in sitting down for an interview. I doubt I would have, had I been in their place, and it made my current opportunity all the more special.

With all of my materials ready, I prepared to recite the disclaimer statement mandated by the human ethics IRB committee back in Gettysburg College. A blanket document designed to ensure informed consent, I ended the waiver stating that, ". . . You will remain anonymous." "Pity," replied Herr Aktas.

"Pity? Would you like to stay anonymous?"

"Why would I want to stay anonymous? I'm already anonymous."

I seemed to have found myself at the same cultural cross-roads that I had stumbled into the time I had asked a question about safety in Berlin. What could I do to make a person I talked to more secure in Berlin? I could tell from the direct gaze of Herr Aktas through his black framed glasses into my own eyes in concert with his softly downtrodden frown that the American bureaucratic preference for the safety of anonymity was a red herring for someone who had built his life around negotiating these dangers in the pursuit to be heard. The maelstrom from

the mural below in the U-Bahnhof raged all around his office in the KKH and it was the reality of life for Herr Aktas.

Herr Aktas' desire to assert his identity in the recordings that I was gathering contradicted everything about the American IRB anonymity. Indeed, the very purpose of the entire KKH and agreeing to my interview was to lift Deutsch-Kurden from the ubiquity of anonymous identity - the same reason Mamoste stated he taught the Kurmanci classes. Taking my cultural blunder in stride, Herr Aktas allowed me to carry on.

Born in Turkey, Herr Aktas had migrated to Germany during the 1990's in order to pursue higher education. Since then he has become the *Geschäftsführer*¹⁶ for the KKH in Berlin. Though Turkey remains his home, he now considers Berlin to be his new *Heimat*. The net result of this migration is a distancing of geographical homeland in exchange for an intellectual community in Berlin represented eventually by the KKH. The organization has become a place where the *vî* and *wî* come together as one Self. Aktas expressed this redefinition in one term: the "*Berliner-Kurde*," a label with which Herr Aktas and increasingly more Kurds born in the German capital identify.

Here the word *Berliner* is used as an adjective to describe *Kurde*, or Kurd in German. This grammatical style illuminates an interesting function of hyphenated identities in the case of Deutsch-Kurden: rather than a completely isolated and solitary existence, to be a Berliner-Kurde is a localized global identity that is simultaneously Kurdish. This dualism is what makes the global scale of the diaspora of Kurds possible. It deterritorializes the belongingness of the

¹⁶ German for "business leader"

Kurdish national identity while at the same time defines quite precisely who is and is not a Kurd. It is a nation that has transcended the nation-state as the traditional unit of nations.

The choice of residency of Berlin might not be obvious to one in the center of power of the majority. Not only has Herr Aktas traveled throughout Germany, but he has in the past 20 years been to no less than six different EU states in order to "see other lands." However, he remains in Berlin, and is not alone in doing so. Berlin is a unique place and city-state within Germany. A city once divided in four by the allied victors of WWII, it is a city now in a cycle of constant reconstruction sparked by the 1989 fall of the infamous wall that maintained the divided past. In fact, Neukölln is not the only district whose skyline is defined by cranes taller than churches.

For Herr Aktas residing in Berlin is partly a political choice, as the SPD dominated city government encourages a less conservative environment than cities like Munich, where the CSU has home court. For an American such as myself coming from the assimilationist "melting pot" that is American culture, I've come to see Berlin as the world miniature, where a migrant culture has the space to be defined by the individual - even if that is not always the reality.

This is not of course to say that Berlin is a paradise. In Herr Aktas' opinion, the one thing that he would like to see change the most is Germans' mentality, which he believes all too often, "considers the foreigners as inferior." "The Germans," he claims, "have a problem accepting that people from other countries live here and have the right to be here." For a nation-state such as Germany, burdened with so much guilt from its own past, this problem is one in which Berlin is a pioneer of addressing. Perhaps that is why so many migrants make the decision to stay.

As my Kurmanci classes proved to me, the transition from Kurdish to German (or vice versa in my case) is not an easy one. Herr Aktas called German his "*Schweresprache*," or language of difficulty, which is a distinction from the German word for second language, or "*Fremdsprache*." Instead, rather than his Kurmanci *Muttersprache*,¹⁷ German was the language always demanding that next step towards grammatical perfection that seemed as distant as the Kurdish capital was from Berlin. A non-native speaker myself, I could certainly understand the difficulty of keeping track of the linguistic rules and nuances that seemed to fill libraries at times. Yet, I had the luxury of hopping on a plane in just under a week that would take me back to my own *Heimat* where perfection of German was not expected. For all *Berliner-Kurden* not born in Germany, that was not a luxury that we shared, for Berlin remained their home. I was merely a migrant in their *Heimat*.

As I left the KKH office and clamored past the construction crew once more following our interview, I could not help but feel a sense of loss as I realized that I was about to leave Herr Aktas, Mamoste, Neukölln, and everything else behind. Only as I crossed the busy street to buy a Döner Kebap one last time in Neukölln did I figure out why I felt the way I did.

Berlin was more than a place, and the people that composed that city were more than Germans, Berliners, or even *Berliner-Kurden*. They were nodes in a vast network of people, ideas, and identities that consisted of the world. Thus even those in Berlin who never traveled outside the city limits were not just citizens of Berlin and the German Federal Republic, but a global citizen by virtue of being an active part of that network. It was this network of collective

¹⁷ German for "mother tongue"

being and consciousness that allowed *Berliner-Kurden* to find their own *Heimat*, that made Neukölln so windy, and made the voiceless heard.

For me, Berlin had taken my conscious identity and split it in half. It had down-sized one half to that of a dwarf compared with the perspective of 6 billion other people in the world, of which Berlin represented only a fraction. Yet it also simultaneously gigantically inflated the other half in the global self-awareness that all met at one space and time in Berlin. In short, it was transnational; after looking for it for so long, I had through both halves of my identity become part of that network at last.

Epilogue: 8 Months Later

The Neukölln wind once again greeted me, as I climbed up from the Grenzallee *U-Bahn* station. It seemed that Berlin had changed while I was gone. Karl-Marx Straße was no longer clogged by construction work; German flags celebrated the recent victory at the World Cup from window sills and makeshift flagpoles. Even the interior of the apartment that housed the KKH office had evolved drastically, now boasting a Kindergarten program for migrant children. Berlin - despite those familiar winds and street names - was not the city that I had said goodbye to in December.

The thought provoked the memory of the events of the previous weekend at Alexanderplatz. I was invited by Herr Aktas to participate in the *Friedensfestival*¹⁸ going on at *Der Alex*, where the KKH and other organizations were delivering talks calling for an end to the dreadful escalation of violence that confronted the international community.

¹⁸ German for "Festival of Peace."

Ascending the tirelessly busy Alexanderplatz, I suffered a mental vertigo, as it seemed I had walked into a flea-market by mistake. Vendors stood under colorful stands offering the typical tourist trinkets and knock-off purses; large umbrellas announced stands selling overpriced beer, smoothies, and frozen yogurt. There was even a moon bounce for children set up across the Tram tracks. Shoe-horned into the center of the market was a small stage by American standards that seemed borrowed from one of the street fairs that one could find off of the *Ku'damm*.¹⁹

Sitting down for the KKH-sponsored event, I could not help but notice the diversity of patrons that composed the audience seated at the assembled *Weihenstephan*²⁰ tables. To my right, a pair of Japanese women chatted about their plans with a German in English. In front of me sat a pair of men wearing t-shirts calling for a free Kurdistan, while behind me rested a group of older (seemingly) local men already tipsy from beer who got kicks out of ridiculing the beggars asking for handouts. It seemed as if the entire flea-market had made the decision to hear what the KKH had to say.

Though its main goal is to support the integration of the local Kurdish Diaspora, the *Kultur-Hilfsverein*²¹ used the public platform that the *Friedensfestival* had afforded them to publically interview a Yazidi leader in German about the tenets of the Yazidi faith and the facets of their own identity. While other groups had employed political rhetoric in their address (some of which was even anti-American), the KKH interview which transpired provided a voice to a minority that, until the disastrous attacks and persecution by the Islamic State, had been

¹⁹ Ku'damm: short for *Kurfürstendamm*; a major shopping avenue of West Berlin famous for its wealthy patrons and residents.

²⁰ A brand of Bavarian beer

²¹ German for cultural aid organization

invisible and voiceless. To a degree they still remained voiceless and unseen, a minority far removed from the centers of power of a Central Europe focused on Ukraine and the euro at the time.

The Yazidi, a religious minority found in some parts of Kurdistan, has been targeted by Islamic extremism mainly for its belief in the non-existence of Hell and the act of evangelically converting others sinful. Considered by some Sunnis to be apostates, the Yazidi leader that the KKH interviewed testified of the atrocities that his coreligionists faced on Mt. Sinjar in Iraq. Invoking words such as *Völkermord*,²² the dialog that unfolded on stage struck home for a city that had devoted an entire city block to a memorial of the Holocaust and a society with the guilt of the Nazi past.

Three days later, as I finally made it to the top of the stairs and entered the administrative office of the KKH that morning, I could not help but appreciate the massive influence that the KKH had brought to bear at the festival by virtue of being a node in the global network community, which I had gained a glimpse of back in the previous winter. It was a network of transnational actors, consisting of the Yazidis, audience, and *Friendensfestival* that had the KKH as the lynchpin of the web connecting Mt. Sinjar to the heart of the German capital. To have such a global reach was an achievement that positioned the KKH as an organization among the most influential of the groups presenting at the festival and its international audience. Having already collected and sent 600€ of aid and humanitarian supplies to the Yazidis, the KKH was collecting donations for a second round of aid at a stand they had set up at the festival as well. It was 600€ more than many EU states had sent at the

²² German for "genocide."

time to help relieve a humanitarian crisis openly denounced by the UN General Assembly. In this regard, the KKH was entering not only cultural, but political spheres of space that nation-states couldn't or wouldn't due to their self-interests. Theirs was an agenda that was without the conventional borders of international affairs and was witness to no legislative vetoes.

It became apparent that the basis of the decision to send aid to the Yazidis was partly based on moral grounds, as I at last got the chance to sit and talk with Herr Aktas in his office beneath the yellow window into Kurdistan. When I mentioned the events going on in Iraq and the acts of genocide committed by the Islamic State, he was also quick to tell me of the lesser known acts of human trafficking that were occurring to populations and communities that the IS considered to be sacrilegious. It was clear to me that this was an equally nefarious atrocity to Herr Aktas, and it became apparent why he was so eager to help the Yazidis find their voice in the city-state of a leading European Union member. While *Berliner-Kurden* faced the attempts of the German majority to force cultural assimilation or at least be labeled as the Other, the Yazidis faced total ethnocide. Herr Aktas and the KKH were actors in a new *Verbindungspolitik*²³ of cultural identities with Yazidis exactly because of their connection to both the economically vibrant Berlin and their *Heimat* of Kurdistan, which was a direct actor on the ground in the conflict against the Islamic State. In this way, the proto-state of Iraqi Kurdistan worked with the diaspora to coordinate the relief effort of a local religious community that included more than Kurds, but Turks, Persians, and Arabs as well.

Thus, the micro and macro scale converged into a single network that spanned across the world, yet consisted of individuals, states, organizations, and regional societies

²³ *Verbindung* is German for "connection," thus "politics of connections."

simultaneously. While complex, it is also a phenomenon that has been observed in other areas of globalization around the globe. Increasingly, however, it is the actors and individuals not defined by the nation-state that occupy the transnational spaces of identity in which states cannot follow. It is in these cultural identities where these networks cross borders and have leverage in navigating the globalizing world we find ourselves in today. As their networks expand, there remains more questions than answers for what lies ahead for the rest of us who fail to follow.