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# The Imaginary Kurdish Museum: Ordinary Kurds, Narrative Nationalisms and Collective Memory

*Vera Eccarius-Kelly* | ORCID: 0000-0002-2206-6559

Professor of Political Science at Siena College, USA

*veccarius-kelly@siena.edu*

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to reflect on the role of Kurdish collective memory in the diaspora as it affirms Kurdishness and rejects the Turkish state's hegemonic histories. Where can Kurdish families go to recognise their own heritage, reflect on their socio-cultural journeys, share experiences, or validate familial memories? Non-elite diaspora Kurds are asked to curate exhibits for an imagined Kurdish museum. The exhibit proposals explore how ideas and beliefs shape diasporic representations of Kurdishness and why the (in)visibility of Kurdish diaspora communities remains a pressing concern.

## Keywords

Kurdish diaspora – Kurdishness – identity – memory – nationalism

## Mûzexaneya xeyalî ya kurdî: Kurdên asayî, netewegeriyên dastanî û bîra cemawerî

Ev gotar dikeve dû nirxandina rola bîra cemawerî ya kurdî li diyasporayê weku ew kurdîtiyê pesend dike û versiyona dîrokê ya serdest a dewleta tirk red dike. Gelo malbatên kurd dikarin berê xwe bidine kî derê ji bo nasîna mîrasa xwe, ji bo ku li ser gerên xwe yên civakî-kultûrî bihizirin, ji bo tecrubeyên xwe par ve bikin, an jî bîreweriyên xwe yên binemalî tesdîq bikin? Ji kurdên asayî yên li diyasporayê hatiye xwestin ku

pêşangehan raçinîn ji bo mûzexaneyêke kurdî ya xeyalî. Fîkr û pêşniyazên pêşangehan nîşan didin ka çawa fîkr û bawerî şîklê temsîlên diyasporayê yê kurdîtîyê diyar dikin û ka çima (ne)diyariya cemaetên kurd ên diyasporayê hêj jî endîşeyêke girîng e.

## مۆزه‌خانه‌ی خه‌یالی کوردی: کوردی ئاسایی، ناسیۆنالیزیستی داستانی و بیره‌وه‌ری جه‌ماوه‌ری

ئهم گوتاره ده‌خوازیت له سه‌ر رۆلی بیره‌وه‌ری جه‌ماوه‌ری کوردی له تاراوگه بکۆلیته‌وه که کورد بوون په‌سه‌ند ده‌کات و شتیوازی میژووی بالاده‌ستی ده‌وله‌تی تورکیا رهد ده‌کاته‌وه. بئه‌ماله کورده‌کان بۆ کۆی ده‌توانن برۆن تاکوو میراتی خۆیان بناسنه‌وه، بیر له سه‌فه‌ره کۆمه‌لایه‌تی-که‌لتوو‌ریه‌کانیان بکه‌نه‌وه، ئەزمونه‌کانیان بۆ یه‌ک باس بکه‌ن، یان بیره‌وه‌ری خێزانی خۆیان په‌سه‌ند بکه‌ن؟ داوا له کوردانی ئاسایی ده‌کریت که پێشانگا رێک بخه‌ن بۆ مۆزه‌خانه‌ی خه‌یالی کوردی. پێشینیازی کره‌وه‌ی پێشانگا له‌وه ده‌کۆلیته‌وه که چۆن بیرۆکه و باوه‌ر وینای تاراوگه‌یی کورد بوون دروست ده‌کات و هه‌ر وه‌ها بۆچی (نا)دیار بوونی کۆمه‌لگای تاروگه‌ی کوردی هه‌تا ئیسته جیگه‌ی سه‌رنجه‌؟

### Introduction

A significant portion of the existing literature on diasporas has focused on conflict-generated communities (often related to factors such as persecution, expulsion, appropriation of land, or other forms of victimisation), and the conditions that drive diasporas to become politically engaged in the homeland (Werbner, 2009; Lyons, 2007; Cohen, 1997; Sheffer, 1995). The literature also has privileged studies that explore unauthorised political or criminal behaviours among members of diasporas in host societies (Turner and Kelly, 2009; Makarenko, 2004; Demmers, 2002). In addition diasporas have constructively influenced the homeland through annual remittances to family members, their involvement in reconstruction efforts, and through advocacy efforts (Koinova, 2013; Baser and Swain, 2008; Smith and Stares, 2007; Kent, 2006; Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003).<sup>1</sup>

For this project, I relied on post-modernist notions (Bauman, 2007) to gain a better understanding of how self-identified members of Kurdish diasporas in Germany and the US express their personal sense of Kurdishness. In a

1 I would like to express my gratitude to David Zarnett for his feedback and helpful suggestions in an earlier version of this article.

detailed study of the Acehnese diaspora's contributions to war and peace, Antje Missbach framed her emphasis on diaspora voices as an "emancipatory approach" as she explored individual diasporan experiences along the margins of society (Missbach, 2012: 17–21). To examine how Kurds express their own socio-cultural identities in the diaspora, I embraced Missbach's methodology to integrate a range of Kurdish narratives without analysing so-called high Kurdish politics. It is obvious from some of the Kurdish participants' remarks included in this article, that memory and emotions play a significant role in how Kurdish narratives are framed, communicated and collected. While relying on an emancipatory approach is certainly a subjective way to grapple with questions of ethnic identity, in this case the methodology provides an opportunity for non-elite Kurds to discuss their individual thoughts about being Kurdish. By "curating" a personally imagined Kurdish museum, the participants can reflect on their own life experiences and the ways in which their families have coped over time.

This article aims to focus on what we can learn from members of Kurdish diasporas by concentrating on questions of culture and identity through curating museum exhibits. By seeking out non-elite or ordinary Kurds,<sup>2</sup> we gain perspectives into what matters to various Kurdish individuals, how they perceive or construct their identities, and what cultural factors contribute to their personal understanding of the Turkish state or of larger Turkish society.

### The Omission of Kurds in Museums

Strolling through the newly renovated Islamic Art galleries of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), visitors encounter impressive displays of geographically ordered Arab, Central Asian, Ottoman, and Persian artefacts including ceramics, metal works, carpets, weapons, textiles, and illustrated texts. Two of the expansive and re-designed exhibition spaces, now called the Koç family galleries, highlight exquisite collections. Emphasizing courtly but also provincial Ottoman art, the galleries recognised the significant donations made by the Koç Foundation. But many of the stunning displays on Islamic art are devoid of contextual narratives that could explore the fabric of peoples' daily lives, their communal histories, and their encounters with empires. Among the unexamined and unnamed people are Kurdish communities, who rarely find evidence of their own humanity in major museums. As project

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2 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for suggesting the term "ordinary Kurds" for this context.

participant Mehmet<sup>3</sup> stated, examining the burnt orange and terracotta hues of several carpets on display at the MET, “some of these carpets look Kurdish to me, but there is no information about Kurds here. This is really frustrating” (Participant #1, 2012).

Mehmet’s irritation compelled me to reflect on how Kurdish diaspora communities would portray their personal and familial experiences or their collective memories in a museum setting. In which ways would diaspora Kurds narrate their cultural heritage and identity? How might Kurds who live in the North-American or European diaspora counter existing socio-cultural bias and prejudice if they curated their own exhibits? This article explores the ways in which “ordinary” members of the Kurdish diaspora might envision and portray their personal sense of Kurdishness in a museum space of their own design and choosing.<sup>4</sup>

A museum, according to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and its Committee for Museology (ICOFOM), “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” (Desvallées and Mairesse, 2010: 57). While exhibitions communicate and mediate ideas, they also represent deeply political projects. Carefully curated exhibitions tend to function as discursive tools to create and disseminate particular knowledge and, at times, emphasize selected cultural contexts for purposes of either social inclusion or exclusion (Sandell, 2003: 45–46). Exhibits can also directly or indirectly enhance national agendas by serving to dismantle existing stereotypes or by constructing new versions of them. Art educator Carol Jeffers (2003) proposed that distinctive knowledge is advanced in museums through elites with particular agendas by highlighting specific ideas or reinforcing selected social norms and codes. Carefully curated collections sometimes endorse narratives that visitors perceive as representing messages of dominance and cultural superiority as certain historical periods are privileged or, alternatively, omitted through the exclusion of symbolic representations, names, maps, artistic projects, installations, or particular voices and communal experiences (Tlili, 2008).

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3 22 self-identified diaspora Kurds in Europe and the United States provided suggestions for various exhibits between December 2012 and July 2014. The participants are assigned numbers to ensure anonymity and all first names are fictive.

4 I approached self-identified Kurds to participate in the project. I integrated exhibit ideas that were suggested by individuals who described themselves as business owners, managers, students, employees, community activists, etc. I avoided including suggestions made by officially recognised leaders in Kurdish diaspora organizations. In addition, I excluded ideas that were made by Kurdish scholars or experts in the fields of art history, sociology, political science, anthropology, or museum studies.

If, as art historian Elena Stylianou (2013) explored, narratives are constructed in museums in relation to a “predetermined set of beliefs and ideologies [...] then it would hardly be the case that the museum allows visitors to imagine and reflect on their own identities” (p. 23). It may have been this very sense of not being able to locate an identifiable space to imagine his Kurdish heritage that distressed Mehmet so deeply during his visit to the MET.

A temporary exhibit curated by the MET in 2012 entitled “Byzantium and Islam, Age of Transition,” reminded museum visitors that Orthodox, Coptic, and Syriac Christians, as well as Jewish communities and “others,” were perceived to have been “critical to the wealth and power of the empire.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the significant amount of breath-taking displays, the scarcity of objects that one could identify as Kurdish was surprising. To a visitor searching for evidence of a Kurdish presence, the exhibit communicated that Kurdish villages and individual Kurdish artisans contributed little of value throughout the vast regions once controlled and administered by Arab, Persian, and Ottoman empires. Mehmet worried that the objects that had been produced by Kurdish craftspeople were counted as among the unidentified, amorphous contributions by “others” (Participant #1, 2012).

Not surprisingly, community-based exhibits without professional curatorial assistance can be just as political as major national museums if the intended outreach efforts focus on addressing perceived museological omissions. For the context of this article the term museology refers to the study of museums and their roles in society, and not to the actual practical activities that are carried out in museums such as managing restoration efforts or ensuring gallery security, for example (Desvallées and Mairesse, 2010: 52–54). Frequently, community-based exhibits compellingly endorse particular narratives that are linked to tangible socio-political agendas. Among them are notions that represent more inclusive and culturally sensitive narratives or counter-articulations with the intent to empower specific communities; or narratives that enhance communal self-esteem and boost levels of social inclusion (Sandell, 2003: 45).

An example of a community-sponsored Kurdish exhibit in the US was a very specialised tribal art and textile display titled “Silver Sounds: An Exhibit of Kurdish Village Jewelry,” held during Spring 2001 in a private home in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, NY. Vera Saeedpour, the founder and director of the former Kurdish Museum and Library in Brooklyn, had curated a collection of mostly

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5 Details about this particular exhibit from 2012 can be found at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s website at <http://metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/byzantium-and-islam> (last accessed 18 October, 2015).

donated and borrowed Kurdish village jewellery and costume textiles from the 19th and early 20th century.<sup>6</sup> Committed to “educating the public about the difficult experiences of Kurds,” Saeedpour had also produced a photographic collection in the mid-1980s entitled “The Kurds: An Endangered People.”<sup>7</sup> Over decades, her work focused on highlighting the larger Kurdish homeland regions of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, but she also integrated a range of objects donated by diaspora Kurds after visiting with relatives in Armenia, Egypt and Jordan. Private Kurdish supporters likely contributed items to the collection to sustain the only Kurdish museum they were aware of. Some may have hoped to honour their own communal or familial memories in that way (Participant #5, 2013). Visitors to Saeedpour’s Kurdish Museum and Library recognised that a consistent theme of her exhibits related to remembering her late husband’s life as a Kurd (Participant #5, 2013). In addition to using photographic images and cultural objects in an exhibit, how else might diaspora Kurds envision ways to curate their cultural heritage and identity?

It was not surprising to find that Kurdish participants in this Imaginary Kurdish Museum project defied one-dimensional interpretations of diaspora Kurdishness.<sup>8</sup> A number of participants insisted on a sense of Kurdish distinctiveness by contrasting themselves to their understanding of Turkishness. To gain a better sense of the complexity of the terminology, I relied on notions of Kurdishness in the Turkish context as explored by political scientist Nicole Watts and anthropologist Ramazan Aras. Watts (2010) proposed to include “ascriptive characteristics (characteristics that are largely beyond people’s ability to choose) to define Kurdishness, especially mother-tongue language,” but also “markers” that distinguish Kurds socio-culturally from Turks and other regional community members in Turkey (pp. XI–XII). Aras (2014) defined Kurdishness as “a state of being constructed by social, political, economic, cultural, and religious transformations” (p. 190). In the diaspora, the claim to Kurdishness often reflects the desire to assert an identity that differs from

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6 My last phone and e-mail contact with Dr. Saeedpour was in March 2009. She died in May 2010, but her entire collection (Kurdish Museum and Library) is now housed at Binghamton University, NY. For questions related to the Saeedpour collection, contact Aynur de Rouen at Binghamton University, Special Collections, Preservation and University Archives.

7 This comment is based on my personal phone contact with Dr. Saeedpour in spring 2009.

8 In this context, Susan Meiselas’ *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* should be recognised since her work is both an exhibit and a book. Her extensive collection of postcards, photographs, newspaper accounts, excerpts of diaries and witness accounts, as well as historical notes ranging from the 1870s to the 1990s represents a collaborative effort between members of the Kurdish diaspora and documentarian and photographer Meiselas.

other ethnic communities (especially Turkish or Arab communities), and also serves to distance Kurds from experiences with discrimination or racism in host societies.

Kurds in the diaspora with familial linkages to Turkey are far from homogeneous. Self-identified Kurds come from a wide variety of social backgrounds, are culturally, linguistically, religiously, and geographically diverse, and defy singular interpretations of Kurdishness. Participants in this project shared a wide variety of views to describe their personal understanding of what it meant to be Kurdish. Kurdish participants relied on several terms to define themselves, or their heritage and sense of cultural identity. They used the terms “Kurdistan,” “Kurdish homeland,” and “Kurdishness” in order to express their socio-cultural belonging or to construct their political identities. Frequently, Kurdishness in the diaspora seemed to assist Kurds to differentiate themselves from superimposed identities that they connected to Turkishness.

To adequately contextualise the Kurdish participants’ ideas, thoughts, and design proposals for a museum exhibit, it became necessary to explore the intersections of several fields of study. During the interviews, Kurdish participants shared personal experiences in the diaspora, discussed their sense of national identity and familial memories, and expressed emotions in reference to homeland politics. In this article, I provide an exploratory framework to place these varied and at times contradictory ideas within the existing literatures on diasporas, collective memory, and museum studies.

### **Kurdish Diaspora Communities**

The notion of diaspora, although traditionally linked to exiled Jewish populations, has been applied to many distinct communities who have maintained their identities despite being dispersed across multiple countries. Diaspora communities such as the Kurds, frequently maintain cultural, political, and economic relationships with their brethren beyond state borders (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Safran, 1991). Many diaspora communities, including Kurds, construct their identities in relation to particular historical moments and specific political experiences (Wahlbeck, 1999: 22–25). Reliable demographic data is not available regarding the exact number of diaspora Kurds as most governments recognise nationality based on passports rather than by ethnic background. Exceptions are Finland and Canada, where information related to a migrant’s preferred or native languages (i.e. language(s) spoken in the home) is collected, which tends to provide more clarity about the number of

self-identified Kurds living in particular societies (Wahlbeck, 1999: 83–87; Statistics Canada).<sup>9</sup>

Kurdish diaspora communities consist of many sub-groupings, which frequently compete with each other for influence and public recognition. Kurds in the diaspora have laid claim to hybrid cultural identities, emphasise their interconnectedness with allied groups, and lobby local, state, and supranational governments to gain socio-political recognition (Eccarius-Kelly, 2011: 166–187; Ayata, 2008). Kurdish diaspora communities are shaped by factors such as their regional origins, social status and educational levels, religious affiliations and cultural practices, the languages spoken in the home, their levels of political mobilisation, social engagement, and ideological commitment. They also differ in their levels of integration in the diaspora, in the ways in which they access homeland oriented information, and in many other ways. Kurdish cultural centres and political organisations often reflect this level of heterogeneity in the diaspora through various types of social and political outreach or membership. In addition, it is important to recognise that some diaspora Kurds, either as a consequence of personal experiences or through communally constructed memory, have been shaped in specific ways resulting in their mistrust or circumvention of state agencies in both their countries of origin and settlement (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003). In this context, sociologist Yasemin Soysal (1994: 84) observed that migrant populations bring with them an entire “organizational repertoire” that over time adjusts to the political sphere they encounter in the country of settlement.

Kurds established communities in more than a dozen European countries but also in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and elsewhere. It is extremely difficult to fully capture the multitude of socio-political nuances that have emerged within and among Kurdish communities in all of these countries. For the purposes of this project, all observations that are advanced relate to Kurdish diaspora communities with familial ties to Turkey. The majority of participants in this project live in the US and in Germany (a small number of Kurds who reside in Denmark and Sweden also participated). The intent of this project is to tease out distinctions between highly politicised and ideologically framed notions of Kurdishness from others that are more culturally conceived through interviews related to Kurdish museum exhibits. By identifying narrative patterns or differences between diaspora communities in the US and in Germany, scholars may gain further insights into how some diasporas maintain and promote their cultural identities over time. The participant

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9 Statistic Canada can be accessed at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/> (last accessed 18 October, 2015).

responses in this article suggest that Kurdish diaspora communities will continue to express their varied claims to a separate identity even if a framework for a peace agreement emerges in the coming years.

### Methodology

Digital technology has made it increasingly possible to transcend national borders which have allowed Kurds to gain access to cultural productions of Kurdishness in cyberspace (Keles, 2014; Candan and Hunger, 2008). But in contrast to online representations, Kurdishness is not easily recognised in public spaces in the numerous countries where the Kurdish diaspora is assumed to have gained a strong voice over time. It is a challenge to find clearly labelled displays of Kurdish objects in museums and to identify Kurdish statues or monuments in public parks.<sup>10</sup> Kurds have formed hundreds of professional organisations, political parties, cultural clubs, and social or legal advocacy groups in Turkey and in the diaspora, but participants made clear that this was different from feeling officially acknowledged in a country. Where can Kurdish families in the diaspora go to recognise their own heritage, reflect on their socio-cultural journeys, share personal stories or experiences, or validate familial memories other than amongst themselves?

Envisioning such a public space that would encourage institutionally unrestrained Kurdish voice and agency, I initiated loosely structured interviews with self-identified members of the Kurdish diaspora by focusing on the idea of imagining a Kurdish Museum. The purpose was to identify how participants saw themselves in the diaspora, to learn about their ideas when they discussed a particular display, and to listen to concerns that they shared. I excluded leaders of Kurdish organisations in the diaspora (such as KON-KURD, KOMKAR, YEK-KOM,<sup>11</sup> the Kurdish Institute in Paris, the Kurdish Library in Stockholm, etc.) and instead focused on speaking with ordinary Kurds through personal introductions and by relying on a snowball sampling approach (Bernard, 2012: 168). All interviews were carried out in English and in German between December 2012 and August 2014. I excluded interviews after that time period

10 Armenian and Jewish community members have access to such public markers in a number of countries. This may be a reflection of the level of “maturity” of the Armenian and Jewish lobbies according to Denise Natali (2007, 213) in Smith and Stares.

11 Confederation of Kurdish Associations in Europe (*Konfederasyona Komelên Kurd Li Avrupa*, KON-KURD), Confederation of Associations from Kurdistan in Europe (*Verband der Vereine aus Kurdistan in Deutschland e.V.*, KOMKAR), Federation of Kurdish Organizations in Germany (*Föderation Kurdischer Vereine in Deutschland*, YEK-KOM).

as participants focused on discussing financial assistance and aid caravans for Kurdish communities near Makhmour, Iraq, and Kobane, Syria, rather than showing interest in exploring museum exhibits.<sup>12</sup>

22 self-identified diaspora Kurds in Europe and the United States provided suggestions for various exhibits. The participants have been identified through a numbering system (see list of participants at the end of this article). All received fictive names and were between the ages of 20 and 45. Among the participants, 14 were male and 8 were female; the majority of the participants, 19 in total, described themselves as secular or non-religious, while 3 participants in the US defined themselves as religious or somewhat religious. 10 participants lived in Düsseldorf and Duisburg, Germany; 2 participants resided in Copenhagen, Denmark; 2 participants were from Stockholm, Sweden; and 8 participants lived in Washington, DC, New York City, and Albany, NY. Since the number of participants is small, the following observations provide initial impressions about cultural or political preferences among specific Kurdish diaspora communities. The exhibit suggestions should not be understood as representing clearly defined positions that are held in Kurdish diaspora communities in a broader sense.

I encouraged all participants to imagine their museum as a space that is curated without considering professional museological ethics or rules (Desvallées and Mairesse, 2010). The participants were able to disregard all existing political constraints in their selection of museum locations. By examining the types of imaginary spaces and displays diaspora Kurds proposed, it was possible to gain insights into relationships between various members of Kurdish diasporas and the government of Turkey, grasp the heterodoxy of diaspora communities, identify gender differences, and grapple with new ways of thinking about reconciliation. Participants in these interviews offered ideas for specific architectural features related to museum structures, and reflected on the use of both indoor and outdoor spaces. The diasporic interpretations of Kurdishness opened up a window into how Kurds may try to mitigate hegemonic histories, political narratives, or collective representations in the future.

### Representations of Kurdishness in the Imaginary Museum

Of the 22 participants, only one had visited a physical museum space that was entirely dedicated to Kurdish peoples, their histories, and their cultural lives

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12 In a future project I hope to contrast diasporan suggestions for Kurdish exhibits before and after the battle for Kobane in Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava).

(Participant #18, 2014).<sup>13</sup> Some participants responded positively to the idea of establishing a Kurdish museum, but asked for clarifications related to the purpose or the mission of such a museum. Several participants expressed scepticism and wanted to know if a “real” (physical) museum project existed or if the Kurdish museum idea represented a mere fantasy. Others thought it might be more realistic to create a museum exhibit on the Internet (Participants #5, 2013; #13, #14, and #20, 2014).

A wide variety of exhibit ideas emerged during the interviews and the results are summarised below. The types of proposed exhibits ranged from displaying tribal rugs to video and audio installations that captured elements of Kurdish life over time. Few participants seemed particularly interested in talking about curating museum spaces in the US or in Europe. Instead, Turkey was identified as the ideal country for such a museum. Participants transitioned naturally to imagining a museum project in major Turkish cities, and frequently mentioned Diyarbakır (Amed) as an important location. Some participants felt that Turkish civil society lacked knowledge, understanding, and empathy for Kurds and that a museum could address the many layers of what might be called the concealed truths or the socio-political taboos that have obscured general knowledge about the lives and experiences of Kurds in Turkey (Participants #6, #12, and #15, 2014).

Some diaspora Kurds believed that a museum could help to educate the Turkish public about Kurdish realities (Participants #6, #12, and #15, 2014). Several Kurds proposed that museums invite the public to access unfamiliar information that was purposefully hidden from the public for decades (Participants #12, #13, and #18, 2014). Others preferred to think about using an exhibit as a tool to confront Turkish society with counter-narratives that challenged the existing knowledge about Kurdish communities (Participants #4, 2013; #12 and #15, 2014). Some participants cautioned that it would be best to avoid pursuing a controversial or politicised museum exhibit because it would increase communal tensions between Kurds and Turks in Turkey (Participants #7 and #8, 2014). And a few participants seemed to be amused by the absurdity of thinking about a Kurdish museum in Turkey as long as no peace agreement existed between the Turkish government (and the military establishment) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), a Kurdish organisation that has been engaged in an armed struggle against the Turkish state since 1984 (Participants #4, #9, #10, and #11, 2013).

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13 The participant visited a Kurdish exhibit in London. That museum, however, appears to have been closed down.

Among the quite diverse and innovative displays diaspora Kurds suggested for a museum were multi-generational family photographs. Such photos were seen as helpful in an attempt to narrate familial experiences and recollections and also to display a sense of Kurdishness in both a cultural and a political manner. One photo exhibit proposal focused on capturing moments of daily life in Kurdistan, only to be disrupted by images of violence in the 1920s, the 1930s, and the 1980s, and finally completed by pictures of Kurdish life abroad over the past decades (Participant #4, 2013). Through photos, some diaspora Kurds hoped to tell a larger story about their layered experiences with loss; the disappearances of family members, the appropriations of tracts of lands, the need to hide signs of customary life, and the weakening of familiarity with Kurdish cultural practices abroad (Participant #4, 2013). For first-generation diaspora Kurds, born and raised in traditional Kurdish villages, it appeared to be particularly important that their children and grandchildren would be aware of their cultural heritage, their identity, and their geographic/tribal origin, despite growing up outside of Kurdistan (Participants #4, 2013; #12, 2014).

Kurds in the diaspora with apparent knowledge of the PKK (or sympathetic to the ideological positions of the PKK) advanced an idea for a photographic hall, within a larger museum, that memorialised the sacrifices of Kurdish martyrs (Participants #4, #9, #10, #11, 2013; #12, #14, 2014). Visitors to the “hall of martyrs” would walk through a space that displayed the portraits of Kurds who died in battle with the Turkish state (or other regional opponents). In essence, the reasons for suggesting a “hall of martyrs” seemed to be twofold: (1) some diaspora Kurds felt it was important to demonstrate the intensity of their experiences and their unbroken commitment to resisting Turkish repression, and (2) others wanted to recognise and honour those who had died for a larger Kurdish cause. One Kurdish participant suggested that a space should be established to recognise the specific contributions and sacrifices made by female combatants in the struggle (Participant #9, 2013). She also proposed that individual accounts of particularly heroic acts of female resistance could be highlighted in such an exhibit through video and audio recordings by family members or witnesses (Participant #9, 2013).

Many of the suggestions for an imaginary Kurdish museum focused on countering the dissemination of dominant Turkish state narratives because they were understood to undermine what remained of particular familial memories. Several diaspora Kurds expressed their anger related to the Turkish state’s efforts to define Kurdish populations as “uneducated,” “backward,” or even “primitive.” (Participants #4, #9, #10, #11, 2013; #12, #14, 2014). Some Kurds analysed the relationship between the Turkish state and Kurdish communities through a lens of internal colonisation. They expected a museum to affirm

their ethnic identities and cultural heritage by contrasting Kurdish lives with existing post-colonial constructs.

In 2010, a quite contentious debate emerged within Turkey that related to the establishment of an actual museum in the former Diyarbakır prison complex.<sup>14</sup> The politics of memory framed some of the public discourses on how to preserve the prison as a site where the suffering of political prisoners could be memorialised. The proposal for a specific Kurdish museum collided noticeably with alternative ideas for a broader human rights museum. Kurdish politician Altan Tan, whose father was tortured and murdered in Diyarbakır prison in 1982, advanced a position that was very unpopular with ethno-nationalist Kurdish advocates. In Tan's view, Diyarbakır prison should be turned into a human rights museum rather than a Kurdish museum. Tan stated that "this prison is a place where not only Kurds but everyone with humanitarian values in Turkey waged a fight for their dignity. Demolishing Diyarbakır Prison would mean covering up the massacre and brutalities committed in Turkey during that period. Diyarbakır Prison can technically no longer serve as a prison, so it should be closed down with the condition that it is converted into a human rights museum."<sup>15</sup> In January 2015, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu confirmed that the Turkish government had decided to convert the prison complex into a "cultural" museum.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on creating a cultural space clearly indicated to ethno-nationalist Kurdish activists that politically framed ideas about specific accounts of Kurdish suffering would be excluded from future exhibition spaces.

In the diaspora, some Kurds also considered Diyarbakır Prison to be at the epicentre of Kurdish cultural and political oppression as family stories focused on the Turkish state's unquestionable control over prisoners within its thick walls. Psychological trauma appeared to have been shared within families as the following remarks by a participant in the museum project indicate.

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14 In the larger discussion related to recognising and memorialising the horrors that took place in the Diyarbakır prison complex, filmmaker Çayan Demirel's 2009 documentary *Prison No. 5: 1980–1984* should be mentioned. His detailed portrayal of the brutal conditions in the prison integrated historic footage, photography, and interviews with former prisoners. Demirel exposed the use of abhorrent systematic torture along with the application of dehumanising Turkification policies intended to "re-educate" prisoners. Turkey's Prison No. 5 was identified by human rights organisations as among the world's most heinous prisons.

15 For details, see <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-221407-symbol-of-torture-diyarbakir-prison-should-be-converted-into-museum.html> (last accessed 18 October, 2015).

16 For details, see <http://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2015/01/28/govt-backs-conversion-of-infamous-prison-into-museum> (last accessed 18 October, 2015).

Diyarbakır Prison represents deep human suffering to Kurds. People experienced unimaginable tortures in that place and now there is a lot of talk about making it into a museum. Is it possible to turn such a terrifying place into a museum? I had not been to Diyarbakır in many years, but this time I decided to go and look for myself. As a structure this prison is menacing and the stories told by my family made the place even scarier. I went to check the gates to see if I could find information about it or even take a look inside. I didn't see a guard and that was surprising to me. My heart was pounding when I walked closer to the gate because I was nervous to go near it. In the past people had entered through the gate and never returned to their families. My palms were sweaty and I was not sure what to expect, but everything was locked up. I took photos instead, but then I was thinking about not being able to go inside and it made me very angry. It felt like part of my family history has been imprisoned in there as well (Participant #4, 2013).

Significantly less contentious exhibit ideas were also furthered by a number of diaspora Kurds, who mentioned that outdoor spaces could provide opportunities for deeper reflection. One Kurdish participant suggested that a guided walking tour through selected neighbourhoods of Diyarbakır would be an excellent way for diaspora Kurds to learn more about their heritage (Participant #22, 2014). She argued that cultural facets of Kurdish life should be included in a museum instead of focusing exclusively on accounts of deprivation. Among her ideas was a walk through old Diyarbakır neighbourhoods, to include meetings with community representatives, and an opportunity to listen to traditional Kurdish music or regional stories or fables (Participant #22, 2014).

### Nationalist Imaginations and Museums

A significant portion of scholarly work on museums in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) accentuates the legacies of the nationalist imagination. Carefully curated discursive, visual, and symbolic productions reinforce the state's capacity to define and shape a unified narrative with the intent to strengthen selected perceptions in the national consciousness. Pieprzak (2010: introduction) argued eloquently in *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco* that the field of museology prioritised the reading of museum projects and their related national architectures in the context of imperial histories. The complete absence of such a national museum in Morocco, Pieprzak noted, was perceived as a painful void during the immediate post-independence period in the country.

Connections between the national imagination, post-colonial state formation, and curatorial practices in museums have long intrigued scholars of nationalism. In the early 1980s, Benedict Anderson observed that new states, such as Indonesia, inherited the colonial passion for using museums as civilising instruments (Anderson, 1996: 243–258). After the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the new nation-state made efforts to manage the national imagination by amalgamating archaeological discoveries into a comprehensive Kemalist narrative that legitimised policies, created values, and instilled pride. Art historian Savino (2012: 253–266) proposed that the fields of archaeology and museology became subservient to the state's interests in producing a coherent visual representation of the past. Minimal space was afforded for independent artistic expression because the goal was to convincingly demonstrate Turkey's claim to ownership of the cradle of civilisation. To produce a "shared" understanding of the national self, a sentiment the public had to invest in, the Kemalist narrative required an ideological overlap between the national population and the state's borders. This process purposefully excised multiple communities who refused to participate in their own exclusion or resisted during the process of national formation. It is this memory and experience with Turkey's museological architecture and its curated exhibits that some Kurdish members in the diaspora recall as traditions of silencing or practices of exclusion and omission (Participant #4, #9, #10, #11, 2013).

Since the foundation of the Turkish state politically engaged members of Kurdish communities had been classified as a threat to the integrity of the Turkish nation-state as demonstrated in an exhibit in Istanbul's Military Museum (*Askeri Müzesi*). A small space was dedicated to Turkish military heroes and Kurdish victims of terrorism. Included in the display were photographs of twisted bodies of peasant women and children, described as casualties of horrific acts of violence perpetrated by members of the PKK. At one point, visitors to the museum encountered bloodied uniforms and book-length volumes listing the names of fallen soldiers. The displays effectively evoked emotions of anger and deep sadness by convincingly portraying the Turkish state as involved in an act of national self-defence (Eccarius-Kelly, 2011: 135). Kurds were seen as victims of leftist manipulation and tribal violence, or alternatively as perpetrators of extremist violence, denying them agency unless it served the state's narrow agenda.

But as anthropologist Özyürek demonstrated, collective memory has challenged such nationalist imagination in recent years. Özyürek (2007) proposed that "the Turkish republic was originally based on forgetting. Yet, at the turn of the twenty-first century, cultural practices are replete with memory, and people relentlessly struggle over how to represent and define the past" (p. 3).

Members of the Kurdish diaspora also participated in such efforts to determine how to represent the past as the remarks about the Diyarbakır prison complex demonstrated. In “Acts of Defacement, Memory of Loss” anthropologist Biner revealed how past events are recalled differently by a variety of religious and ethnic communities. Witnesses, perpetrators, and descendants of victims relate in competing and conflicting ways to stories that disclose what she called “intertwined and contradictory narratives” (Biner, 2010: 71).

Is it possible for museum exhibits to contribute to a process of disentangling memories and democratising political discourses by going beyond museologically controlled or authorised norms and allow for a fuller representation of experiences and memories? Numerous participants in the Kurdish museum project seemed to share their experiences in the hope that they might be recognised and respected. A thoughtfully conceived museum exhibit could potentially contribute to a more open discourse that would disentangle memories that are frozen in time.

### Collective Memory

The study of collective memory, understood as the ways in which past experiences are communally narrated or, alternatively, disciplined and regulated on behalf of communities, has captivated the interest of artists, activists, and scholars in a wide range of fields (Weedon and Jordan, 2012; Neyzi, 2010; Olick, 2008; Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003). Collective memory, of course, is shaped by particularistic interests and relationships with authority, and therefore represents an obvious “site of contestation” as dominant narratives are challenged by marginalised groups (Weedon and Jordan, 2012: 144). As individuals, families, and communities share experiences through personal narratives, they also reveal related memories, link them with memories of others, and thereby produce new memories that connect them to their communal past. Their stories propagate a specific understanding of experienced history and affirm an attachment to cultural practices and geographic locations. The act of communal remembering encourages a deeper reflection about one’s own cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Jewish and Armenian communities, especially those with effective organisational structures that extend into the diaspora, engage in various levels of outreach and activism to protect against a potential loss or dilution of historical memory (Meyers, Zandberg, and Neiger, 2014; von Voss, 2007: 187–200). In both cases, community members emphasise the significance of communal recollections through a range of media, public, and educational events,

scholarly conferences, and memorials. Kurdish diaspora groups also have intensified their activities to gather oral histories in recent years, aiming to publicise accounts that shape collective and communal memories (Demir, 2012; Eccarius-Kelly, 2011: 86–88). Several scholarly studies explored diaspora Kurdish narratives and the ways in which they influence multiple generations in the Kurdish diaspora (Baser, 2013; Eliassi, 2013; Demir, 2012; Guyot, 2011; Soytürk, 2010). Soytürk published ethnographic work related to Alevi and Kurdish families who originated from Dersim but live in France. She examined how experiences of trauma in Dersim during 1937 and 1938 tended to be simultaneously recalled and forgotten among relatives in Europe and in Turkey (Soytürk, 2010). Guyot's work on frozen collective memory or what she called the formation of a "memory ghetto" among Kurdish communities contextualised the significance of particular communities' collective memories over time (2011: 150). In this context, memory is a heavy burden, which limits, confines and oppresses Kurds in a ghettoised existence.

Within the research group some members of Kurdish diaspora communities emphasise the importance of recollecting past tragedies. They reflect on how to publicly or privately recognise moments of communal suffering in an effort to preserve the essence of their Kurdishness. It is common for members of the Kurdish diaspora to be deeply frustrated and angered by what they describe as practices of denial and silencing in Turkey (Participant #4, #9, #10, #11, 2013). Some Kurdish participants, at times, articulate counter-narratives that seem more consistent with familial recollections of particular events instead of relying on their own experiences or memories (Participant #4, 2013 and #6, 2014). Sometimes, diaspora Kurds focus on decoding their family stories and interpret experiences and memory for future generations, including their own children (Participant #4, 2013 and #6, 2014). One participant explained that his children will never learn Turkish because the language made him recall details of his own suffering and his family's oppression (Participant #4, 2013).

In diaspora circles, stories of anguish and grief appear to be part of regular multi-generational conversations and encourage European-born Kurds to emotionally connect with their families' experiences in the homeland and to recall their ethnic heritage (Guyot, 2011: 143). Narratives of pain and suffering assure a sense of group cohesion and communal belonging, which can result in a frozen collective memory, or, alternatively, serve to shape a particular ethnic consciousness (Eliassi, 2013: 69–98; Demir, 2012; Guyot, 2011). Among the Kurdish participants' varied accounts of losses, a determination emerged to ensure that collective memories remain relevant, and that communal experiences were not to be co-opted or denied by state authorities. Those efforts

appear to continue to influence aspects of Kurdish collective memory among ordinary Kurds in the diaspora.

A few patterns emerged in the interviews for the museum project with ordinary Kurdish diaspora participants. In Germany, many of the suggested museum exhibits related to historical moments of familial trauma or painful pasts. Some diaspora Kurds expressed that they felt disregarded and unequal in comparison to Turkish diaspora members (Participants #9, #10, #11, 2013; and #14, #16, and #17, 2014). This may have motivated them to focus on claiming their Kurdishness more directly. If their parents or grandparents recalled profound familial injustices, younger generations also frequently expressed a sense of marginalisation. Some articulated a deeply held mistrust toward Turkish society, especially if they appeared to be ideologically sympathetic to positions held by the PKK. At times, female participants living in Germany were quite direct about claiming their Kurdishness, perhaps to show their political engagement. I can only theorise that this may be because ethno-nationalist Kurds in Germany have encountered significant levels of hostility from members of the Turkish immigrant communities living there; additionally they have faced suspicion from German society at large, particularly since the 1990s when the PKK was designated a terrorist organisation (Eccarius-Kelly, 2002). A combination of such factors may have contributed to a profound sense of disregard and marginalisation among Kurds, especially related to Germany's long-standing policy of refusing to formally recognise a separate Kurdish ethnicity.

Kurdish diaspora participants in the US represented a wider variety of perspectives related to imagining Kurdish exhibits than in Germany. They focused less on a sense of ethnic identity and appeared to want to create an emotional distance between themselves and their past, even though some may have undergone difficult personal experiences (Participants #4, 2013; #6, #8, 2014). None of the participants in the US explicitly endorsed the PKK, but some could have had family members affiliated with the organisation in the past. Kurdish female participants in the US were more inclined to discuss socio-cultural notions for museum exhibits, but that could be a reflection of the small number of female participants. They focused on the need to educate the Turkish public to become less "narrow-minded and closed toward other ethnic groups" (Participants #3, 2013; and #7, 2014). A possible factor could be that Kurds in the US are less frequently questioned or directly challenged by the general public for claiming their Kurdishness.

Glynn and Kleist (2012: 237–243) suggested in their edited volume on *History, Memory and Migration* that ample opportunities exist for more critical readings of collective memories at the intersection between migration,

historiography, and memory studies. Diaspora Kurds, born in Europe and the US or having arrived as children, appear to continue to make claims to particular memories. How will diaspora Kurds over generations recall their heritage, their identity, and their own sense of Kurdishness? Rainer Bauböck (as quoted in Glynn and Kleist, 2012) explored the notion of a “democratic memory,” which “not only recall[s] the crimes committed in the name of national majorities, but also reconstructs the particular histories of the victims,” to allow them to “become fully recognized members of a polity” (p. 239). Bauböck’s notion of the “democratic memory” starkly contrasts with Guyot’s observations of the existence of a “memory ghetto.” It may become increasingly important for members of Kurdish diaspora communities to collect oral histories to be able to reflect on creating their own specialised exhibition spaces. Kurdish diaspora communities could “unfreeze” their collective memories over time to begin a healing process, advance intergenerational dialogues, and transition into positions that make it possible to articulate their own sense of legitimacy as participants in societies. An actual physical space for a museum project might be of interest to diasporic Kurds interested in safeguarding their communal and familial memories.

Democratic discourses would need to take place between members of Kurdish communities in Turkey, across the border in Syria, and with influential Kurdish diasporas in Europe (and elsewhere) to minimise negative interventions. Members of Kurdish diaspora communities would likely pursue democratic discourses if they felt affirmed and recognised as a separate community across Europe. The public acknowledgement of the Kurdish diaspora could increase the potential for consistent diasporic engagement in advocacy and reconstruction efforts.

### List of Participants

#### *USA*

- Participant #1, male, 45, NYC, December 2012.
- Participant #2, male, no age given, NYC, December 2012.
- Participant #3, female, no age given, DC, July 2013.
- Participant #4, male, 43, Albany, July 2013.
- Participant #5, male, no age given, DC, July 2013.
- Participant #6, male, 36, Albany, June 2014.
- Participant #7, female, 28, Albany, June 2014.
- Participant #8, male, 25, Albany, June 2014.

### *Germany*

- Participant #9, female, 24, Düsseldorf, August, 2013.  
 Participant #10, male, 21, Düsseldorf, August, 2013.  
 Participant #11, male, 23, Düsseldorf, August, 2013.  
 Participant #12, male, 40, Düsseldorf, July, 2014.  
 Participant #13, male, no age given, Düsseldorf, July, 2014.  
 Participant #14, male, no age given, Düsseldorf, July, 2014.  
 Participant #15, male, no age given, Duisburg, July, 2014.  
 Participant #16, female, no age given, Duisburg, July, 2014.  
 Participant #17, female, no age given, Duisburg, July, 2014.  
 Participant #18, male, no age given, Düsseldorf, July, 2014.

### *Denmark and Sweden*

- Participant #19, female, 26, Copenhagen, May 2013.  
 Participant #20, female, 28, Copenhagen, May 2014.  
 Participant #21, male, 21, Stockholm, May 2013.  
 Participant #22, female, 32, Stockholm, May 2014.

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