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DIASPORA STUDIES 15 (2022) 271–296

DIASPORA STUDIES

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The Politics of Cultural Production

Exile, Integration and Homeland in Europe's Kurdish Diaspora

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Abstract

This article examines the politics of cultural production in the Kurdish diaspora in Berlin and Stockholm. The paper argues that Kurdish cultural actors deploy various forms of cultural production as a strategy to restore Kurdish collective heritage and cultural identities and achieve visibility for the Kurdish cause. Furthermore, the politics of cultural production serves to promote universal solidarity for particularistic Kurdish agendas and challenges oppressive policies of ruling Turkish, Iranian and Arab governments. Finally, this article aims to address the integration of Kurdish refugees and boost cohesive diasporic communities to overcome exilic conditions. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews with twenty-five Kurdish artists and intellectuals, and participant observations in Berlin and Stockholm, the paper sheds light on how Kurdish cultural production in the diaspora offers an alternative approach to understanding and tackling complex matters. However, at the same time, cultural production can become an object of contention and political mobilisation.

Keywords

Kurds – diasporas – politics of cultural production – homeland – integration – exile

1 Introduction

Diasporas are viewed as a 'mode of cultural production' that generates and reproduces cultural, political and social relations through different objects, actions and interpretation of artistic expression in the transnational space

(Vertovec, 1997). However, questions about how cultural production and culture makers[1] function in the diaspora are still poorly understood. In the Kurdish diaspora, culture makers use the politics of cultural production as a multiple strategy to address politics in their homeland and their exile conditions as well as policies in new environments. This paper will explore the way in which Kurdish cultural actors in the diaspora are involved in the politics of cultural production and how the politics of cultural production overlaps with homeland engagement, cultural identities, ideas of exile, integration of refugees and cosmopolitan belonging.

What constitutes cultural production in the diaspora is of course varied, and can include the films, music, poetry and artistic artefacts that create a cultural and social space for reflective display and negotiation of diasporic identities (Khrebtan-Hörhager, 2016: 105). Similarly, in a diasporic context, music, poetry and literary artefacts can be viewed as vehicles for marginalised identity groups to express their political demands for recognition and transformation and their feelings of grievance or collective traumatic experiences (Zheng, 2010: 17–18; Millar and Warwick, 2019; Kalu and Falola, 2019). These forms of cultural production are used by diasporic 'cultural workers' in exile not only as key methods of sustaining ties with their lands, participating in a homeland struggle and asserting agency over their collective experience, but also for surviving cultural erasure by resisting exilic conditions of alienation, liminality, dispossession and loss (McDonald, 2013). Cultural production in the diaspora can positively contribute to refugees' social inclusion and integration when this is deployed as a therapeutic means to empower them with perspectives to cope with past discriminatory experiences and the daily emotional distress of on-going exile conditions (Fitzpatrick, 2002; Millar and Warwick, 2019). In this way, cultural production helps them to overcome the trauma of social isolation in exile.

Cultural production serves as a dynamic force in the diaspora, helping to provide refugees with social and cultural spaces for their wellbeing, which can also promote their adaptation process (Zharinova-Sanderson, 2004; Amir, 2004; Delhaye, 2008; Vanderwaeren, 2014; Martiniello, 2015; DiMaggio and Fernández-Kelly, 2015; Millar and Warwick, 2019). Moreover, cultural production illustrates their situation to audiences and promotes understanding of complex political and social world issues and solidarity as a result of cosmopolitan principles (Kurasawa, 2004). This paper will address these questions

1 In the context of this study, 'cultural workers' refers to committed artists who also serve as political activists for the transformation of social and political conditions of their population both in the diaspora and the homeland (Kondo, 1997; Chin, Feng and Lee, 2000).

about the politics of Kurdish diasporic cultural production from an interdisciplinary perspective, incorporating theories from international relations and cultural studies. It will analyse the findings of a detailed ethnographic study on cultural production by the Kurdish diaspora in Berlin and Stockholm. In so doing, this paper will close the gap in understanding the relationship between cultural studies and transnational politics in the diaspora and migration literature.

Most cultural production amongst Kurdish diaspora segments in the cities in question circulates via organised events such as film festivals, concerts, poetry and art performances and exhibitions. Such performances and events act as nodes in cultural networks that connect dispersed diaspora communities to one another and to the homeland, constituting a transnational cultural space in which themes of homeland affairs, diaspora politics, relationships with native citizens, integration issues and identity are presented, critiqued and renegotiated. Whereas there is already substantial literature on the Kurdish diaspora in European states, including its relationship to homeland affairs (Adamson, 2012, 2019; Adamson, 2013; Østergaard, 2003), politics of identity and of belonging (Minoo, 2004; Eliassi, 2013), consequences of statelessness (Eliassi, 2021), diasporic construction and transnational citizenship (Ammann, 2000; Khayati, 2008), integration process (Engin, 2019) and global politics and transnational networks (Emanuelsson, 2005; Demir, 2021), to date there have been few detailed studies on the politics of cultural production in the Kurdish diaspora, such as film, poetry, music and art festivals and how cultural production displays the themes listed above.

The data collection for this paper comes from ethnographic fieldwork carried out over two years between 2017 and 2019 in Berlin and Stockholm. During this period, I conducted twenty-five in-depth and semi-structured interviews with Kurdish and non-Kurdish festival organisers, Kurdish film directors and actors, musicians, poets, artists and interpreters as well as intellectuals from the Kurdish regions in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. I attended film screenings, concerts, political panels and poetry reading events that took place at film festivals, and cultural and political activities organised by diaspora associations in Berlin and Stockholm. Within the context of my fieldwork, I offered translation services (from the Kurdish dialects of Kurmanji and Sorani into Turkish, German and English) for the film festival organisers on a voluntary basis. In this way, I was able to gather opinions, information and insider knowledge from cultural actors, event organisers and audiences from a wide variety of participants, including diaspora leaders and members, as well as newly arrived refugees who shared their views and experiences with me. In determining who to interview I took into consideration gender equality and ethnic, linguistic and religious

backgrounds as well as the legal status of my interlocutors. This study has been divided into different theoretical and empirical sections to shed light on the impact of the politics of cultural production in different social environments involving diasporas, homeland and host countries.

2 Diasporas and Cultural Production

According to the social constructivist approach, culture shapes the way in which individuals and groups think of, involve themselves in collective actions in and interpret the world (Väyrynen, 2001). This approach emphasises the roles that identity and culture play in world politics and their influence on the production of domestic and international policies (Hopf, 1998). While identities are shaped by historical, political and social contexts, culture is used to construct, articulate and receive meanings as well as describe lived and creative experience (Anheier and Raj, 2007). In this way, culture is regarded as 'a body of artifacts, symbols, texts and objects' that constitutes identities (ibid.). It has an overriding impact on the way individual and collective groups construct their realities and identify themselves. Culture is presented as an inevitable condition of human identity (Antonsich, 2010), and 'constitutive of human reality' (Väyrynen, 2001). It is designated as 'a grammar for acting in and interpreting the world, and it refers to widely shared practices and to commonly held assumptions and presuppositions that individuals and groups hold about the world' (ibid.).

The constructivist approach to culture in international relations also includes non-state actors, such as international organisations and civil society organisations, as well as diasporas (Adamson and Demetriou, 2007). Cultural interests predominate over material interests to consolidate and reproduce the formation of diasporas, maintain collective community and foster self-identification (Shain and Barth, 2003). Diaspora identities and actions occur across the various territorial boundaries of a symbolic or real homeland (Ogden, 2008). Diaspora identities are driving forces for their mobilisation and are used to exert influence on domestic politics and foreign policy (Fearon and Wendt, 2002; Shain and Barth, 2003). Thus, constructivism promotes an understanding of diasporic identities and culture in relation to the domestic politics and foreign policies of countries of origin and countries of settlement, as well as of people outside both countries who make up transnational diasporic segments.

The diaspora as an interdisciplinary concept has been widely discussed in nationalist and postmodernist literature as a dialectical set of connections

between territorially focused ethno-national communities and 'travelling' (Clifford, 1994), 'hybridity' (Hall, 2000: 31), 'third space' (Byrne, 2009) and 'shared imagination' (Cohen, 2008). Diasporas reflect aspects of purity and hybridity, primordial subdivisions and constructed formation, and reality and imagination as well as alienation and belonging (Hall, 2000; Zheng, 2010; Halstead, 2019). These dichotomies lead to the description of diasporas as communities that hold a 'double consciousness' (Du Bois, 2007), and a 'double engagement' (Mazzucato, 2008). Consequently, the concept of diaspora is inconsistent because of its incessantly 'changing nature' (Butler, 2001: 211). Its definition is rather ambiguous and can be considered as a 'cottage industry' (Adamson, 2012: 25).

Although what constitutes diaspora lacks a stable definitional and conceptual framework, it has been generally analysed as voluntarily or forcefully dispersed segments of people who were/are deeply rooted in the ancestral territories of their real or imagined homeland (Safran, 2005). Its usage has expanded to cover various cultural and intellectual interests of identity groups with a multitude of agendas and visions who are dispersed across transnational space and have homelands in a wide variety of regions (Brubaker, 2005: 1). These communities are sustained by a common history, heritage, language, culture and rituals as well as collective memories and experiences of displacement, which play a significant role in maintaining and reproducing their 'social formation and collective identity' (Tölölyan, 2007). These objective features might be supplemented by more subjective experiences of exclusion, xenophobia and racial discrimination, which diaspora members face in new environments (Eliassi, 2013). The combination of diasporas' objective and subjective features leads to the formation of a diasporic 'self-consciousness' that triggers collective mobilisation for dispersed communities in multiple locations and longing for a safe home (Dufoix, 2008). Self-consciousness is crucial to instil agency into the process of cultural production in order to create and hold a sense of a diasporic identity. Cultural production leads to the consolidation and maintenance of diaspora identities 'through the mind, through cultural artefacts, and through shared imagination' (Cohen, 2008: 8).

Cultural production is often defined as a process in reference to three intertwined principles. Firstly, it refers to the way in which cultural workers produce 'material objects, actions and interactions' as well as events (Chin, Feng and Lee, 2000: 273). Secondly, it concerns how these produced objects and events are interpreted. Finally, it is important how the artefacts produced are consumed. The objects and patterns of cultural production occur during their reception, interpretation and consumption by audiences, and the types of narratives that artists seek to present are implicated by the audience type (ibid.:

274). In this sense, the involvement of artists in cultural production through films, arts, poetry or music is not only hugely important for the expression of their chosen narratives but also has a tremendous impact on audiences' understanding. In the following section, I will shed light on how Kurdish artists' cultural practices create and negotiate an idea of cultural production in the diaspora which overlaps with homeland engagement, exile and policies in host countries.

3 Cultural Production in Europe's Emerging Kurdish Diaspora

Contemporary Kurdish diasporic cultural production and circulation began in the late 1960s, initiated by exiled artists and intellectuals, including poets Cigerxwîn and Sherko Bekes, novelists Mehmed Uzun, Mahmut Baksi, Rohat Alakon and Rojen Bernas, and singer Şivan Perwer in Sweden, as well as the filmmaker Yilmaz Güney in Paris (Engström, 2007; Gunes, 2012; Bozarslan, Gunes and Yadirgi, 2021: 13; Sustam, 2021). These Kurdish artists all shared a common history: they had to escape from the authoritarian regimes in the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey because of their engagement with and performances about Kurdish 'underground' narrative genres, which they produced in the homeland (Aras, 2014: 126). These artists then began to lead exilic lives in European states, where they continued to produce Kurdish cultural artefacts, tell stories about Kurdish culture, history, self-identification, tragedies and repressive politics, and universalised their exilic experiences, such as rupture from their social and spatial communities in home countries, constant isolation, exclusion and the lack of belonging in their new environments. For example, the exiled film producer, Mamoste Kevirsipi, told me in a dialogue at the 2019 Berlin film festival that he and many Kurdish artists interpreted their experiences in exile as sources of pain and grief, as depicted in their films, songs, poems and drawings. Their artefacts become a means to identify and connect themselves with their homeland and the ancestors or roots from which they were forcibly cut off when they chose to participate in the struggle for a homeland (Sustam, 2021).

By choosing to focus on political events such as the forced displacement, oppression and mistreatment of Kurds at the hands of Turkish, Iranian and other authoritarian regimes in the homeland, Lavin, a female filmmaker, pointed out that she and her colleagues have raised a 'critical voice' towards governments that deny Kurdish identity, deprive the Kurdish population of power structures within state institutions or censor their expression, as well as mourning Kurdish statelessness (Sustam, 2021: 783–783). Drawing on Kurds'

collective memories, these artists and musicians perform to create a 'consciousness of the collision of cultures and histories' among Kurdish refugees and people in the homeland (Mercer, 1994). For example, Cigerxwîn's poem 'Kurdistana min Ka' (Where is my Kurdistan) and 'Kime Ez' (Who I am), Yilmaz Güney's film *Yol* (the Way) and Şivan Perwer's Helepçe lyrics about the chemical gas attacks on the Kurdish population in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are constitutive of the Kurdish consciousness that is displayed in cultural production and which led to the formation of the Kurdish diaspora community across Europe in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

In collaboration with transnational networks and local associations of Kurdish diaspora groups, since the 1990s these artists have performed at annual international culture festivals in Germany, traditional festivities such as Newroz, film festivals in Berlin, London and Stockholm, and local concerts (Gunes, 2012; Sustam, 2021). A large segment of Kurdish refugees started to gather at these performances of cultural artefacts. During a conversation, a group of newly arrived and long-term Kurdish refugees at the Association of Kurdish Children and Youth (KOM-CIWAN) in Stockholm referred to these cultural works as inspiring them to produce music, folklore and theatre. All of these media addressed political events in the homeland that have helped to create, mobilise and organise Kurdish diasporic communities.

The first primary form of distribution of cultural production occurred via cassettes and VCDs, which were shared, often at great personal risk, between Kurdish associations in European countries and local activists in Turkey and other Kurdish regions in the Middle East (Gunes, 2012; Van Bruinessen, 1998). The introduction of globalised information and communication technology via satellite benefited the Kurdish diasporic population by helping them establish their first television station in 1995 (MED-TV), with offices in London and Brussels (Adamson, 2013; Hassanpour, 1998; Sustam, 2021: 779–780). It reduced the risk from circulating physical objects and enabled Kurdish artists to spread their work. These cultural outputs focused on the reconstruction of Kurdish language, the creation of a 'virtual' homeland, preservation of collective memories and the rehabilitation of Kurdish history, aiming to produce self-knowledge and self-definition among the Kurdish population and a counter-narrative to dominant discourses in major societies (Arslan, 2009; Koçer, 2014; Koçer and Candan, 2016; Maisel, 2018; Gunter, 2019).

4 Sites of Cultural Production

Several major European cities became the main sites of cultural production for the Kurdish diaspora. With Kurdish businesses acting as sponsors, Kurdish activists organised the first Kurdish film festival in London in 2001, which was followed by similar festivals in Berlin, Paris, Rome and Stockholm (Koçer, 2014: 476). Film screenings were nearly always accompanied by music performances, poetry readings, photo exhibitions, political panels, and cartoons and animation films for children. Additionally, off-shoot events were organised by local Kurdish associations. Cultural production has not only burgeoned as a tool of the Kurdish struggle but become a powerful strategy that contributes to the promotion and recognition of the Kurdish cause.

The diversity of events at these festivals allows the performers to provide profound insights into the Kurdish culture and political situation, which the mainstream media fails to explore. In my interview, Mamoste Kevirsipi, the director of Berlin's Kurdish Film Festival, described the event as a community space for Kurdish identity and culture, where critical political debates and artistic exchange between various cultures could take place. Kevirsipi described the fringe events (such as poetry readings, concerts and political panels) as contributing to and reflecting the diversity of Kurdish society as well as the social structures of the cities in which Kurds have settled. Each event influences the next. For example, the Berlin Kurdish Film Festival was organised along the same lines as the London Kurdish Film Festival, as a site of cultural affirmation, an exhibition of Kurdish resistance culture and a hub of interaction, as well as to build a cinematic movement (Candan, 2016). These festivals also set out to inform European audiences about Kurdish history, identity, culture, art and suffering.

Now well established, Berlin's annual Kurdish film festival could be viewed as a transnational site and alternative public sphere for the production, presentation and circulation of cultural politics. Each year, the committee of the Berlin Kurdish Film Festival chooses a different theme relating to Kurdistan. In 2019, for example, the role and contribution of Kurdish female fighters in the battle against ISIS was the festival's focus. Female Kurdish artists also presented their work. The previous year, it was the tragedy of Yezidis who were exposed to 'genocide' at the hands of ISIS in 2014 (Schmermund, 2018). Consistently in their presentation, Kurdish diaspora artists depict the Kurds as a marginalised and subordinate immigrant community that is excluded from 'the public sphere of bourgeoisie' or mainstream societies (Habermas, 1991). Mainstream arenas fail to represent their experiences of statelessness, exile, refuge, diversity and conflicts as well as Kurdish history and culture, so Kurdish film

festivals step in to fill this function and eliminate the gap by creating alternative public spheres (Wong, 2016): 'transnational' or 'diaspora public spheres' (Fraser, 2007). Many filmmakers at the Berlin Kurdish film festival reaffirm that without these events their films are meaningless since they otherwise are not offered a space to screen their work. The festivals are cultural hubs where Kurdish and non-Kurdish immigrants and native citizens in Berlin come together and establish connections and 'critical dialogue' around the aforementioned themes (Mercer, 1994). These attract people with shared interests who do not feel heard in the mainstream public space.

Kurdish associations in Berlin, Stockholm and other European capital cities are involved in the politics of cultural production too. These associations offer training in language, playing musical instruments, folkloric dance, drawing and singing. Members of the KOM-CIWAN in Stockholm, for instance, offer classes in Kurdish folklore, language and music, stating that it is their wish to foster a Kurdish identity and sense of belonging amongst Kurdish refugees, to educate Kurdish children and to connect Kurdish refugees with the rest of Swedish society. In this way, they promote a sense of belonging amongst newly arrived refugees and seek to contribute to alleviating constraints in their lives which result from their social isolation and traumatic experiences. Similarly, the Kurdish Parents Association (YEKMAL) in Berlin and other associations organise poetry readings, literary seminars and cultural weeks where they seek to introduce Kurdish culture, promote dialogue between Kurdish refugees and native citizens and criticise xenophobic events at local level. Events and classes focus on the Kurdish homeland as well as social conditions in new environments. Overall, the politics of cultural production are firmly embedded in the institutional and political structures and social relationships among the Kurdish diasporas. In the following sections, I will discuss the ways in which the Kurdish diaspora artists use cultural production to address broad themes that shape the Kurdish community.

5 Construction of Kurdish Heritage and Common Memories

The Kurdish diaspora artists deploy the politics of cultural production to maintain and foster Kurdish identity through the preservation of cultural heritage, including language, traditional songs, collective narratives and memories of tragic experiences. For example, specific Kurdish dialects are used in most Kurdish films to inspire younger Kurdish generations to speak Kurdish in their daily lives without feeling ashamed. The filmmaker Merdan stated that learning the Kurdish language increases self-esteem and self-trust amongst the newer

generations and emboldens them to speak in Kurdish more often. Sherwan, a Kurdish social worker, uses old Kurdish songs from the 1990s in his films as a means to maintain Kurdish heritage and affirm Kurdish identity to counter the assimilation of Kurdish refugees. Thus, through language, diasporic artists seek to preserve Kurdish heritage for the next generation. The use of Kurdish language and culture in film also implies a 'manifestation of historical visibility, political agency, and cultural resilience' (Koçer, 2014: 475).

Kurdish artists present narratives that describe and explore collective experiences and memories of their ancestors, to enhance their identification, and those of fellow refugees, with 'Kurdishness' (Bozaslan, 2003). These painful Kurdish experiences and memories are rooted in the homeland and serve as the basis of a collective consciousness that promotes solidarity and identification (Abdelhady, 2007: 41). For example, when Kurdish-Yezidi poet, Rojda, who was born and brought up in Germany, paid a visit to the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria, she collected stories about the devastation of the Kurdish-Yezidi population at the hands of ISIS. When she returned to Germany, she presented these narratives in the form of poems and texts at the Kurdish film festival in Berlin in 2019. Her stories directly compared the Kurdish-Yezidi genocide by ISIS terrorists to the German context of the Holocaust. Rojda aimed to create awareness within German society in the cultural space of the Berlin Kurdish film festival and encourage the next generation of audiences to develop an interest in Kurdish history, identity and present reality. Amed, a Kurdish actor, also noted the ardent interest among younger Kurds for cultural products that depict the Kurdish past, relating that they asked for information about the lives of the grandfathers and grandmothers who were portrayed in his films. Younger members of the community are keen to carry the burden of their ancestors and to construct their belonging based on heritage and memories that mirror Kurds' collective reality.

6 Connecting, Storytelling and Networking

Kurdish cultural workers use cultural production as a tool for connecting, networking and storytelling amongst Kurdish refugees and the homeland. They establish multiple connections between cultural actors across countries outside their homeland and promote cooperation on the translation of tragic incidents involving their homeland compatriots into cultural practices. During their encounters at film festivals, they also share exile experiences with each other to connect the past and future, the homeland and receiving states, their community and receiving societies. Through storytelling, they construct mean-

ings for their stories and create a sense of belonging (Hellegers, 2011; Rousseau and Heusch, 2000).

Kurdish culture makers point to the importance of connecting and networking as the most significant functions of cultural production, as a means to counter disconnection and dispersion and foster communal cohesion and togetherness (Jeffers, 2012; Maeng, Jang and Li, 2016). Being disconnected and dispersed is a painful process which involves rupture from their homeland and social community, as well as exilic lives, for large segments of refugees. For Berlin's Kurdish Film Festival committee member Herdem, from Iran, annual film festivals play a crucial role in connecting, networking and informing dispersed population in exile:

> Film festivals enable us to come together, meet each other, build networks and tell each other our stories. We exchange ideas about art, films and politics in the homeland … Kurdish singers are here from different parts of Kurdistan, speak different dialects and have different music. They help raise awareness about what is happening in different parts of Kurdistan. As I am a Kurd from Iran, I don't know about the situation of Kurds in Syria, but many films provide me with insight into the circumstances and realities of Kurds in other Kurdish regions.
>
> Interview, 03.08.2019

Connecting and networking are crucial for colonised and dispersed people (Smith, 1999). Connecting people with their community and homeland through films and other cultural and artistic forms restores social and traditional features that generate social and spatial belonging. The connection of Kurdish refugees, artists, intellectuals and politicians in the diaspora through cultural production involves identification with place and contributes to 'spiritual relationships and community wellbeing' (ibid.). Cultural production, as Herdem stated, has crucial implications for networking and information sharing, especially for marginalised communities such as Kurds who make up a divided and dispersed community that is also a disconnected one. Cultural production alleviates this rupture and transcends the bounded space where the Kurdish refugees find themselves, as it allows them to share with other refugees their stories from the homeland and an experience of exile that crosses time, borders and societies. This positive aspect of cultural production contributes to the formation of new networks, too. Smith argued that network construction signifies building knowledge and data bases that are premised on the principles of relationships and connections (1999). In this sense, the politics of cultural production in the Kurdish diaspora connect(s) dispersed refugees and consoli-

date(s) interaction between these scattered segments, who construct an organic knowledge about different political, social, cultural and linguistic features of Kurdish society and disseminate it within the Kurdish diaspora and beyond.

7 Exile and Integration

The role of cultural production also appears to be a crucial tool for the social, cultural, therapeutic and communal dimensions of integration and exilic conditions (Fitzpatrick, 2002). Many Kurdish refugees narrated experiences of violent inter- or intra-state conflicts—of being persecuted, tortured or having suffered loss and casualties. They were forced to leave their homeland and start an uncertain life in new environments where they faced trauma and experienced isolation, alienation, uprootedness and exile, all of which cause social and emotional distress (ibid.). Exile is not a choice but rather a situation that human beings go through, and defines human existence (Rossbach, 2009). Kurds have been cut off from their homeland and continue to suffer from the implications of this, as shown by expressions of intense feelings of sorrow, irritation and indignity in their new countries. This situation is authentic, original and concrete and shapes people's lives as 'a contingent event' (ibid).

While these traumatic experiences are rooted in the homeland, further obstacles occur through the conditions of the integration process in receiving states. Integration challenges for refugees involve spatial and social factors with many political and institutional actors determining and recognising those who belong (Marlowe, 2018). Kurdish refugees elucidated consequences of the integration process in which they face a high level of structural demands in terms of language courses, finding employment, housing, bureaucracy and completing paperwork. All of these often lead to social exclusion, a lack of recognition, stereotyping, prejudice and xenophobia (Lentin and Moreo, 2012; Fibbi, Midtbøen and Simon, 2021). These detrimental conditions, which slow down integration, are multidimensional (cultural, social, institutional and structural), multi-sided (involving diaspora leaders, decision-makers, the general public and homeland actors) and multi-local (in cities of settlement, receiving states, countries of origin and in-between spaces where kinship is based).

Exiled Kurdish cultural workers continue to adopt cultural production dynamically to mitigate the traumatic pain of refugees that results from exile conditions, express their problems and promote their wellbeing. Kurdish-Yezidi artist, Zarife, explained that Kurdish refugees who have experienced conflict, displacement and persecution seek films that tell these stories. Filmed versions of these events provide refugees with different perspectives when

they watch these stories and reflect on them and realise that other individuals share these experiences. Kurdish artist Seyfan agreed, saying that Kurdish diasporic art and culture relieve people, providing a healing therapy. He believes that people are able to access their own capacity of thinking and creativity to solve their complicated issues and conflicts. Using art as therapy to tackle traumatic experiences of refugees in order to promote integration is an innovative strategy that contributes to building wide perspectives for orientation, self-confidence, resilience and empowerment (Kalmanowitz and Ho, 2016).

Diaspora associations also establish cultural practices as a way for refugees to feel at home by practising their culture, speaking Kurdish and expressing their thoughts. Thus, these associations aim to improve exilic conditions for refugees and inform their feelings of home or social belonging, helping to facilitate integration in new environments. KOM-CIWAN in Stockholm seems to fulfil this commitment by offering artistic and cultural activities in order to provide newly arrived refugees with a safe space, as well as meeting their social needs and promoting social interaction. Shagirt, a long-term member of the KOM-CIWAN from Turkey, stated:

> The majority of newly arrived refugees escaping to Sweden are orphans. They deeply long for social and family relations, as they were forcefully cut off from their families and social environments. They seek to re-establish these relationships in this country as if they were in Kurdistan. When they come to our association and see that there are youths and parents speaking Kurdish, they feel immediately drawn to them. This serves as the foundation for the warm social relationships to which they aspire. They also gain a lot of confidence.
>
> Interview, 17.03.2019

Practices of cultural production play a fruitful role in the complex, long-term and multi-sided integration process, arousing feelings of belonging. Diaspora artists and associations seek to create social capital that enables refugees to cope with structural barriers in networks where loneliness and social isolation are downplayed and conditions of exile are diminished (hooks, 2009).

Cultural production also serves as a means to enlighten native citizens about refugees' experience and background. Kurdish artists I interviewed emphasised how their cultural outputs help non-Kurdish audiences obtain a greater understanding of the Kurdish community. Local audiences are able to gain insight into social, traditional and political issues that are anchored in the lives of Kurdish refugees, which helps to fight misunderstanding and stereotypes. The filmmaker Gyankin explained this in the following statement:

> My film is about those Kurdish refugees with different religious, social and traditional backgrounds who arrived in Switzerland but have difficulties regarding issues of sexuality. They cannot imagine having sex before they marry and organise a wedding because it is a tradition they cultivated in the homeland. This tradition is odd to Swiss citizens. I deal with cultural differences in my film. I touched upon this sensitive matter that is prevailing in our society. I want to show Swiss society what our tradition looks like and what problems we have with this tradition.
>
> Interview, 07.08.2019

This example shows that films can imbue traditional stories with new contemporary meanings, helping to illuminate social, traditional, cultural and political events of the past. In this way, they make a positive contribution to the elimination of stereotypes and prejudices and seek to clear up misunderstanding. The films clear the way for a cohesive community of Kurdish refugees and native citizens. This means, says Kertzin (a festival coordinator), that these communities can come together through cinema and share feelings of burden and exchange their experience collectively.

8 Homeland in Cultural Production

Kurdish cultural products contain objects and ideas that reaffirm the diasporic identification with the homeland, despite a lack of geographical proximity. The homeland is interpreted and reconstructed permanently through memories, myths, traditions, symbols, images, landscapes and maps (Kaiser, 2004: 232; Smith, 1988: 148). Its expression emerges continuously in textual, visual, musical and literary forms.

Kurdish diasporas create spatial belonging to the homeland in four areas: their identification with the homeland, confrontation with ruling governments, intra-community criticism and visibility, and legitimacy of the homeland cause. In the first area, cultural artists deploy their cultural and artistic skills to promote their identification with the homeland as a romanticised and idealised place on screen, in songs, poems and drawings. For example, they continually illustrate or express Kurdistan's landscape in their films and songs to perform the identification of diaspora constituencies with the homeland and to challenge the assimilation policy of governments. Kurdish filmmaker Bawer described the way the war in Kurdistan has devastated Kurdish lives that were previously beautiful and desirable. As with other artists, he seeks to restore these desired lives by including memories of homeland in his cultural artefacts.

Kurdish cultural workers also construct a counter-narrative to challenge the official discourses that ruling governments produce for Kurdish populations. The Kurds are stateless in a structural sense but also citizens of states that, according to Kurdish diaspora artists, have colonised their homeland (Eliassi, 2021; Tas, 2016). Sara, a Kurdish female activist, pointed out that the film festivals deal with Kurdish issues and fight against colonialism by emphasising Kurdish costume, culture and arts in connection with the landscape and people of the homeland. These cultural methods are tools used by Kurds to decolonise themselves and to illustrate and explain their struggle, pain and conflicts. Kurdish artists can play a crucial role in challenging the inferior feelings that, for example, Turkish cultural and nationalistic outputs might engender (Scalbert-Yücel and Le, 2006; Yeğen, 2006).

The Kurdish filmmaker Merdan described how he challenges the Turkish representation of Kurds as backward and inferior. He contests this view by presenting the authentic Kurdish way of life. In this way, Kurdish cultural producers create and disseminate their own self-knowledge in a self-created space, namely films, songs or poems, which fosters their own cultural and social values and questions the hegemonic and colonising positions that Turkish artists impose on Kurds (Sustam, 2021). Amed also referred to a dominant theme in Turkish cinema whereby Kurdish characters are frequently portrayed as dirty clots with poor language skills in a negative and trivial context. In contrast, Kurdish filmmakers describe these colonising institutions as oppressors in their films. Thus, the Kurdish artists construct their own reality through cultural means that sustain their culture, language and history in the diaspora and legitimise their cultural politics, which ruling states demonise in mainstream cultural outputs.

In the third arena, Kurdish cultural workers also look inward to critique leading Kurdish parties and political actors, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and other main parties in the Kurdish region in Northern Syria. Kurdish artists often claim that Kurdish politicians put their own political, economic and ideological interests ahead of Kurdish people's legitimate demands, such as the right to speak their language and cultivate their culture. The self-centric politics of the Kurdish parties mentioned above has led to the fragmentation of Kurdish society and created political and symbolic borders. Seyfan noted how the PKK, KDP and PUK have not mounted coordinated resistance to the repressive politics meted out to the Kurdish population but instead have focused on how to increase their own interests and membership. This has led to Kurdish fragmentation and contributed to the deterioration of relationships between Kurds. In contrast, Kurdish artists highlight how they produce and use arts to

abolish the (political) boundaries that Kurdish parties draw to establish factions within the Kurdish community, in line with their self-centric interests. Kurdish musicians, such as Koma (Band) Wetan and Şivan Perwer, critique party politics and seek to reinstate harmonious relationships and unity within Kurdish society. Their artefacts aim to encourage Kurdish politicians to reflect on their positions for the interests of the Kurdish population.

Finally, these cultural forms are conducive to the visibility and legitimacy of Kurdish demands for recognition of their cultural identity and political rights. Bawer, a film actor, referred to the importance of films for these Kurdish demands:

> My film was screened in Uruguay. Afterwards, I received many positive emails about my film, which explains the Kurdish conflict. However, every day, Kurdish MPs are on the streets screaming but nobody hears their voices. My film has more influence on the introduction of our cause .... We spread the Kurdish struggle to the world through film as a medium with images and photos. Our artwork explains that we have the right to exist, like every community.
>
> Interview, 05.08.2019

Cultural production is a tapestry of films, music and artistic and literary practices. This tapestry contributes to the promotion of understanding, reflective display and negotiation of belonging but also to demands for Kurdish rights. This was confirmed by Suwar, who referred to films as 'Kurdish wings', because they can fly around the world and be seen by the international public. This tapestry of cultural production is not only unbounded in raising the visibility of the Kurdish cause, but is a peaceful instrument wielded to draw people's attention without harmful effect. Amed stated that Kurds cannot resist the appeal of sophisticated weapons, but here they use cinema and music to achieve the same effect without injuries and casualties. They can translate the armed struggle into culture and art and be creative. In this way, they can have an impact on the international public and represent themselves directly. Thus, cultural production can be an effective strategy to promote visibility of the Kurdish cause, educate audiences about Kurdish society and achieve recognition and legitimacy of Kurdish claims through peaceful means.

9 Universalisation of the Kurdish Cause

Studies and concepts around diasporas concentrate on nation, ethnicity, transnationalism, interconnectedness, multiple allegiance, mobility and locality (Cohen, 2008). However, these concepts fail to pay sufficient attention to categorical identity groups of social collectivities who encompass intersectional subjects such as 'class, gender and trans-ethnic alliances' (Anthias, 1998). Although cosmopolitanism has been suggested to include these multiple social and cultural categories (Ziemer, 2014), it undermines the key aspects that diasporas address, namely the homeland, ethnicity and nationalism. These concepts serve as solid pillars for social solidarity and the formation of collective communities (Calhoun, 2003). Informed by criticism of cosmopolitanism, Kurdish diaspora artists give rise to a combined perspective that the homeland is not less important in the lives of diasporic artists and members, but—as the politics of cultural production demonstrate(s)—the homeland is introduced in connection with universal themes that simultaneously create communal, territorial and multiple social and cultural belongings (Bhimji, 2008: 421; Ziemer and Roberts, 2013: 6).

The politics of Kurdish cultural production addresses particular agendas for Kurds and associates them with universal themes. These move beyond essentialist ethnic and national identities to include important global issues, such as gender, human rights, and minority and refugee matters. Culture-makers reiterate their affiliation with more than one identity source and belonging and manifest these in their artefacts. They do not renounce their communal and territorial identities but rather add these to their multiple social and cultural identifications within diasporic and cosmopolitan frameworks. For instance, Lea, a member of the Kurdish film festival committee, referred to the festival themes that addressed Kurdish women's realities and the various perspectives offered by and about women. They sought to create an alternative space for women to discuss their varied roles as mothers, artists, politicians, refugees, activists, freedom fighters and traumatised victims through different forms of cultural production. The appearance of Kurdish women from different areas was intended to raise awareness about the resistance, victimisation and oppression of women who embody hope for a free future and 'the traces of past experiences and traumas' (Şimşek, 2019: 120). The Kurdish film director and actor, Lavin, stated that she uses her personal experience as a Kurdish woman to address the universal challenges faced by women:

> I focus on autobiographical stories through use of my own narratives to universalise the problems of Kurdish women in male-dominated cinema.

> For me, art and cinema are tools of the struggle. I tend to produce films to increase optimism, which we need for the Kurdish struggle. I adopt this approach from the perspectives of oppressed people. By coping with my individual problems through films and arts, I pay attention to the universal problems of women and try to offer collective solutions for common problems for women.
>
> Interview, 07.08.2019

Kurdish artists place particular perspectives of the Kurdish struggle within their cultural production in order to identify with universal categories and groups. For example, they do not concern themselves only with solidarity for the Kurdish cause but also build connections with universal causes through women's issues. They claim that they represent all oppressed women and use demonstrations of their female resistance as an example. This applies to the refugee phenomenon too. For instance, Zarife detailed how her multiple identities as a woman, oppressed individual and refugee allowed her to claim to be a universal figure:

> I was a child refugee, have a Kurdish and Yezidi background and played the main role in the film, *Girls of the Sun*. I felt extremely committed to performing this role in the film since it is about women who were raped by ISIS. These women had children and these children might escape to Europe as refugees. This is also my reality … We Kurds have always suffered from pain because we are all oppressed. In the film, as women, refugees and oppressed people, I could bring up my feelings of pain, which are universal.
>
> Interview, 08.08.2019

Kurdish women have played a decisive role in the battle against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Their engagement has been celebrated by international mainstream media, feminist movements and left-wing groups (Käser, 2021). Kurdish diaspora artists have realised the positive international perception of Kurdish women as fighters and have exploited this interest through their artefacts. In this way, Kurdish artists in the diaspora amplify the voices of oppressed groups, including women and refugees, so they are heard both as Kurds and as universal activists who are against oppression and are striving to achieve recognition for their claims.

10 Conclusion

The dynamic impact of the politics of cultural production in the Kurdish diaspora has been overlooked by previous studies, where the focus has often been the diaspora's role in Kurdish identity formation, the construction of diaspora structures, political activism, transnational mobility and citizenship and homeland conflicts, as well as the integration process for Kurdish refugees. This paper, however, addressed the politics of cultural production in the Kurdish diaspora by describing and analysing the role of Kurdish filmmakers, musicians, artists and intellectuals in Berlin and Stockholm. I discussed how Kurdish artistic and cultural actors deploy films, songs, poems and artefacts as forms of cultural production to address multiple subjects and genres. The artistic and cultural sites of diasporic cultural production are mainly Kurdish film festivals in European capital cities, such as Berlin, London, Stockholm and Paris, and diasporic Kurdish associations which diasporic cultural workers and intellectuals transform through their artistic actions into unbounded alternative cultural and social spaces where they can engage with large audiences and encounter each other through political discussions, peaceful dialogue and social interaction as well as artistic cooperation and networking.

The themes they highlight through their cultural production include the restoration of Kurdish heritage, the reproduction of Kurdish cultural identity, the construction of the homeland and the contestation of the colonial and coercive politics of the authoritarian Turkish, Iranian and Syrian regimes. Furthermore, they exploit the means of cultural production to promote a sense of belonging, intra-community cohesion and integration among Kurdish refugees and help them to express and overcome feelings of exile, as well as to connect Kurdish cultural and political claims to universal themes. Finally, Kurdish artists in the diaspora utilise these cultural media, alongside various fringe events, to form a community of global solidarity as well as civic resistance to affect the transformation of political and social conflicts and their consequences in both the homeland and host states. Thus, they seek to render their cultural and political demands visible to the international public.

By producing cultural genres and arts, Kurdish artists and intellectuals transform their status as inferiorised and suppressed victims of conflicts and their means of their struggle. They become active and dedicated subjectivities that restore their cultural heritage and identity and challenge colonising regimes that oppress Kurdish populations (Sustam, 2021). In doing this, they replace their conventional means of struggle, such as arms and contentious politics, through artistic and cultural works that are expressive, peaceful and power-

ful, and merit recognition, understanding and solidarity from wider audiences. Thus, the cultural practices of Kurdish cultural actors in the diaspora are important for international politics and intersect with multiple territories, identities, cultures and allegiances within the framework of constructivism in the scholarship of international politics (Ogden, 2008). As this paper has explored, diasporas are central to the blending of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in terms of cultural norms and identities, local and global communities and particular and universal global problems. The politics of cultural production of Kurdish cultural actors in the diaspora could be the subject of further studies to illustrate the dynamic contribution of transnational and non-state cultural movements in the generation of alternative solutions to complex local and global problems in the world of states.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Fiona B. Adamson for her invaluable comments on the final draft of this article.

Disclosure Statement and Funding

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. The research for this article received funding from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant agreement number 822806 for the Project 'Migration Governance and Asylum Crises' (MAGYC) and the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) for 2020–2021.

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