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## CHALLENGING NARRATIVES: KURDISH YOUNG ADULTS IN ISTANBUL AND CHICAGO

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Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2021.305>

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Dr. Diane E. King, Major Professor

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CHALLENGING NARRATIVES: KURDISH YOUNG ADULTS IN ISTANBUL AND  
CHICAGO

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
Lydia Shanklin Roll  
Lexington, Kentucky  
Director: Dr. Diane E. King, Associate Professor of Anthropology  
Lexington, Kentucky  
2021

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### CHALLENGING NARRATIVES: KURDISH YOUNG ADULTS IN ISTANBUL AND CHICAGO

In this dissertation, I explore the interplay between youthful agency and state imposition. Specifically, drawing on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul, Turkey and Chicago, Illinois, I investigate how young adults who have migrated within one state and to another are navigating the states and bureaucratic systems in which they live. My interlocutors hail from a state that is quintessentially twentieth century, by which I mean the state was established as a nation-state, promoted as existing for members of a particular ethno-linguistic identity, with a charismatic leader who inspired a cult of personality. This narrative of the state has reverberated down the generations and is central to the socio-political environment in which my interlocutors have lived their lives. I argue that ethno-nationalist states and the education systems they establish to train their citizenry do not necessarily produce loyal, docile subjects that conform to the state's narrative of ideal citizens. Rather, as my case shows, the university environment can foster the development of activists who assert who they are in ethno-linguistic terms that challenge state narratives. My interlocutors are challenging the dominant ethno-nationalist narratives of a state that seeks to erase and silence them, as well as narratives of asylum seeking that rely on tropes of victimhood that do not reflect their lived experiences. In challenging these narratives, my interlocutors make emphatic assertions of their ethno-linguistic identity and strive for increased visibility.

As Kurds in Turkey, my interlocutors have been subject to narratives perpetuated by the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state and agents of the state, such as the military and the education system, that they do not have a history, they do not exist as a distinct ethno-linguistic group, and they are terrorists. It is these

narratives my interlocutors are challenging. In both Istanbul and Chicago, they are engaged in making emphatic assertions of their Kurdishness. In Istanbul, this has included challenging dominant state narratives in university classrooms and through activities such as spray-painting Kurdish language graffiti in central locations in the city. In Chicago, this has included protesting in front of the Turkish Consulate and submitting narratives of the various forms of violence they endured at the hands of the Turkish state as part of their political asylum applications to the United States government. In migrating to the United States and applying for political asylum, my interlocutors continue to assert their Kurdish identities, pose challenges to the Turkish state, and demand visibility for themselves, and Kurds more broadly.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Anthropology of the State, Migration and Asylum Seeking, Kurdish Studies, Turkey

Lydia Shanklin Roll

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*(Name of Student)*

26 May 2021

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Date

CHALLENGING NARRATIVES: KURDISH YOUNG ADULTS IN ISTANBUL AND  
CHICAGO

By  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a doctoral dissertation is, ultimately, a solitary endeavor. Finishing mine in the midst of a global pandemic made it, perhaps, more so. However, the process of writing would have been impossible without the support of the following individuals and organizations, to whom I am incredibly grateful.

My most sincere gratitude to my interlocutors in Istanbul and Chicago. I am honored that you shared your stories with me and entrusted me with retelling them in this dissertation. *Gelek spas hevalên min!*

Thank you to the members of my committee. To my advisor Diane King, for your unwavering support throughout the entire process of my doctoral studies. To the other members of my committee, Mark Whitaker, Kristin Monroe, and Srimati Basu, for your insightful suggestions and encouragement over the years. I am a better scholar because of the contributions you all made to my education.

Thank you to those organizations that provided the financial support that helped make my dissertation research possible. To the National Security Education Program, for supporting my fieldwork and Kurdish language study in Istanbul as a Boren Fellow. *Spas dikim!* To the Critical Language Scholarship Program, for the opportunity to spend two summers studying the Turkish language in Bursa and Ankara. *Teşekkür ederim!*

Thank you to my graduate school colleagues. To the members of my initial cohort for their patience as I navigated the learning curve of embarking on graduate studies in a new academic discipline. To my dear friend and former officemate, Lizz

New, for always being there to offer sage advice and cupcakes. To Katie Zapel and Karen Stevens, for all the adventures and moral support. To the members of the Sunday night supper club, Lizz, Olivia Spradlin, Vanessa Hanvey, and Anahid Matossian for the conversations, camaraderie, and culinary adventures. And, to those with whom I shared an advisor, Anahid and Diana Hatchett, for all the helpful feedback over the past few years. A massive thank you, also, to Katie and Vanessa for the eleventh-hour feedback as I was getting ready to send this document to my committee!

Thank you to my family. To my Granny, who got her GED in her 70s, and my Grandpa Gobert, the crossword puzzle enthusiast who never graduated from high school, for showing me that being a lifelong learner is, first and foremost, predicated on curiosity. To my Grandma, for her encouragement of my educational pursuits and my desire to travel. To my Grandpa Roll, for setting the example of attaining higher education. To my parents, my siblings, and my niblings, for their constant encouragement, love, and laughter. And finally, to B, for listening to my rambling tangents, for providing feedback, for your continuous support, and for your seemingly endless supply of patience.



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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

“I’m not Turkish; I’m Kurdish.” I was standing at a long table in the main lounge at the International House at the University of Chicago (I-House), where I had just served a dish of ice cream to a new friend, Comerd. It was a Sunday evening late in the fall semester of 2007, shortly after I began my master’s studies in Higher Education Administration at Loyola University Chicago. My Graduate Assistant position at I-House required that I work in the Programs Office, planning lectures, concerts, and social events for residents and the broader campus community. One of my responsibilities was setting up and managing weekly ice cream socials. These events provided an excellent opportunity to meet fellow I-House residents from across the United States and around the world. It was at one of these ice cream socials that I first met Comerd. Originally from the province of Gaziantep, in southeastern Turkey, Comerd had come to the University of Chicago as a visiting scholar for one year to study Ottoman history in the Kurdish majority provinces of what became the Republic of Turkey. Over the course of the next several months, I would learn from Comerd and other Kurdish students at the University of Chicago more about their history, their language, and their culture.

My introduction to the world of Kurdish studies and cultural anthropology began with an emphatic assertion of a particular ethno-linguistic identity. In retrospect, the circumstances of my introduction to the Kurds were fortuitous, as I conducted my dissertation research with university students and recent university graduates, in Istanbul and Chicago, respectively, looking at issues related to ethno-

linguistic identity assertions, competing narratives, migration, asylum seeking, and education. In talking with my interlocutors, during preliminary fieldwork, conducted during the summers of 2013 and 2014, and dissertation research, conducted in 2016, the common themes that emerged between Turkey and the United States revolved around challenging narratives, both state and scholarly, assertions of Kurdishness, the Kurdish language, the pursuit of education, and migration. It also became apparent that Kurdish university students were engaged in several forms of challenging the dominant narratives of an ethno-nationally assertive state regarding who Kurds are and their role in Turkish society. I use the term, “ethno-nationally assertive state” to describe states that promote the idea that the state was created for and is populated by members of the same ethno-linguistic group. Additionally, the migration and asylum-seeking experiences of those who migrated to Chicago challenge assumptions of what asylum-seeking “looks like” in the anthropological literature on migration. For the purposes of this dissertation, the individuals with whom I worked, though geographically separated, comprise one analytic unit.

In this dissertation, I explore how young adults may respond when they are confronted with an ethno-nationally assertive state. My interlocutors hail from a state that is quintessentially twentieth century, by which I mean the state was established as a nation-state, promoted existing for members of a particular ethno-linguistic identity, with a charismatic leader who inspired a cult of personality. This narrative of the state has reverberated down the generations and is the socio-political environment in which my interlocutors have lived their lives. I argue that

ethno-nationalist states and the education systems they establish to train their citizenry do not necessarily produce loyal, docile subjects that conform to the state's narrative of ideal citizens. Rather, as my case shows, the university environment can foster the development of activists who assert who they are in ethno-linguistic terms that challenge state narratives. My interlocutors are challenging the dominant ethno-nationalist narratives of a state that seeks to erase and silence them, as well as narratives of asylum seeking that rely on tropes of victimhood that do not reflect their lived experiences. In challenging these narratives, my interlocutors make emphatic assertions of their ethno-linguistic identity and strive for increased visibility. My interlocutors who are university students are agentively challenging an ethno-nationalist state narrative that conflates the majority ethno-linguistic category with citizenship. Indeed, they use a carefully constructed form of linguistic nationalism to challenge ethno-nationally assertive state narratives and power, while simultaneously asserting their own ethno-linguistic identity. Moreover, my interlocutors who are recent university graduates are using the furtherance of their educations as a means to migrate to the United States, where their navigation of immigration bureaucracy and the asylum-seeking process challenges dominant narratives of asylum seekers as tragic figures found in anthropological literature on asylum seeking. My interlocutors who have migrated have engaged in a careful selection of a particular path to migration to the United States, and their experiences highlight the role that engagement with institutions, in this case higher education institutions, can play in the crafting of a path away from a hostile state and into a future in which one is able to freely assert one's collective identity. While these

migrants to the United States are no longer physically present in Turkey, they are not completely removed from the watchful eye of the Turkish state, as there is a Turkish consulate in Chicago with which they must interact from time to time. Both segments of my research population are asserting their ethno-linguistic identity in their interactions with and reactions against the states in which they live. In doing so, they are demonstrating a kind of agility in their interactions with these states and in their assertions of their Kurdishness. Their assertions can be variously loud or soft, as the situation in which they find themselves warrants. Thus, this dissertation explores an interplay between youthful agency and state imposition, and how young adults who have migrated within one state and to another are navigating the states and bureaucratic systems in which they live.

Underlying the experiences of my interlocutors is a theme of the pursuit of higher education. University-level education in Turkey is a continuation of the primary and secondary education system that was designed, in the years immediately following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, to further the homogenization and Turkification efforts of the Turkish state and train ideal Turkish citizens (Navaro-Yashin 2002a; Altınay 2004). My interlocutors were among the first generation of Kurds to attend university in large numbers in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Their pursuit of higher education supports their ethno-linguistic identity

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<sup>1</sup> There is a striking lack of demographic statistical data in Turkey. For example, no ethnicity or language census data has been published since 1965. However, this assertion about my interlocutors being among the first generation of Kurds to attend university in large numbers in Turkey was expressed by my interlocutors.

assertions. For example, through finding space in state-sanctioned Kurdish language classrooms on a Turkish university campus to explore their identities as Kurds in Turkey. Or, by using enrollment in a language institute and the resultant student visa as a means to migrate to the United States and subsequently make the decision to apply for political asylum based on their experiences as members of an oppressed ethno-linguistic minority group in an ethno-nationally assertive state.

As Kurds in Turkey, my interlocutors have been subject to narratives perpetuated by the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state and agents of the state, such as the military and the education system, that they do not have a history, they do not exist as a distinct ethno-linguistic group, and they are terrorists. It is these narratives that my interlocutors are challenging. In both Istanbul and Chicago, they are engaged in making emphatic assertions of their ethno-linguistic identity: Kurdishness. They are also engaged in striving for increased visibility for Kurds. In Istanbul, this has included challenging dominant state narratives in university classrooms and through activities such as spray-painting Kurdish language graffiti in central locations in the city. In Chicago, this has included protesting in front of the Turkish Consulate and submitting narratives of the various forms of violence they endured at the hands of the Turkish state as part of their political asylum applications to the United States government. Ultimately, my interlocutors are engaged in making emphatic assertions of ethnic identity, in their case Kurdishness. Inherent in this is challenging the dominant ethno-nationalist narrative of the state in which they live or from which they hail, the Republic of Turkey, which has sought to erase and silence Kurds since its establishment in 1923. In migrating to the



United States and applying for political asylum, my interlocutors continue to assert their Kurdish identities, pose challenges to the Turkish state, and demand visibility for themselves, and Kurds more broadly.

### *Terminology and Positionality*

I have chosen to predominantly use the noun form, Kurd(s), in discussing my interlocutors and their experiences. I acknowledge that, as Diane E. King (2014) described, the norms for how we discuss identity labels has shifted in recent years. There has been a movement away from using ethnic identifiers in the noun form (e.g., “Kurd”) to the adjective form (e.g., “Kurdish people”) in anthropology. While I understand this linguistic shift, I find it at odds with the ways in which my interlocutors tend to describe themselves. My interlocutors almost exclusively use the noun form, “Kurd(s),” when talking about themselves, their local communities, and the broader Kurdish population. To confirm this impression, I asked one of my interlocutors, Azad, about it, and whether he preferred the use of “Kurd” or “Kurdish.” This was his, somewhat indignant, reply: “‘Kurdish’ is an adjective. ‘Kurd’ is a noun. I want to be a noun!” I am committed to allowing my interlocutors to drive the conversations about their own identities. Thus, I tend to use the noun form, in accordance with the form favored by my interlocutors, though I do use both forms interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

In a similar vein, I also felt I needed to make a decision about how to render place names. Villages, towns, and cities in the southeastern, Kurdish-majority region of Turkey all have at least two potential names: one Kurdish and one Turkish (with

some places also having names in other languages spoken in the region, such as Syriac). Conferring new Turkish place names on places with non-Turkish names was part of the Turkification policies of the early Republic of Turkey, which was established in 1923, and thus, these Turkish place names are inherently politicized. That being said, I have found that the Turkish place names are more prevalent in map resources. Additionally, my interlocutors tend to use both forms of place names interchangeably. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, I have elected to predominantly use these Turkish place names, unless I am quoting an interlocutor or other scholar who used a Kurdish place name, for the purposes of clarity, and to make it easier for readers who may wish to look for any of the places mentioned throughout this dissertation on a map. My use of Turkish place names should not be construed as any sort of political statement or support for sole use of these Turkish place names.

As an American anthropologist, who identifies as female and white, conducting ethnographic fieldwork with members of the Kurdish ethno-linguistic minority in Turkey and the United States, I was particularly concerned about issues of my own positionality. Nearly all ethnographies I have read include some discussion of the researcher's positionality vis-à-vis their research population, as positionality, and specifically positionality of the ethnographic researcher, has been an ongoing concern of anthropology. These analyses tend to center on questions of access to research populations, power dynamics, and questions of representation (Rosaldo 1993; Wilson 2004; Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Borneman and Hammoudi 2009). For my research, this meant empowering the people with whom I

worked, facilitating dialogue through language, and relying on my position as a university student.

While I did not set out to conduct my fieldwork almost exclusively with young men, this is what ended up happening. I made initial contacts with the community in Chicago, and then relied on snowball sampling to find individuals who were willing to participate in my research project in both Chicago and Istanbul. My initial entrée into the communities in which I conducted research began by reaching out to a member of the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago (KCC, now known as the Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois) in the fall of 2012. I asked if I could visit the Center on my next visit to Chicago and was told I would be welcome. That initial contact at the KCC was Azad, a young man who had migrated to Chicago about two years before we first met. He invited me to the KCC to have tea with members of the Kurdish community in Chicago. When I arrived, I was greeted by Azad, two other young men, and an older gentleman. We talked for a couple of hours, over seemingly bottomless cups of tea. They told me about their community and activities, and I shared my ideas for my dissertation project. I also told them I planned to go to Istanbul the following summer for preliminary fieldwork. As I was preparing to leave, Azad told me that if I needed contacts in Istanbul for the summer, to let him know. I took him up on his offer, which is how I was introduced to my initial contact in Istanbul, Welat. Welat was a political science student who took it upon himself to essentially act as my research assistant for the month I was in Istanbul, introducing me to his friends and answering my endless questions. While in Istanbul, and then later in Chicago, on several occasions I found myself the only female member of

small groups otherwise composed entirely of young men. I do wonder if I might have been granted access based on my outsider status that I might not have enjoyed if I were a Kurdish woman. Regardless, one thing was certain. My positionality as an outsider, and in particular, an American, who was interested in the plight of Kurds in Turkey seemed to open many doors to social interaction. Almost everyone I met was eager to share their thoughts on the “Kurdish issue,” and often also, snippets of their own experiences. I asked those who seemed particularly eager if they would be willing to let me interview them.

One way I attempted to empower the people I interviewed was through representation. I went into my fieldsites with a grounding in the particular historical and political contexts that have led to the current position of Kurds as a marginalized ethno-linguistic minority within the Turkish context. Indeed, I see the dual meanings of marginality, as described by Kostas Gounis (1996), in that being labeled a Kurd both excludes and confines Kurds in Turkey, from the point of view of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state. Yet, I have also seen interlocutors take on this label as a point of pride. Thus, in conducting my research, I never aim to label individuals as Kurd or non-Kurd, but rather allow them to tell me who they are, what identity their experiences have led them to assert for themselves and why. As one who is not Kurdish it is not my place to decide who is or is not Kurdish.

I relied on language to facilitate access and the building of rapport among my research population. I developed working proficiency in the Turkish language through two summers of intensive language study in Turkey as an awardee of the United States Department of State Critical Language Scholarship program. My

interlocutors, university students in Istanbul and recent university graduates in Chicago, had been educated in Turkish since primary school. Those who attended private universities and more prestigious public universities also knew English, as the language of instruction at these institutions is English. Thus, I had two languages in common with my interlocutors, though, in almost all cases, interviews were conducted primarily in English. Additionally, while a National Security Education Program Boren Fellow carrying out three months of fieldwork in Istanbul, I worked with a Kurdish language tutor, followed by a few Kurdish language classes at the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago (now known as the Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois). I found that actively working toward learning Kurdish during fieldwork helped in building rapport with my research population.

Finally, I found that my own position as a student made it easier to connect with and build rapport with my interlocutors, who were themselves either university students or recent university graduates. That we were in a similar life stage, despite the fact that I was at least 10 years older than all my interlocutors, seemed to make it easier for my interlocutors to understand what I was doing and why. My doing research to fulfill a requirement for a university degree was something they understood, as they had all done research projects as a part of their own university educations. My own positionality as a student facilitated the establishment of relationships with my interlocutors and access to the spaces in which they tended to congregate within my broader fieldsites.

### *Fieldsites*

In designing my research plan, I sought to follow the story of my interlocutors from the villages in which most were born, to the city of Istanbul, through their university educations in Turkey, and, finally, their migration to the United States in pursuit of educational and economic opportunities. This dissertation project was multi-sited in design, inspired by what George E. Marcus (1995) calls the “follow the people” (106) mode of constructing multi-sited ethnographic research. In designing my project in this manner, I sought to explore the ways in which two geographically distant segments of the same population were grappling with similar questions of identity, education, and challenging narratives.

I collected the data for this dissertation over a period of approximately five years, including informal data collection and observations made while living in the capital city of Ankara and teaching English language classes at one of the top-ranking universities in Turkey during the 2011-12 academic year, preliminary research conducted in Istanbul and Ankara during the summers of 2013 and 2014, while in Turkey for summer language institutes, and formal dissertation research conducted in Istanbul and Chicago during the 2016 calendar year.

I conducted the bulk of my research in Turkey in Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey and the Turkish (and global) city with what is said to be the largest Kurdish population (Günay 2019). However, it is impossible to know the exact number of Kurds in Istanbul. Ethno-linguistic demographic data, which had been collected in responses to questions about the language spoken in the home, has not been collected as part of the Turkish census since 1985. The Turkish state has actively

suppressed the distribution of ethno-linguistic data, preventing the publication of ethno-linguistic data beyond that collected as part of the 1965 census. (Dundar 2014). This means that the most recent ethno-linguistic data that can be accessed is, at present, 56 years old. For Istanbul, in particular, which has received sizeable groups of internal migrants from the Kurdish majority areas in southeastern Turkey, the age of available data renders it essentially useless for understanding the current ethno-linguistic demographics of the city.

Istanbul straddles the Bosphorus straight, with one foot in Europe and the other in Asia, where it has been a major hub of trade between Asia and Europe for hundreds of years, and is the location of numerous consulates. It is, thus, a very diverse city. Most of my interlocutors had moved to Istanbul in the early to mid-1990s with their families, due to violence in their home villages in the Kurdish majority region in the southeast of Turkey. For the majority of my interlocutors, their formative years were spent in Istanbul. I also conducted a bit of additional preliminary research in Ankara, the capital, which sits squarely in the middle of Turkey. Ankara is very much a planned city. In the early years of the Republic of Turkey, which was established in 1923, Ankara was designed to be the capital of the Republic of Turkey, and features wide boulevards lined with government buildings. It is also a hub for higher education and serves as home to a number of the best universities in Turkey.

Chicago is a large midwestern city located along the shore of Lake Michigan, in northern Illinois. It is the third largest city in the United States, and serves as a cultural, economic, and transportation hub. A number of foreign governments have

established consulates in Chicago, including Turkey. The greater Chicagoland area is also the location of about 100 institutions of higher education, by which I mean education beyond the high school level, including several well-regarded research-intensive universities. Chicago is home to migrants from around the world, including a small Kurdish community that had, at the time of my dissertation research, predominantly migrated from Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

Again, reliable demographic data is difficult to come by. The United States Census does include a question about the language spoken in the home. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, there were 160 reported speakers of Kurdish in the Chicago metropolitan area during the years 2009-2013. This provides some statistical insight into the number of Kurds in Chicago. Of course, there is no Kurdish box to check included in the “race” section of the United States Census, nor is there a box for some version of “Middle Eastern.” One evening, while talking with a group of my interlocutors after dinner, the discussion turned to what box they check when they are filling out forms with demographic sections. The answers were varied, including “white,” “Asian,” and “other.” However, it was made clear to me that the Kurdish community in the greater Chicagoland area did a fairly good job of keeping track of the members of their own community. I asked Azad about numbers in November of 2015, and he told me that there were about 200 Kurds from Turkey in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs, including about 15 families with children.

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<sup>2</sup> Since completing my dissertation research, a growing number of Kurdish migrants, or refugees, from Rojava (the Kurdish term for western Kurdistan, or the part of Kurdistan that lies within the borders of Syria) have migrated to Chicago to flee ongoing violence in Syria.



Most were recent migrants who were university graduates. It was common knowledge among my interlocutors that the largest Kurdish community, by far, in the United States is in Nashville, Tennessee. Yet, as Azad told me, the majority of the thousands of members of the Kurdish community in Nashville are those who fled Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in the 1990s, and their descendants.

### *Methods*

For this project, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul, Turkey and Chicago, Illinois over the course of the 2016 calendar year. I was in Chicago during the months of January and May-December. During the months of February-April, I was in Istanbul. This dissertation research was a continuation of research begun during preliminary stints in Turkey (2011-2012, 2013, and 2014) and Chicago (2013-2015). The following methods were employed:

**Participant Observation:** I engaged in participant observation on university campuses, in cafés, and in other locations in Istanbul where students tend to congregate. In Chicago, I engaged in participant observation at the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago (now known as the Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois) and in the homes of interlocutors. In all cases, I was invited into these spaces by my interlocutors. My entrée into these spaces was initiated by my reaching out to a board member of the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago, Azad. He invited me to visit the center and talk with some of the community members. He then introduced me to Welat, who became my initial point of contact in Istanbul for my preliminary research during the summer of 2013, and the person who introduced me to the

spaces in which I conducted participant observation in that city. This method of participant observation allowed me to take part in and experience the daily lives of my research participants, including interpersonal interactions, individual and group activities, and community events (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002); the “being there” (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009:14) that has been the hallmark of anthropological research. Participant observation provided the opportunity to collect detailed fieldnotes (Sanjek 1990) based on extensive time spent engaging with interlocutors during the course of their daily lives (Bernard 2005; Emerson et al. 1995). Participant observation also allowed for the development of ongoing relationships with interlocutors.

**Ethnographic Interviews:** In addition to participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews (Schensul et al. 1999) with seven Kurdish university students and one university instructor in Istanbul and nine Kurdish university graduates who had migrated to Chicago. Research participants were identified through snowball sampling. Again, my initial contact was Azad, in Chicago. He introduced me to Welat, who participated in my first interview in Istanbul during preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2013. Welat then introduced me to his Kurdish language instructor and several of his classmates. After building rapport with them, I was able to conduct additional interviews. By the time I was ready to do fieldwork in 2016, Welat had moved to Chicago, but Azad had by this point also introduced me to Zana, who I first met during the summer of 2014. She served as my main contact during the time of my fieldwork in Istanbul (February-April 2016). Zana introduced me to several of her friends, through informal hangouts, such as

studying at a small independent library, drinking tea at a café, and visiting an art gallery. After building rapport with this second group of university students, I was again able to conduct a few interviews. In Chicago, Azad introduced me to other members of the Kurdish community and invited me into the spaces that seemed to be the main spaces for social activity within the community: the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago and the apartment Azad shared with an ever-changing group of several other members of the community from the first dinner I attended there in December of 2013 until Azad moved out in August of 2016. It was in these spaces that I was able to build rapport with the members of the Kurdish community in Chicago with whom I conducted interviews during my fieldwork in 2016.

Semi-structured ethnographic interviews, which rely on open-ended questions and allow for follow-up questions (Bernard 2005), provided both the structure needed to gather data and the freedom for my interlocutors to direct the conversation and talk about what they considered to be most meaningful. My “interview guide” (Schensul et al. 1999) was designed to focus on the following topics: concepts of Kurdishness; what it “means to be Kurdish”; experiences of moving to Istanbul and/or migrating to Chicago; experiences of being Kurdish in Istanbul and/or in the United States; education; and political engagement. Beyond these topics, the open-ended format of semi-structured interviews allowed for follow-up questions on particular subjects, as and when deemed necessary.

*"I Am Different"*

In Turkey, to state that one is Kurdish, out loud, is an always already political act. In the Turkish state, the largest ethno-linguistic group is Turkish. For the last century, the second largest ethno-linguistic group is Kurdish. The Turkish state, since its founding in 1923 has been engaged in various tactics to "Turkify" its citizenry, by which I mean the promotion of the Turkish language and national symbols and the erasure of competing languages and national symbols. These efforts included outlawing the use of the Kurdish language, denying the existence of Kurds as a distinct ethno-linguistic group, impelled migration, and state violence against those who were deemed to be acting in opposition to the Turkish state. Indeed, since 1926, some form of a law outlawing "denigrating Turkishness" has been on the books. The most recent version of this is Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, which went into effect in 2005 (Algan 2008). High profile cases, such as that of author Orhan Pamuk, who was arrested under an earlier version of Article 301 for making a statement about the numbers of Kurds and Armenians who had been killed in Turkey, point to the liberalness with which the article has seemingly been interpreted (Freely 2005). As we will see in the next chapter, too, Turkishness is an integral part of the nation-building and nation-sustaining efforts of the Turkish state. Thus, it would not be a stretch to be concerned that anything that could be seen as in opposition to the homogenous narrative of the state could also be seen as a violation of Article 301. The Turkish state uses the penal system... And it has become clear to me, through my research, my conversations with interlocutors, and my own experiences living in Turkey, that Kurdishness is seen as threatening by the

Turkish state. It is this environment in which my interlocutors grew up, and in which they first learned they did not quite fit the state narrative of an “ideal” Turkish citizen, that they were somehow “other.” It is in the shadow of Article 301, and the Turkish ethno-nationalism that produced it, that my interlocutors are making their emphatic assertions to Kurdishness.

Many of my interlocutors recounted first realizing they were Kurdish in a way that referenced, or was entirely in, a school setting, which is part of the underlying ties to education that run throughout this dissertation. Much work in anthropology has shown how educational institutions can be key drivers in the shaping of national identity and the quashing of minority identities (e.g., Adely 2012; Kaplan 2006; Coe 2005; Luykx 1999). The following account, relayed to me by Heval, encapsulates the themes in this dissertation. I first met Heval in 2013, shortly after he arrived in Chicago, from Atlanta, where he had been living for several months. He moved in with Azad and was in the process of getting his paperwork together to apply for political asylum. Heval grew up in Suruç, a town in Şanlıurfa Province. He went to Balıkesir, a small city in western Turkey, for high school and then began his undergraduate studies at Dicle University in the city of Diyarbakır, often referred to as the “unofficial capital of Kurdistan,” where he studied archaeology for two years before transferring to Ankara University, where he graduated with a degree in journalism. When asked about why he transferred from one university to the other, he said, “I had a problem with the Turkish police and other officials. They threatened me, and I had to leave... I was working for, I mean, voluntarily of course, we were protesting the Turkish government because of their

Kurdish policies. We were protesting and sometimes we were gathering, and we were discussing Kurdish issues, you know, and that's why I had a problem with them." Before leaving Turkey, Heval had been studying for a master's degree in political science at Ankara University and working as a journalist. He was also very politically active, regularly participating in protests related to Kurdish issues in Turkey. His political activities led to his being arrested while he was a master's student, which ultimately led to his decision to migrate to the United States, as we will see in Chapter 5.

I asked Heval about the first time he realized he was Kurdish:

Lydia: Do you remember the first time you thought to yourself, "I am Kurdish"? Or the first time you realized you were Kurdish, do you remember?

Heval: Yeah, I remember.

Lydia: What happened?

Heval: I was a student in high school, and, you know, there was a program on TRT [*Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu*, or Turkish Radio and Television Corporation], which belongs to the Turkish state, and I was watching that program and the Turkish army killed many Kurdish villagers. [Members of the military] were talking and they were claiming that [the villagers] were members of the PKK and that's why they deserved to die, you know, and it influenced me a lot. I believed that they weren't terrorists, and they were just villagers, you know. But, [the Turks] were showing that they were terrorists. They were claiming that they were terrorists. It influenced me a lot, and, I mean, there were kids and women. At that moment, I said, "Hey, okay you are a student in a Turkish city, but as you see, they are killing your people. I am different." And then, my life changed, you know. I decided to struggle for my society, for Kurds, you know, and at that moment I realized I am different and that's why they are targeting us.

Heval's account of the narrative being shared by members of the Turkish military, as agents of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state, on a state-owned television channel highlights the types of narratives my interlocutors were challenging. Heval

is also one of my interlocutors who migrated to the United States and applied for political asylum, on the basis of the work he had done challenging the narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state as a university student, and later as a journalist. I find Heval's story particularly striking because his realization of his own Kurdishness was not simply about something that was said directly to him, but rather he came to the realization through seeing what was done to and said about others he recognized as being like him. His feelings of solidarity with the Kurdish villagers he saw on television and identity-based belonging are key to this realization of his own Kurdishness. Indeed, in this account, we can see the exact moment when Heval decided to challenge the narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state, and particularly the narrative that Kurdish villagers are "terrorists." It is clear that he could not tolerate this narrative of Kurds, of people like him, as terrorists that was being put forth by members of the Turkish military, as agents of the Turkish state. Therefore, he decided to fight back and challenge this narrative.

Heval's realization of his Kurdishness led him to the activism that would eventually lead to his arrest and, by extension, his decision to migrate to the United States. Shortly after arriving in Chicago, he initiated the political asylum application process. Throughout these experiences, Heval, as with my other interlocutors, challenged the narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state as well as narratives of what asylum seeking should "look like." Central to all of this were continuous assertions of Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity and attempts to render Kurds more visible. These are the themes that run throughout this dissertation.

### *Organization of the Dissertation*

The body of this dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter Two is focused on providing a brief overview of the historical and geopolitical context of the situation of the Kurdish population of the Republic of Turkey and the establishment of a Kurdish community in Chicago. In Chapter Three, I explore the concept of “the State” as well as the double displacement my interlocutors have experienced. I address both their migration from villages in southeastern Turkey to the city of Istanbul in northwestern Turkey and their migration from Istanbul to Chicago. In doing so, I explore how my interlocutors’ experiences interact with concepts of hospitality, citizenship, and diaspora. Chapter Four explores the experiences of Kurdish university students in Istanbul, Turkey. It relies on stories about university-level Kurdish language classes and a Kurdish language graffiti project to highlight the ways in which Kurdish university students are challenging the dominant narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state regarding who or what makes an “ideal” Turkish citizen. Chapter Five focuses on the asylum-seeking process in the United States and the ways in which my interlocutors’ experiences challenge the dominant narrative of this process found in the anthropological literature on migration.

This dissertation contributes to discussions about the assertion of ethno-linguistic identities by addressing how Kurdish university students in Istanbul, Turkey and recent university graduates who have migrated to Chicago, Illinois conceptualize their own ethnic identity, in this case Kurdishness. Through my



participant observation, I have seen a conceptualization of Kurdishness in Turkey that privileges linguistic and political elements of Kurdish identity. I see this as a departure from other narratives of Kurdish identity found in the literature, that place the emphasis on patrilineally conferred collective identity and shared histories of trauma.

I also see my work as unique within Kurdish studies, which encompasses a growing anthropology of Kurdishness. I focus on Kurdish young adults, and Kurdish university students and recent graduates in particular. Little sociocultural anthropological research focuses on Kurdish youth or young adults, and no ethnographies focus on university-educated Kurds, specifically. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002a) and Ayşe Gül Altınay (2004) touch briefly on the impact of Turkish state policies on the education system, generally, including the assimilationist aspects that disproportionately affect Kurds and other ethnic minorities. However, these accounts focus primarily on primary and secondary education, rather than universities. Kurdish youth are, of course, present in more comprehensive discussions of Kurdish life (e.g., Yalçın-Heckmann 1991; Grabolle-Çeliker 2013), especially in discussions of marriage and child-rearing, but there is no ethnography that focuses specifically on Kurdish young adults, university students, or recent university graduates. Therefore, I see my focus on this particular segment of the Kurdish population in Turkey and the United States as an expansion of the scope of anthropological literature on Kurds and Kurdishness. Further, as mentioned, I have found that my interlocutors are making specific choices about migrating to the United States, through initially securing student visas to study English, that result in

rather calm migration and asylum-seeking experiences. These experiences challenge tropes found in the anthropological literature of asylum seekers as tragic figures. Rather, my interlocutors are exercising agency in making decisions about how to migrate to the United States and working together to successfully navigate the asylum application process. As they do so, they continue to make emphatic assertions of their Kurdishness and strive for increased visibility in their interactions with both the Turkish state and the United States immigration bureaucracy.

## CHAPTER 2. SETTING THE SCENE: HISTORICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

So, the first day of class [at university], the professor, I don't know how he came to this, but he said, "Well, the Kurds, they don't have history." We were history students, you know. I said, "Well, we have some sources, you know? Kurdish and Persian sources." He said, "Oh, no, they are not, blah, blah." So, then, the Kurdish students wanted to respond, you know, or they wanted to prove that Kurds have history. ... It was kind of an honor, you know. Someone says you don't have history and then the Kurdish students say, "No. Here. We can show you some books, some sources."

This account was relayed to me by Azad in 2016. He had graduated from Istanbul University with a degree in history before migrating to Chicago in 2010. His account of his first day at university highlights the ways in which the Turkish state, and state actors, including professors at public universities, are involved in an ongoing project to silence (Trouillot 1995) the history of Kurds in Turkey. The Turkish state, since its founding in 1923, has been engaged in various tactics to Turkify its citizenry and promote the narrative that the Turkish state is a homeland for Turks, by which the state means ethnic Turks who speak the Turkish language. These efforts included outlawing the use of the Kurdish language, denying the existence of Kurds as a distinct ethno-linguistic group, impelled migration, and state violence against those who were deemed to be acting in opposition to the Turkish state. As I will discuss in the chapters that follow, this narrative of Turkey as a homeland *for Turks* remains, for my interlocutors, a visceral part of the state narrative in Turkey. Understanding the foundations of this narrative, and the history of Kurdish opposition to it, is important for understanding the experiences of Kurds in the present.

Those who get to create the historical narratives are the ones with the power over determining “that which is said to have happened” (Trouillot 1995). Thus, there is also the potential for power in challenging dominant narratives and creating alternative narratives; in bringing the silences out into the open and speaking them. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) asks us to consider history, in order to better understand power relations in the present. In doing so, he tells us we should look to narratives of history and pay particular attention to the silences in that history. Trouillot asserts that, “in vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both ‘what happened’ and ‘that which is said to have happened.’ The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process” (2). Thus, there can be a disconnect between historical facts and historical narrative. As Trouillot points out, “in history, power begins at the source” (29). In their challenges to the dominant narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state, I see my interlocutors challenging the state’s account of that which is said to have happened and creating space for alternative sources of historical accounts and narratives.

This project specifically focuses on the experiences of Kurdish university students in Istanbul, Turkey and recent university graduates who have migrated from Turkey to Chicago, Illinois. These young adults, as citizens of the Turkish state, find themselves in a situation in which a claim to be a Turkish citizen who is not ethnically Turkish is provocative and challenges historical and contemporary state narratives. This dissertation deals with a population that asserts a particular ethno-linguistic identity. This ethno-linguistic identity does not match the national

moniker of the state in which the population lives, or from which they hail. My interlocutors challenge the dominant narrative promoted by this ethno-nationally assertive state. In particular, the state in question here is Turkey. The anthropology of the state, nationalism, and ethnicity happens in particular contexts. In this chapter, I set the stage for the later arguments of this dissertation by summarizing some of the relevant history and geopolitical context in order to build an anthropology of youthful agency in the face of an ethno-nationally assertive state. This chapter addresses how a state has set up this situation to which my interlocutors are reacting. The imaginings of the state and the construction of state narratives are central to this understanding.

History, as marshalled by the state in order to make its arguments about what the state “should” be, looms large in Turkey. It is ever-present. I was made acutely aware of this fact while living and teaching in Turkey in 2011-2012. One of the first things I noticed on the bus ride from the airport to the university campus that would be my home for the forthcoming academic year was a massive statue of the first Turkish president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who served in this role from the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 until his death in 1938, in the middle of a major intersection, seemingly keeping an eye on the capital of the country he helped found. I found it to be an imposing statue, but, as I would soon learn, not an uncommon sight in Turkey. The cult of personality around the founding president of the Republic is palpable. This phenomenon has been explored by Esra Özyürek (2006), in her book, *Nostalgia for the Modern*, in which she describes the cult of personality around Atatürk as a particular longing for the hope of the early

republican era and its modernization projects. Similarly, Lisa Wedeen (2015) describes the cult of personality around Hafiz al-Asad as the “father” of Syria, in much the same way that Atatürk was, and continues to be seen, as the father of the Turkish nation-state. Atatürk’s image was seemingly everywhere I turned in Turkey. A photo of Atatürk hung in the security booth at the entrance to campus. I passed a bust of him twice a day as I walked from my apartment to the building in which I worked and back again. Photos of him hung in the communal office I shared with other teachers in my unit. Banners of his image were unfurled on the sides of buildings across the city for every national holiday, such as Republic Day, Youth and Sports Day, and Victory Day. I routinely spotted stickers bearing his signature on the rear windows of cars. Various images of him could be found on all manner of souvenirs, from coffee mugs to evil eye amulets. One of the most striking images I saw was on the back of a black t-shirt one of my coworkers purchased at a rest stop on a weekend trip organized by the university for foreign teachers not long after we had initially arrived in country. It is something I have since seen countless times throughout Turkey. It was a black and white image of Atatürk, in profile, with “1881-193∞” inscribed underneath. The infinity symbol clearly implied that, despite having died in 1938, Atatürk was actually immortal.

For those who displayed his image or signature, Atatürk seems to represent the ideals of the early republic, including modernization and secularism. However, these images are also incredibly political. For those, like my interlocutors, who are members of a minority ethno-linguistic group that has experienced a history of political violence, physical violence, erasure, and silencing at the hands of the

Turkish state and its agents, a history that is, indeed, very much tied up with the foundations of the Turkish Republic in 1923, these images are a constant reminder of their othering by the Turkish majority and the state. Atatürk's ever-present visage brings to mind his assertion on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic, "Ne mutlu Türküm diyene!" (How happy is one who says I am a Turk!). The implication being, of course, that those who cannot, or will not, call themselves Turkish cannot be happy, because Turkey is a place for Turks.

Kurds in Turkey have been fighting against this state narrative since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in 1923. My interlocutors are among the most recent generations to take up this fight, this challenging of the dominant state narrative. While the fight is not new, it appears that some of the tactics are. In particular, the mobilization of their language and their educations to create their own narratives of their shared history and assertions of their shared ethno-linguistic identity. The fact that my interlocutors are part of the most recent chapter in the *longue durée* of this struggle points to why it is so important to have a solid grounding of the history of the Turkish nation-state-building project and its impact on Kurdish citizens of Turkey, as well as some of the ways in which Kurds have challenged and fought back against this project over time.

The contemporary struggle in which my interlocutors are engaged emerged in localities in the Kurdish majority regions in southeastern Turkey, as a part of Kurdish interactions with and reactions against agents of a hostile ethno-nationally

assertive Turkish state. This struggle has since expanded beyond the villages of the southeast to the most populous city of Turkey, Istanbul, in the northwest. In this case, I would argue, it is impossible to understand how it is that my interlocutors have come to challenge Turkish state narratives without understanding the foundations of those narratives. Thus, in this chapter, I will provide an overview of the historical context that is necessary for understanding the circumstances of my interlocutors' lives.

*Kurds in Turkey: State Policy and Attempts at Assimilation*

States strive to define (and redefine) who legitimately belongs and who does not. The incompleteness of the state points to the need for state discourse, or narrative, to explain what and who, comprises the state. I argue that this need to constantly define the state leaves the space for challenges, and it is these spaces that my interlocutors target in challenging the narrative of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state. As Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) assert, “the state is imagined as an always incomplete project that must constantly be spoken of—and imagined—through an invocation of the wilderness, lawlessness, and savagery that not only lies outside its jurisdiction but also threatens it from within” (7). In defining the citizenry of the state, mechanisms (e.g., identification cards, the police; but also, state apparatuses such as the military and the education system) are employed in an “attempt to ‘manage’ or ‘pacify’ these populations through both force and a pedagogy or conversion intended to transform ‘unruly subjects’ into lawful subjects of the state” (Das and Poole 2004:9). In their challenges, my interlocutors are



speaking, and in some cases writing, Kurds and Kurdishness into public spaces in Istanbul. This carries over to the United States, for those who migrate, as my interlocutors in Chicago continue to challenge the Turkish state narrative through such actions as protesting in front of the Turkish Consulate.

Kurdish university students in Istanbul must contend with the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state's narratives on a daily basis as they pursue their educations and engage with the political process in Turkey. Young adult Kurds who currently reside in Chicago, Illinois, while no longer physically in the Republic of Turkey, are not entirely removed from the watchful eye of the Turkish state. The Turkish government has a consulate in Chicago, where Kurds living in the city, and elsewhere in the region, must go for the purposes of securing official state documents (e.g., renewing a passport) or to conduct other official business with the state (e.g., voting), and the state watches them in other ways as well. Thus, they continue to grapple with Turkish state control over aspects of their lives. Additionally, most of the Kurds with whom I conducted research in Chicago were engaged in, or preparing for, the asylum-seeking process in the United States. Thus, they were also interacting with the United States government on a regular basis. These two research populations, Kurdish university students in Istanbul and recent university graduates who have migrated to Chicago, share a common historical context that is tied to the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state's treatment of its Kurdish citizens. The following historical events and forces form the backdrop against which my interlocutors have lived their lives.

The environment in which my interlocutors were raised is intimately connected to the establishment of the Turkish state. These events happened nearly a century ago, yet traces of them turned up in conversations throughout my fieldwork. The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923, after the First World War, during a period when the idea of the hyphenated nation-state was promoted in colonial centers and by nationalist and indigenous movements alike (Hobsbawm 1992). Within this political environment, Turkish political leaders put forth an idea of “Turkey” as a state for “the Turks,” based on claims to history (Tambar 2014). In the early republican era, the state, under the leadership of its first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, instituted a series of nation-building reforms aimed at modernizing, westernizing, secularizing, and homogenizing the Turkish citizenry. At the core of the Kemalist reform project were a form of modernization that broke with the past in its quest to create a new kind of future for Turkey (Çınar 2005; Silverstein 2011) and promotion of the ideal of a “pure” Turkish nation, what has been called “Turkification” (Navaro-Yashin 2002a). This process led to the formation of an ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state.

Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the Turkish state has presented itself as a monolithic state that exists for Turks, rather than for people of other ethno-linguistic categories. In doing so, the Turkish state othered its non-Turkish citizens, considering them to be “foreigners,” whose status as citizens is always experienced as “being-in-question” (Derrida 2000:3). As such, they have been subject to various attempts at Turkification. One of the main ways in which the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state continually imposed Turkification on the

populace was through educational institutions (Navaro-Yashin 2002a; Zürcher 1998), beginning with Atatürk famously touring the country promoting education and stressing the importance of youth and university students to the future of the republic (Saktanber 2001). Atatürk also oversaw the adoption of a new alphabet, replacing the Perso-Arabic script of Ottoman Turkish with the Latin alphabet of modern Turkish (Lewis 1999). This alphabet reform was done in the name of increasing literacy and increasing access to education, but it has been widely interpreted by scholars (Yılmaz 2013, 2011; Gürçağlar 2008) to have been integral to Atatürk's vision of creating new modern senses of the self in twentieth-century Turkey. A system of education that requires a high school course on the Turkish military called "National Security Knowledge" (Altınay 2004:119) is one example of the ways in which education continues to be used to promote Turkish nationalism. Turkification further included efforts such as banning the Kurdish language and denying the existence of a separate Kurdish ethno-linguistic group (van Bruinessen 1992). Instead, Kurds were, for many years, beginning in 1938, referred to in official discourse as "mountain Turks" (McDowall 2007:210), an attempt to symbolically "erase" (Abu El-Haj 2001) Kurds from Turkish state history. Through the process of Turkification, entire groups of the ethnically diverse citizenry of the Turkish state, including the Kurdish population on which this project is focused, either chose or were forced to identify as "Turkish." Those who refused found themselves subject to the razing of villages, forced migration and resettlement, and disappearances (McDowall 2007). These Turkification efforts were aimed at all ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities in Turkey, including Armenians (Biner 2007, 2010), Syrians

(Biner 2007), Sabbatean Jews (Neyzi 2002), and Alevis (Tambar 2014), in addition to Kurds. They were by no means passive, but at certain times in some locations, involved a great deal of violence, including during significant population transfers, such as the forced population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923 (Cowan 2008; Hirschon 2003).

Turkishness comprises historical, territorial, and ethno-linguistic components that privileges Turkish historical, linguistic, and cultural elements at the expense of any alternatives that might be put forward. As Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002a) describes, “the notions of Turkey, Turks, and Turkish culture are products of historical agency and contingency... Nationalisms, as they were formulated at the time [of the founding of the Turkish Republic], were based on primordialist claims to represent the unitary and original ‘culture of circumscribed pieces of territory’” (11). In addition to this historical component of the newly imagined Turkish nation, Anna Secor (2004) contends that “Turkishness, as constructed within the discourse of the new republic, referred variously to a civic, territorially defined identity (all those within the Turkish state) and to an exalted *ethnie*, the Turkic people of Anatolia whose language and culture the architects of the new regime historicized and valorized” (355).

Early in my time in Turkey, I learned that one way the nascent Turkish state sought to legitimize its existence as a territory of and for Turks was by making claims to ancient Anatolian history, particularly through making connections between the ancient Hittite civilization, an ancient civilization that encompassed most of Anatolia (i.e., the Republic of Turkey), and modern Turks (Erimtan 2008).

Signs of these claims are still prevalent in Turkey. A massive Hittite monument stands in central Ankara, the capital city of the Turkish state. Similarly, the symbol of Ankara University, a public university, is a Hittite symbol. The Ankara University-affiliated TÖMER language institutes, through which I took Turkish language courses, use a series of textbooks called *Yeni Hitit* (New Hittite). Even snacks make claims to history in Turkey. The name of a popular snack food company, *Eti*, is an alternative Turkish term for Hittites, and also utilizes a Hittite symbol for their logo. Indeed, claims to a long and glorious history in Anatolia are everywhere in Turkey. Connections between history and the state in Turkey are also considered by Michael Meeker (2002), in his discussion of the legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the modernizing project of the Turkish state. Modernity, as discussed by Alev Çınar (2005), is often about transformation, and “the transformative power of modernity comes from the idea of progress, which reorients the subject toward an ideal future, where movement itself becomes a virtue... Therefore, modernity is not only about the contemplation of an ideal future, but also about the construction of the present as deficient and flawed” (23). It was, of course, this very idea about modernity that drove the modernization project of the early Turkish state, which desired to make a clean break from the then still Ottoman present. Meeker (2002) looks at how this modernization project affected his research fieldsite in the Black Sea region and argues that the organizational practices of the new Turkish state continued state-like social organizational structures that began to emerge under the late Ottoman Empire, thus making the transition from Ottoman subjects to Turkish subjects easier. Thus, the modernization project of the nascent Turkish state may not have

been as radically different from its Ottoman precursor as intended (or, at least, as publicly advertised).

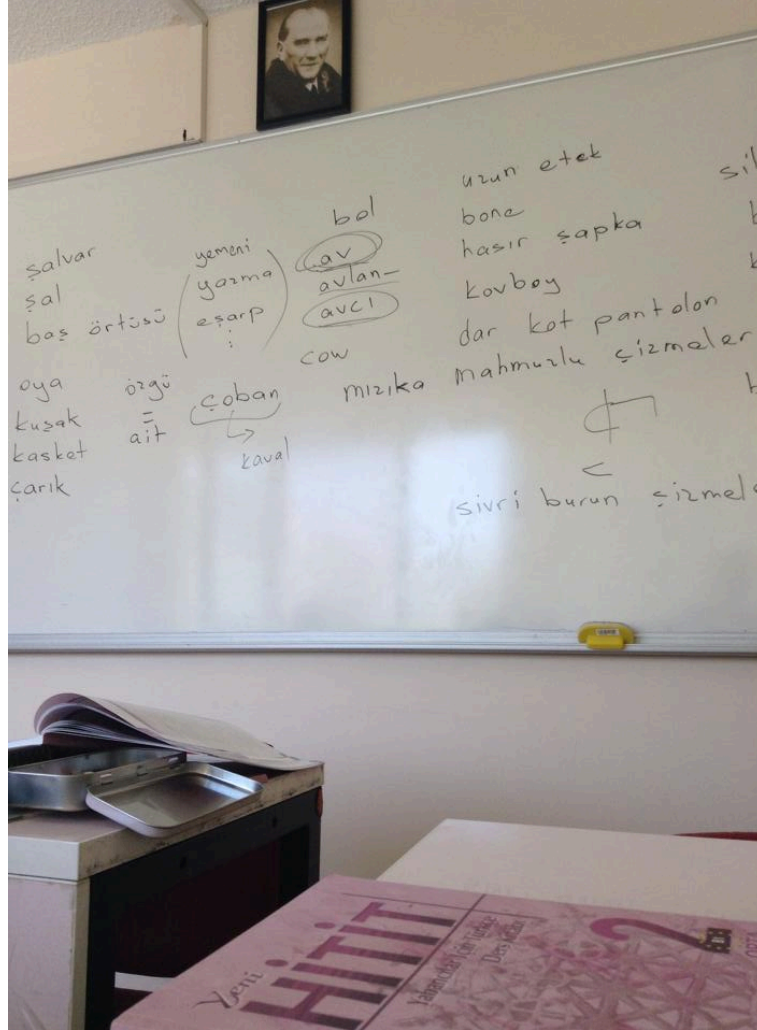


Figure 1 At the TÖMER language institute in central Ankara. A photo of Atatürk hangs over the whiteboard, on which vocabulary for a lesson on "traditional" Turkish clothing is written. In the foreground is a copy of a Yeni Hitit (New Hittite) textbook, with a Hittite symbol at the center. (Photo by the author.)

A disconnect between the promises of early republican modernity and the reality nearly 100 years later is a subject of Esra Özyürek's (2006, 2007a, 2007b) work. She argues that "in the late 1990s, the memory of a strong, independent, self-sufficient state and its secularist modernization project that dominated the public sphere through the past century was challenged by the rise of political Islam and

Kurdish separatism, on the one hand, and the increasing demands of the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, on the other” (2006:2). Thus, the unity and secularity of the Turkish state were both perceived as under attack. This led, Özyürek argues, to nostalgia, a kind of yearning, not for the past, but for the promise of a future that had yet to be fully realized in Turkey. This nostalgia has resulted in the creation of a cult of personality around the figure of Atatürk, who is seen as the symbol of this as yet unfulfilled promise of modernity. Özyürek further addresses history, and memory, in her edited volume (2007a, 2007b). In her introduction, she claims that the early republican reforms were, at least in part, designed to force people to forget their Ottoman past (2007a). And yet, she argues, memories of the Ottoman past are everywhere in Turkey, commodified for modern consumption (this is also seen in Potuoğlu-Cook’s [2006] discussion of the commodification of belly dance in Istanbul). Özyürek also argues that “memory is... productive of social relations by managing identities and helping individuals and groups come to terms with the suppressed or commemorated traumas of the past” (2007a:11). These themes of history, nostalgia, and collective memory are ever present in the background of my research. I have heard invocations of collective memory in conversations with my interlocutors, particularly in their accounts of their families being violently displaced from their villages.

History and the past are also implicated in early republican projects to rewrite history in such a way that supported the claims of the nascent Turkish state and promoted Turkish nationalism. Carol Delaney (1991) states that “Atatürk

himself was well aware that his vision of the future of Turkey rested on his revision of the past; this was the motivation behind his energetic investigations into linguistics and history. If people were to be reoriented, they needed to be given a new sense of where they came from, a new sense of history and identity” (224). This rewriting of history was based on a pre-Ottoman, pre-Islamic past that traced the legitimacy of the Turkish nation in Anatolia from the “glorious” ancient history of the Hittites to the founding of the modern Turkish Republic (Houston 2008). The result was to create a new narrative account of “that which is said to have happened” (Trouillot 1995:2), an indication of the power relations between the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state leadership and the Turkish ethnic majority on the one hand, and various ethno-linguistic and ethno-religious minority populations of the Turkish state on the other, as well as an important part of the creation of the imagined Turkish state community.

The creation of the Turkish state has also been equated with the creation of a national family (Delaney 1991), based on the dominant patrilineal kinship system of Anatolia. Delaney (1991) contends that the Turkish state was not imagined (Anderson 1991), but born:

The *birth* of a nation is not merely a colorful way of describing the creation of a new state, for the symbols and meanings of procreation form an integral part of its conceptualization. Mustafa Kemal capitalized on peasants’ deep relation to the soil—their own *memleket* [roughly, “hometown”]... All those born upon and nurtured by her soil were henceforth to be related as one people. By decree of the Grand National Assembly, the founder of the Republic was to be called Atatürk,



“father of the Turks.” The people could trace their descent to the *ata* (ancestor-father) and recognize their consubstantiality by being born on and nurtured by the same soil. (272-273)

Thus, Atatürk was literally named “father Turk,” symbolically becoming the lineage founder of the new Turkish national patriline and father of the citizens of the Republic, and the Turkish citizens were imagined as children of the same mother-soil and father-state (Özyürek 2006; Najmabadi 2005). This idea of citizens of the Turkish Republic being seen as children is further addressed by Esra Özyürek (2006), when she describes those who were children and adolescents during the early years of the Republic being considered “children of the republic” (31) for their entire lives, even into old age.

#### *Kurdish Internal Displacement/Migration*

More recently, Turkification policies have carried over into interactions between the Turkish state and its Kurdish citizens. Beginning in the late 1970s, the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or Kurdistan Workers’ Party) emerged as a militant Marxist-Leninist separatist group in southeastern Turkey. Starting in 1984, the PKK engaged in violent struggle with the Turkish military (Houston 2001). This struggle has been called a “low-intensity war” (Ahmetbeyzade 2007), though at its height in the 1990s, it was referred to by the PKK as *Şerê Qirêj* (“The Dirty War”). Resistance to the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state and military has been ongoing, taking the form of occasional attacks, called *Serhildan* (“Rebellion”) by Kurdish participants. Due to violence in the Kurdish-majority region, many Kurds

left their villages for cities in the region and further afield, particularly in the early 1990s (Secor 2004; Ahmetbeyzade 2007). Indeed, many were forced to do so as entire villages were evacuated and razed (Secor 2004; Houston 2005).

Members of my research populations in both Istanbul and Chicago have recounted stories of being evacuated from their villages as small children, and the lingering effects of these evacuations on their lives and those of their families. It has been estimated that since 1993 the residents of as many as 3,500 Kurdish villages were forced to flee their homes (Houston 2005). Beginning in 2015, and lasting throughout my dissertation research in 2016 and beyond, this tension between the Turkish state and the PKK, along with tensions between the Turkish state and its Kurdish citizens, intensified. During this time, the Turkish military bombed PKK camps in the mountains along the border region between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, often while claiming to be fighting ISIL. The state also imposed curfews in Kurdish-majority cities, such as Nusaybin and Cizre, in southeastern Turkey, and there were violent clashes between Turkish police and Kurdish civilians (Human Rights Watch 2015; Allen 2016; Zalewski 2016). During the latter part of my fieldwork in Chicago, in November 2016, the co-leaders of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, or HDP) were arrested along with 10 other HDP Parliamentarians (Shaheen 2016).

For the generation of Kurds to which my interlocutors belong, a critical mass now lives at a distance from the main conflict zones, where asserting their Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity is now both facilitated and made possible. The university student population among whom I conducted the phase of my dissertation research

based in Turkey has been living a relatively stable life in urban Istanbul. Estimates for the Kurdish population of Istanbul range from 2 to 3 million (Bird 2007; Nachmani 2003). Istanbul is now recognized as “the world’s largest Kurdish city” (Nachmani 2003:90), a title it has held for less than a generation (Wedel 2001), with many Kurds living in well-established, predominantly Kurdish communities in several areas of the city (Grabolle-Çeliker 2013).

Rural to urban migration of Kurdish citizens of Turkey is tied to the history of the relationship between the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state and its Kurdish citizens, as well as the nation-building project of the early Turkish Republic. Villages, and the systems of governance found in them, have been a key component of state relations with rural citizenry since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. Paul Stirling (1953, 1960, 1965) examined the Kemalist reforms of the early Turkish state and their impact on both village life and relations between the central government and rural villages. He focused on the importance of lineages, and patrilineal kinship reckoning systems in particular, as the foundation of social relations in the villages in which he worked. He argues that these lineages were the foundation for the hierarchical systems found in the villages in which he worked, and that those hierarchical systems are the basis for keeping order and settling disputes.

The relationships between the nascent Turkish state and rural villages were, in the first couple of years of the new Republic of Turkey, essentially a continuation of the decentralized governance system that had been in place under the Ottoman Empire. In this system, local leaders were often allowed to continue governing over

local populations. There were various levels of allegiance to and oversight by the central Ottoman government, based in Istanbul, but these local leaders generally enjoyed a good deal of autonomy. Atatürk initially allowed this system to continue as the system of governance for the Republic of Turkey was being established. For a whole host of reasons that are beyond the scope of this dissertation, it quickly became apparent that this was not a viable system, and a major Kurdish nationalist rebellion was organized in early 1925 and led by Sheikh Said, a powerful local leader. Ultimately unsuccessful, the Sheikh Said Rebellion, as it is called, marked a turning point in the relationship between the Turkish state and its Kurdish citizenry (van Bruinessen 1992; Olson 1989).

Active relocation projects, aimed in particular at Kurdish villages, began in 1934, with the passage of Law No. 2510, which divided the country into three regions, classified by varying degrees of perceived Turkishness: a region for those of “Turkish culture,” a region to be devoted to assimilation of non-Turks, and a region to be evacuated (İskân Kanunu 1934). Dersim (Tunceli, in Turkish), an area perceived by the Turkish state to have a history of being particularly defiant, was the first to be targeted for evacuation, and “at least 1,500 Dersim Kurds were determined to resist” (McDowall 2004:208). Resistance was met with bombing and gas attacks, and as many as 40,000 (though David McDowell admits this is likely an exaggerated number) were killed. According to McDowell, “Dersim marked the end of the ‘tribal’ revolts against the Kemalist state” (209). Deportation of Kurds from the southeastern area of the new Turkish state, and resettlement of Turks in the southeast, continued through the 1930s. The next major wave of migration from the

rural southeast to urban areas in the northern and western parts of Turkey resulted from the escalation in violent clashes between the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or the Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Turkish military during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1984, the PKK started attacking Turkish military stationed in the Kurdish-majority area. The government countered by arming citizens and forming "temporary village guards" (McDowall 2004: 424), which the government saw as particularly crucial along the mountainous border region. In 1987 the PKK initiated a series of attacks on this village guard system, focusing their attention on agha (tribal chieftain) and village guard families. The Turkish military then began conducting arbitrary security sweeps in villages, ostensibly to look for PKK supporters. The escalating conflict between the PKK and the Turkish military resulted in government evacuation of Kurdish villages. It is estimated that at least 3,500 villages were evacuated, many of which were razed, during this period of conflict, throughout the 1990s (Houston 2005; McDowall 2004).

One of my informants, Welat, a 25-year-old recent university graduate who moved from a village in the province of Mardin to Istanbul when he was five years old, described one of these evacuations during research in the summer of 2013: "In 1992, the soldiers burned the village. They just came and burned the village. There was no information. No warning. In that time the Kurdish movement [the PKK] was very strong. The village wanted to help the Kurdish movement." In this statement, Welat is making the implication that because his village was sympathetic to the Kurdish movement, by which he meant the PKK, it was targeted for "evacuation" by the Turkish military, acting as agents of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state.

I see these evacuations of the early 1990s as directly connected to Law No. 2510 of 1934. The Kurdish-majority region in southeastern Turkey having been designated as “a region to be evacuated” (İskân Kanunu 1934), appears to have allowed the Turkish state to continuously view the area in this way. Thus, a claim of sympathy for the PKK became easy justification for evacuating villagers and razing villages.

In addition to forced evacuation, many other Kurds decided to leave their villages in Turkey’s southeast for the relative security of cities (McDowall 2004). As Şervan, who was, in 2013 when we talked, a 21-year-old law student who moved from a village in Diyarbakır Province to Istanbul in 1994, explained: “In the eastern part of Turkey, there was a war. There still is. But, in the past, it was different... We came because of the political problems, because of the economic problems. We couldn’t live in Diyarbakır.” Rural to urban migration of Kurds continues in Turkey, both for the pursuit of economic opportunity and to escape harassment from members of the Turkish military.

In her account of rural to urban migration of Kurds within Turkey, Anna Grabolle-Çeliker (2013) discusses the importance of the village in the imaginations of Kurds. She argues that “rural-urban migrants use memories of rural life in their narratives in order to locate themselves spatially, temporally, and culturally in their migratory social field” (27). Thus, memories and stories of the village, and the past more generally, play a role in the way Kurds situate themselves, understand their position in Turkish society, and make meaning of their lives as Kurdish migrants in the Turkish city. Drawing on Sherry Ortner’s (1973) concept of key symbols, Grabolle-Çeliker asserts that the village is a key symbol for Kurdish migrants who

“use narratives about village life to make sense of their current lives” (2013:45). This importance of the village, and a specific piece of land in particular, is echoed by King (2014), in her discussion of patrilineal, and thus identities, being linked to particular pieces of land “in the heart of the Kurdish homeland” (81). While my interlocutors generally spoke favorably about the villages from which their families migrated, they also expressed feeling disconnected from those villages, as I will discuss in subsequent chapters.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have provided a brief overview of the historical context that is necessary for better understanding the lives of my interlocutors in the present. In both of my fieldsite locations, Kurdish university students in Istanbul and recent university graduates in Chicago share a common history of Turkish state oppression, erasure, silencing, and violence. This history is at the root of why those of my interlocutors who have migrated to Chicago chose to leave their lives and families in Turkey to come to the United States. Additionally, as I will describe in the following chapters, this shared history is also at the heart of the ways in which my interlocutors are constantly challenging narratives, in both Istanbul and Chicago.

### CHAPTER 3. CONTENDING WITH THE STATE

After arriving in Istanbul for dissertation fieldwork at the beginning of February 2016, one of the first people I talked with was Zana. We met in front of the ornate gate of Galatasaray High School on İstiklal Caddesi and walked together to a café just off İstiklal for tea. As we were nearing the end of our first glass of tea, Diyar, one of Zana's friends, came to join us and we ordered another glass of tea. We finished our tea, and then all walked together to a bookstore that had books by Kurdish authors and books translated into Kurdish for sale. At one point, Zana pulled a book from the bookshelf, turned to the bookstore owner, and said, "Don Quixote? It's translated from Spanish?" "Yes," the book seller replied, "from Spanish." She turned to me and said, "It is from Spanish. Wow. Cool," seemingly pleasantly surprised that a Spanish novel had been translated into Kurdish.

As we left the bookstore, Diyar said he needed to go, so we said our goodbyes. Zana announced that she was hungry, and I admitted that I was, too. "We can have lahmacun," she announced. "Good idea," I said, "I love lahmacun." Zana led the way to a small lahmacun restaurant nearby, located just below street level with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. There were only a handful of small, low tables with small square stools. A counter stood at the back of the narrow space. At the table nearest the counter, a young man sat alone, eating lahmacun and chatting with the young man behind the counter. We sat down at one of the empty tables and ordered two lahmacun each. At this point I noticed a young man was sitting at a table in the corner, right next to the door, eating a bowl of lentil soup with a large chunk of bread. He was completely engrossed by a soccer game that was playing on the small



television set mounted on the wall, next to the door. Zana asked, "Do you know Amedspor?" I nodded, knowing it was one of two professional soccer teams based in Diyarbakır. "It is Amedspor and Fenerbahçe," she continued. Fenerbahçe is one of several Istanbul-based teams, and one of the most popular soccer teams in Turkey. One thing I learned quickly from my students after I arrived in Ankara is that having a favorite soccer team is a necessity in Turkey. Pressured by my students to take sides, I had chosen Beşiktaş, another of the most popular Istanbul teams, simply because it was the oldest, having been founded in 1903, during the latter years of the Ottoman Empire.

"It is a big deal," Zana said. "Why is it a big deal?" I asked. "Fenerbahçe is the best team in Turkey. Well, one of the best teams in Turkey, and Amedspor is from Diyarbakır." I asked her what the score was, as my back was to the television. "Amedspor has 3 and Fenerbahçe has 2," she replied with a smile that I read as a look of satisfaction. Soon, Fenerbahçe scored a goal, tying the game, which ended in a 3-3 tie. Zana told me that despite having not managed to beat Fenerbahçe, it was still a big deal, because Amedspor had not lost the game. The implication being that a team from the unofficial capital of Kurdistan coming close to beating one of the best teams from the cultural capital of Turkey served as some sort of proof that, in direct contradiction to Turkish state narratives, Kurds are, and should be acknowledged as, equal to Turks. Yes, in Turkey, even soccer can be political. Our brief soccer interlude over, we turned back to our lahmacun.



Figure 2 One of many lahmacun enjoyed while talking with Zana. (Photo by the author.)

This became our routine, meeting for lahmacun periodically over the course of my three months in Istanbul. We would often follow our meal with a stroll to a café for tea. During these meetings, we would talk about our lives. I asked about how her family came to Istanbul. Zana told me that the family had first moved from their village to the town of Dargeçit in 1995, and from there to Istanbul in 2000:

Lydia: So, why did your family leave the village to go to Dargeçit in 1995?

Zana: Because, you know, in 1980, the PKK started to fight against the government, and then the government started to... And the government insisted that you have to be a *korucu* [village guard]. If you don't work for us, you have to go from here. And my mother didn't accept it.

Lydia: Your mother or your father?

Zana: My father, because you know, my father is dominant in the family to say something [on behalf of the family]. He didn't accept it, and we had to come to Dargeçit.

So, the family's initial migration experience, from their village to a nearby city, was prompted by Zana's father refusing to become a village guard. The village guard system in the early 1990s, as my interlocutors explained it to me, was essentially a militia system in which the military, acting as agents of the Turkish state, would present a so-called "option" to adult males living in Kurdish villages thought to be sympathetic to the PKK. The villagers could agree to serve as village guards, in which case they would be given a gun and a salary, in exchange for agreeing to fight against the PKK if necessary, and would be allowed to stay in the village with their families. Those who refused to serve as village guards would be evacuated from the village along with their families. In cases where no one in the village agreed to be a village guard, villages were completely evacuated and razed.

As our conversation continued, I asked Zana about the family's second migration experience:

Lydia: And, why did you leave Dargeçit to come to Istanbul?

Zana: Because village people can earn money with their land in the village, but in Dargeçit we had no land. Our land was in the village. Like, we couldn't find money to buy something or eat something. We had to come to Istanbul because you have to earn some money to live.

Lydia: Right.

Zana: And, we are nine siblings, and my father had to earn a lot of money because nine children is such a large family in a city or in a town. In the village it is okay, because there is a lot of work to do, and you don't need to spend a lot of money in the village because everything is ready to eat and to live. But, in a big town or in a city, no.

So, the decision to migrate from the Kurdish-majority southeast to the city of Istanbul in northwestern Turkey was largely an economically motivated move.

Zana's family consisted of 11 family members, and there were not enough opportunities in the small city of Dargeçit for them to earn an adequate living to support themselves. Zana's narrative about her family moving from the village to Istanbul echoed stories I had heard during preliminary fieldwork. The story of clashes between the PKK and the Turkish government leading to a dangerous situation that families felt compelled to flee, is a common one for Kurds in Turkey, and especially for Kurds in Istanbul. As is the decision to migrate in pursuit of economic opportunities. And yet, the conditions that led to Zana's father and so many others making the decision to migrate with their families to Istanbul in pursuit of economic opportunities were the direct result of state action in the villages. If they had not been forced to leave their villages, or if their villages had not been razed, these families might not have made the same decisions to migrate. Thus, a direct line can be drawn from internal rural to urban migration in Turkey and the actions of the Turkish military in Kurdish villages.

In this chapter, I address the role of "the state" in the experiences of my interlocutors and argue that the very nature of the state provides space for challenging state narratives. To do this, I delve more deeply into the anthropology of "the state," and the difficulty of defining the term. I am particularly interested in the notorious difficulty in pinning down exactly who and what constitutes the state. The fact that the state is perpetually in the process of being defined, or, more precisely, defining itself, leads to a certain flexibility and room for challenges to dominant state narratives. I see my interlocutors taking advantage of this in making emphatic assertions of their particular ethno-linguistic identity that is at odds with the

narrative of the ethno-nationally assertive state in which they live or from which they hail. In doing so, they are exercising agency.

I also argue that my interlocutors have been “doubly displaced,” once from their villages, and again from Turkey. I look at the violent displacement experiences most of my interlocutors endured with their families as young children. This displacement was perpetrated by the military, as agents of the state. These military actions, and armed resistance to them, have contributed to state narratives in which an entire ethno-linguistic minority group is classified as “terrorists.” My examination of this narrative leads to critical reanalysis of the concepts of hospitality and citizenship in the context of “the state.” In doing so, I assert that the ethno-nationally assertive state is, in fact, inhospitable to Kurds. This inhospitality has contributed to my interlocutors being what I call “doubly displaced.” By this I mean that my interlocutors, as members of an ethno-linguistic minority group that has been the target of state violence and narratives that vilify them, have felt compelled to engage in “onward migration” (Jeffrey 2010, 2017). In onward migrating, they move beyond the borders of the ethno-nationally assertive state of which they are citizens, in pursuit of educational and economic opportunities beyond the borders of that state and in pursuit of the freedom to express their identities without persecution.

### *“The State”*

The amorphous interlocutor at the heart of this dissertation is “the state,” and by extension the “nation-state,” concepts that many scholars have noted are

particularly difficult to define, and thereby to study (Aretxaga 2003; Das and Poole 2004; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Gupta 1995; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Abrams 2006). In part, this is because the state is always in the process of redefining and reforming itself (Brooke and Strauss 2018). I argue that the difficulties in pinning down what the state is actually provides the flexibility and space for challenges to the concept and dominant state narratives in specific contexts, including alternative narratives about the citizenry. This section is a response to Begoña Aretxaga's (2003) model of the state as "maddening" (393) entity to study, or even define. Aretxaga claims that "the difficulty in studying the state resides in the fact that the state—as unified political subject or structure—does not exist; it is a collective illusion, the reification of an idea that masks real power relations under the guise of public interest" (400). By claiming that the state is an illusion, Aretxaga is saying that states are fictions, that they are ideas created in the minds of those who have power, and in contexts in which there is the illusion of consent on the part of citizens. This can be seen clearly in the context of Turkey, as the evidence of the creation of the illusion of the Turkish state less than 100 years ago is ever present in Turkey. Indeed, the Turkish state is clearly proud of the Kemalist state-building projects of the early Republic of Turkey. One place in which this pride is on full display is Anıtkabir, the massive mausoleum complex of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, located in central Ankara. When I first visited Anıtkabir in the fall of 2011, shortly after I arrived in Ankara to teach English at Bilkent University, I was struck by just how palpable the Turkish patriotism was in this place that was, ostensibly, a memorial to one man. Yet, as I would soon learn, the identity of the Turkish state

and the mythos of the founding president of the Turkish Republic are inextricably intertwined. A key component of the celebration of the Kemalist reforms of the early republic is the Vault Galleries that are part of the museum on the grounds. These galleries depict the story of the early years of the newly established Republic of Turkey. There is patriotic music playing throughout, seemingly to help maintain a feeling of nationalistic awe. In the niche labeled “Reforms in Education, Language, and History” is the following note on history reform: “History is one of the fundamental ties that creates a nation. Common history consolidates national unity and cooperation.” This, perhaps perfectly, sums up the nation-building project. The imagining and creation of a homogeneous shared history is central to the promotion of a nationalistic ideal. One also learns in this niche that the Turkish History Research Society was established on 12 April 1931 (renamed the Turkish History Society in 1935), and that Atatürk claimed on 23 August 1931 that, “Writing history is as important as making history. If the writer is not faithful to the maker, the unchangeable truth would have a misleading nature for the mankind.”

In the same niche, regarding language reform, we learn that “Language is one of the fundamental ties that constitutes a nation. In a country lacking language unity, the national unity is in jeopardy.” And so, we learn that language reform and making Turkish the sole national language of Turkey were steps to ensuring national unity and strength. However, the Ottoman Empire, the remnants of which were re-imagined into the Turkish Republic, was far from homogeneous, serving as home to a diverse group of ethnicities, religions, and languages. What of this diversity? It was

subordinated in the name of establishing a new Turkish nationalism in the early Republic.

What is conspicuously missing from the narrative presented at Anıtkabir is, of course, the presence of alternative voices or perspectives on Turkish history and the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. This is not surprising, given the nature of the nation-building project undertaken in the early years of the Turkish Republic, a project that is continued for contemporary generations in the displays at Anıtkabir. Through a series of sweeping reforms in such areas as education, language, dress, and history, Atatürk strove to create a new Turkish national community and to unify, and in many ways homogenize, the Turkish nation. The idea of the state was, and continues to be, sold to the public in a way, as something that is in the public interest, though it really only serves to reinforce power relations. The dynamic between those who govern and those who are governed is an important element in the illusion of the state, as it is the complicity of the governed that grants legitimacy to the government and, by extension, to the illusion of the state.

In presenting the state as a set of power relations in which the governed are complicit in their own governing, Aretxaga (2003) is echoing Foucault's (1979) concept of a strong nexus of power supported by self-subjugation of the people. This idea also supports her claim that the illusion of the state can be seen as a hollow "state form" (395) that can be shaped in any number of ways by those in power to serve their own ends. She then goes on to claim that this creation of the illusion of the state is a form of violence in itself, as it is an imposition of the will of those in



power on those over whom they hold power, though the illusion of the state can also be maintained through the use of physical (i.e., not illusory) violence as well. The physical violence of the Turkish state was on stark display just before and during my fieldwork. I did preliminary fieldwork in Istanbul early in the summer of 2013. When I returned to the United States, I learned of the Gezi Park protests and the violent response of the Turkish military, which had started while I was on my flight back. These protests were initially a response to the government unveiling plans to renovate Gezi Park and the surrounding area, in central Istanbul, including reconstructing an Ottoman-era military barracks that had once stood on the site. However, due to the violent reaction of the government to initial protests, the movement rapidly grew into a much larger protest, airing various grievances against the government. More violent crackdowns ensued. Turkish state violence was on display for the whole world to see, and the world was watching. This was undoubtedly embarrassing for those in political power in Turkey. The tension between the government and citizens who dared to be even the least bit critical remained palpable while I was doing my fieldwork in early 2016. This tension came to a head about a month and a half after I returned fieldwork in Istanbul when, on 15 June 2016, an attempted coup was violently suppressed by the Turkish military, acting as agents of the state.

Perhaps the most well-known definitions of “the State” are predicated on the concept of the use of force. Max Weber (2010), building on Leon Trotsky’s assertion that “every state is founded on force” (O’Kane 1996:5), claimed that “a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of*

*physical force* within a given territory” (115). Thus, for Weber, states incorporate two things: force and territory. This is certainly true in the case of Turkey, in which we see uses of force such as: the forced population exchanges between Greece and Turkey in 1923 (Hirschon 2003); the passage of Law 2510 in 1934 (İskân Kanunu 1934), which designated certain areas for evacuation on the basis of, essentially, not being Turkish enough; and the evacuation and razing of villages in the early 1990s (McDowall 2007). Yet, I would argue, the force of the Turkish state also appears in less overtly violent ways, such as through the language reform policies and programs such as “*Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş!*” (“Citizen, Speak Turkish!”) that sought to linguistically homogenize the citizenry of the Turkish state. Education is also implicated in nation-state-building projects centered around language.

In educating its citizens to know the official state language and the official state version of “that which is said to have happened” (Trouillot 1995), the state is also educating its citizens to consent to regimes of domination, through which the state transforms individuals into citizens. Antonio Gramsci (2006) argues that beyond force, states require the consent of their citizens. Yet, rather than allowing citizens to freely consent to being governed, Gramsci argues that states are involved in various forms of hegemonic coercion to “create and maintain a certain type of civilization and of citizen” (77). This is done through the law, which Gramsci considers to be “the repressive and negative aspect” (77) of the state. Further, he argues that “the State does not have and request consent, but it also ‘educates’ this consent” (78). This concept of educating citizens to be “good,” consenting citizens in the eyes of the state is echoed in Navaro-Yashin’s (2002a) and Altnay’s (2004)

discussions of the links between education and ideas of “ideal” Turkish citizens in Turkey. And yet. As I experienced during preliminary fieldwork in May of 2013, a bureaucratic decision to allow Kurdish language classes at Turkish universities, provided enough flexibility in the education system to allow space for Kurdish students to explore their identities as Kurds in Turkey.

Governmentality, the system of processes and regulations designed to manage populations and make them more visible, is necessary because “the state can only be understood in its survival and its limits on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality” (Foucault 2006:143). Thus, these tactics of governmentality are the tactics of being a state. Tied to the concept of governmentality is the concept of discipline. For Foucault (2006), the means for managing the population is discipline. This, then, leads Foucault to describe “a triangle, sovereignty—discipline—government, which has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security” (142). Ultimately, then, there four elements, or “tactics” (143), of governmentality: sovereignty, discipline, government, and security. These seem to map onto Weber’s (2006, 2010) and Gramsci’s (2006) ideas of state management of populations. Sovereignty is, of course, concerned with territory. Security can be linked to the legitimate use of force. Government, and particularly the use of statistics, clearly connects to bureaucracy. Finally, discipline appears to link up nicely with Gramsci’s idea of consent, which implicates education and other forms of coercion. Foucault (2006) asserts that states are not simply concerned with sovereign control of their territories but are also concerned with the security of their populations. The way in

which states determine who is included in their populations and the specifics of their collective lives, what Foucault calls “regularities” (140), is through the use of statistics. Statistics can also then be used to justify governing and managing the population in the interest of the “welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc.” (141). Of course, the irony here is that there is no reliable demographic statistical data available for Turkey. The first Turkish census was conducted in 1927. Every census from 1927 to 1985 included a question about language, asked as some form of language spoken at home and/or in the family. However, the Turkish state has not disseminated ethno-linguistic demographic data beyond that collected for the 1965 census (Dundar 2014). The language question was the only question on the census that got at some form of ethnicity data. Thus, because there has been no question on the Turkish census that specifically asks about language or ethnic identity since 1965, there is no accurate up-to-date statistical data for the number of Kurds in Turkey.

Aside from statistics, populations can be made more legible in a variety of ways. James C. Scott (1998) apparently builds on Foucauldian concepts of state management of populations through his discussion of “seeing like a state.” According to Scott, for states to effectively govern their populations, and collect taxes, they must simplify and make their populations more “legible” (2). Standardization of measurements and the drawing of maps is one way states can make populations legible, as it allows for individuals to be mapped onto the territory of the state, and also allows for more clear and specific delineations of the borders of state territory. Similarly, the planning and building of “rectilinear streets”

(62) as part of the transformation of central Paris in the late 19th century allowed for more efficient management and administration of the urban population than had been possible when the city was still comprised of winding alleyways. Through urban planning, states are able to make both the cities themselves and the populations of those cities more legible. In Turkey, this is seen in the built environment of Ankara, the city to which Atatürk moved the capital at the time of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. While Ankara was an old city, the areas designed for government offices are, indeed, comprised of wide boulevards that make the city more legible.

Language is another means through which states attempt to make their populations more legible. One way that language is used to achieve legibility is through the creation and mandated use of surnames. Scott (1998) asserts that “tracing property ownership and inheritance, collecting taxes, maintaining court records, performing police work, conscripting soldiers, and controlling epidemics were all made immeasurably easier by the clarity of full names” (71). Thus, the mandated use of surnames led to easier practice of the bureaucratic elements of state governance. The case of the mandated adoption and use of Turkish citizens, as part of the new Turkish state’s Kemalist reforms aimed at modernization and westernization, is discussed by Meltem Türköz (2007). The surname was, according to Scott, “a first and crucial step toward making individual citizens officially legible, and along with the photograph, it is still the first fact on documents of identity” (71). Pradeep Jeganathan (2004) also discusses the use of identification cards as sites of legibility and control of populations, and indeed as sites of violence, in a discussion

of checkpoints. Jeganathan argues that the “marginal location of the checkpoint is mapped again through the identification card, which... is the illegible, illegal demand of the checkpoint” (75). In describing checkpoints and identity cards in this way, Jeganathan draws attention to the ways that seeking legibility at the borders (the margins) of state sovereignty violently highlights who does and does not “belong” in the eyes of the state. Thus, state legibility is implicated in concepts of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not belonging, legitimate and illegitimate residents, and by extension definitions of citizenry. Citizenship is really about being defined as a legitimate (legible) member of a state; one who belongs in a particular state. Thus, in the marginal border areas the definition of who belongs and who does not is thrown into sharp contrast, especially when a piece of paper with a name and a photograph may be the only thing standing between being defined by agents of the state (border guards, police at checkpoints, etc.) as belonging or not belonging, as being worthy of hospitality or not. Or, as in the case of one of my interlocutors, Welat, the presence of a birthplace on one’s identity card. As Welat described it, this birthplace information is used to discriminate against those from Kurdish majority regions in the hiring process.

In addition to surnames, the establishment of an official state language is linked to legibility, and particularly the simplification of state control. According to James C. Scott (1998), “of all state simplifications, then, the imposition of a single, official language may be the most powerful, and it is the precondition of many other simplifications” (72). Indeed, requiring all citizens to learn to speak, read, and write the same language makes bureaucratic things, such as forms of government

communication with citizens simpler, as forms and instructions can be issued in a single language. Adopting an official language further implicates educational institutions, as schools are the location in which the standardized form of the official language is taught to young citizens. Further, according to Scott, an official state language is also tied to national identity. Thus, Scott links language and nationalism to the idea of the state. This connection between language, nationalism, and the state was a key component of the Turkish nation-building project of the early republic. Language was one of Atatürk's first areas of reform (Lewis 2002). The ramifications of this are felt by my interlocutors, such as when Serhad expressed exasperation at falling into speaking Turkish because being formally educated in Turkish meant "we think in Turkish!"

As we see in the early work of Michael Meeker (1971), these issues of linguistic imposition by the state can affect regional populations that speak distinctive dialects of the national language as well. Meeker looked at regional and national identity reckoning in Turkey among the Black Sea Turks, also known as *Laz*. He was looking at village life in Turkey, but beyond just a classic ethnography of Black Sea Turks in contrast to dominant Turkish society, Meeker grapples with issues of identity and naming. One issue he points out is that the term "*Laz*," used by outsiders to name Black Sea Turks is problematic, as it is often "used by Anatolian Turks" to refer "to all Black Sea peoples of Turkey," while the *Lazi*, as they call themselves, are a distinct ethno-linguistic group. So, "*Laz*" is an essentializing term used by non-Black Sea Turks to describe anyone living within a particular geographic area. However, the *Lazi* speak a distinctive dialect of the Turkish

language and share certain cultural systems of meaning amongst themselves. The key here is that the *Lazi* are othered by members of the dominant Turkic group in Turkey. This distinction serves to further the dominant narrative of the Turkish state: that Turkey is a land for Turks who speak Turkish, and specifically the form of Turkish on which the national language is based, *Istanbulu* Turkish, the dialect predominantly spoken by those who lived in Istanbul (Lewis 1999). Thus, those who speak a different dialect, are marked as different, and by extension as inferior citizens.

As we shall see, this distinction between those who speak the standardized Turkish promoted by the Turkish Language Association and those who do not or are not ethnically Turkish is a key component in the othering my interlocutors have experienced as Kurdish citizens of the Republic of Turkey. Indeed, what is going on here, is that the Turkish state and the various ethno-linguistic groups living within the borders of the Turkish state are grappling with categorization, and specifically identity labels. Anthropology has acknowledged that all categories of classification are constructed, and yet humans seem to love categorizing things to make meaning. The state, and most certainly the Turkish state, relies on categorization as part of the ongoing project of defining who and what constitutes “the state.” If Turkey is a place for Turks who speak Turkish, then there must be a definition of who fits into that particular category. Those who do not fit into this category must then, by extension, be defined as something else, as something “other.” Those “other” categories are then, as we shall see in the case of Kurdish citizens of Turkey, potentially considered suspect, or dangerous to the ongoing nation-state-building



project. The ultimate manifestation of this for the Turkish state vis-à-vis its Kurdish citizenry is a narrative that categorizes Kurds as “terrorists.” It is this narrative that my interlocutors are fighting against.

Ultimately, “the State,” is an incredibly difficult thing to define and to study, in large part because it is predominantly a conceptual construct; an illusion. Maintenance of the illusion of the state is a continual process that requires establishing the state vis-à-vis what the state is not, or those who belong vis-à-vis those who do not. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) agree that the state is difficult to define and study. They critique anthropologists as embodying “forms of administrative rationality, political order, and authority” (5) in their work. In other words, they think that anthropologists have been overly concerned with finding neat, orderly state forms to study. They assert that the state is more difficult to pin down because “the state is imagined as an always incomplete project that must be constantly spoken of—and imagined—through an invocation of the wilderness, lawlessness, and savagery that not only lies outside its jurisdiction but also threatens it from within” (7).

This idea of who belongs and who does not, or who is a citizen and who is a foreigner, and how the categories are defined, is raised by Jacques Derrida (2000) in his discussion of hospitality. Derrida begins by addressing the concept of the foreigner. For Derrida, the status of foreigner is related to language. Thus, as with Scott’s (1998) discussion of citizens, language is a requirement of belonging. According to Derrida, foreigners do not speak the language of the society in which they find themselves. Derrida asserts:

Among the serious problems we are dealing with here is that of the foreigner who, inept at speaking the language, always risks being without defense before the law of the country that welcomes or expels him; the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc. This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence. [15]

Thus, language serves as a way to mark the foreigner as a foreigner, an "other," and it is a violent marking. Yet, for Derrida, there is also the idea that foreigners can be understood in some way; at the very least they are understood as being foreigners. Further, foreigners are in question (much as they are at the checkpoints described by Jeganathan [2004]); that is, they are in a liminal state of sorts, in which they are knowable and recognized but never fully incorporated into society. This "being-in-question" status of the foreigner can be destabilizing for society, as their liminal state can highlight and serve to call into question the existence and sovereignty of the state. The presence of foreigners, thus, challenges the very concepts of the structure and legitimacy of the state. However, hospitality, or the gesture of welcoming the foreigner, can also be seen as an expression of sovereignty. The gesture of welcoming, of offering hospitality, implies the state's claim to power or sovereignty over the space into which the foreigner is being welcomed. These connected concepts of foreigners, state sovereignty, and language, while implying that the foreigner comes from outside the state, could also be useful in addressing state interactions with ethno-linguistic minorities who reside within the borders of a particular state, as in the case of Kurds in Turkey.

In addressing the concept of the state, it is also useful to address the idea of the nation. In this, Aretxaga (2003) again proves useful, as she addresses what she calls the “untenable hyphen” (396) of the concept of the nation-state. She asserts that the ideas of nation and state are often conflated, though the two concepts actually describe two different entities, though she also claims that the two ideas are often intertwined, as states can engage in projects of nationalism and nationalist movements can demand states. For Aretxaga the ideas of nation and state are both illusions. The illusion of the nation lies in, drawing on Anderson (1991), an imaginary concept of unity and commonality of language, culture, history, and other shared aspects of the nation. The illusion of the state, on the other hand, is based on organizational structures and power relations that are experienced in different ways by different groups, based on “class, gender, ethnicity, and status” (396), thereby highlighting difference. This difference is experienced as differences in citizenship. Differences in citizenship require a “scapegoat,’ an outsider, or an outsider-insider, a ritual repository of the jarring violence inhabiting the national community” (397). These outsiders, who can come either from within or from without the borders of state territory, are often ethnic minorities or migrants who are seen as not full members of the illusory concept of the nation-state and are therefore susceptible to structural and physical violence. Violence against outsiders is seen as necessary for the maintenance of the illusions of nation and state. This outsider (or outsider-insider) sounds very much like the foreigner described by Derrida (2000). So, while the state can choose to offer hospitality to the foreigner, the state could just as easily enact violence against the foreigner.

These ideas of foreigners and outsiders highlight the importance of the concept of borders. Das and Poole (2004) describe these borders as margins. They argue that the concepts of nation and state are most evident in the margins, and the central question of the margins is “the relationship between violence and the ordering functions of the state” (6). Margins can be locations where violence is seen by the state as legitimate for the maintenance of order. For Das and Poole, margins can be seen in three ways: 1) as “containers” (9) for marginal groups, and locations where these groups can be managed in areas where they are simultaneously included and excluded from the state; 2) as sites where legibility or illegibility is determined, since margins and borders are the sites where official documents, such as identity cards or passports, must be produced for inspection by agents of the state; and 3) as sites where the law and discipline comes into contact with individual bodies. All three of these concepts of margins center on issues of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not belonging, which are, of course, concerns of the state. Yet, inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not belonging, are also concerns of nations. It is specifically to the concepts of nations and nationalism to which I now turn.

In looking at the concept of nation, I began with French historian Ernest Renan (1882), who defined a nation as “a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life” (1) From this definition, we can conclude that nationalism,

or sense of belonging to a nation, is a shared experience that involves a supposed shared history, as well as commitment and sacrifice on the part of the individual for the idea of the nation.

For a more contemporary definition of nationalism, I turn to Ernest Gellner (2006), who states that “nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (1). He continues by saying that “nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment. A nationalist *movement* is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind” (1). Here, then, we see the primacy of the political in formulating a concept of nationalism. For Gellner, as for Renan, nationalism is necessarily a shared phenomenon; it is a social experience. It is Gellner’s definition that Eric Hobsbawm (1992) draws on in setting up his discussion of nations and nationalism, before concluding that “nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so” (12), thus equating nationalism to something that is imaginary.

This connection between nation and imaginary points us to Benedict Anderson’s (1991) description of the nation as an imagined political community:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations... Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. [6-7]

Thus, nations are not an actual “thing” that can be pointed to, they have ideas membership that include some and exclude others, and they are predicated on the idea of equal membership for all members. So, while nations, as with states may be better conceived as an idea than a thing, and while both incorporate ideas of inclusion and exclusion, as well as ideas of belonging (citizenship for states, community for nations), nations do not seem to be concerned with sovereignty over territory in the same way states are. Though, to return briefly to Aretxaga (2003), nations may desire to establish sovereignty over territory in order to become nation-states.

I find these perplexing ideas of nation and state compelling as an anthropologist. While the concepts of nation and state may be difficult to define and understand, they certainly hold sway in the imaginations of groups of people around the world. I see these concepts as useful for describing what I see in my research context. Ideas about what and who the Turkish state is and who belongs or does not belong, including ideas about who a Turkish citizen is, including specifically what language he or she speaks, has very real ramifications for my interlocutors. Reactions against these ideas about the Turkish state have resulted in the fostering of Kurdish nationalism, which raises its own set of questions about who belongs or does not belong, including ideas about who Kurds are, including specifically which dialect he or she speaks, and whether or not the Kurdish nation should pursue a future Kurdish state. These problems and questions affect the lives of my interlocutors in Istanbul and in Chicago. While the concepts of state and nation may not be neat categories, perhaps it is in their “maddening” (Aretxaga 2003:393)

qualities, their flexibility in a way, that make them useful for understanding concepts that can be maddening not only for the researcher, but for the individuals who are living within the imagined borders of various states and nations.

### *Kurds in Urban Turkey*

Mehmed was a 31-year-old history doctoral student at a university in Ankara when we spoke in 2012, during my time teaching in Ankara. Mehmed had moved from a village in Gaziantep Province to the provincial capital city of Gaziantep as a small child, with his mother and two older brothers, after his father passed away. Of his experience in the city, Mehmed stated:

In the city many families do not talk to their children in Kurdish. In the case of my family, we were always talking in Kurdish, but when we were downtown my mother tried to talk in Turkish with us. Switching to Turkish was a kind of automatic reflex for us. We were scared we might face negative consequences if we spoke Kurdish. On the other hand, Kurds were convinced that their culture was useless and inferior. So, for many families living in the cities, Turkish was one of the only things that could bring them self-esteem in their terrible life conditions. Turkish is much more identified with city life, and city life is always preferred by poor people of rural backgrounds.

At the time when Mehmed and his family moved to the city, the Kurdish language was completely outlawed by the Turkish state. Kurds, such as Mehmed and his family, felt the pressure to speak Turkish, to publicly perform Turkishness, for fear of retribution. Further, speaking Turkish was a way for Mehmed and his family, as well as other Kurds, to “fit in” to their new Turkish urban environment, and was seen as a means of social elevation. The Turkish focus on language, according to Secor (2004), is in line with the idea that “Turkey has historically viewed emergent claims to Kurdish linguistic, cultural, or political rights as sources of instability and

threats to national unity” (356). Therefore, enforcing a Turkish-language-only policy was one attempt by the Turkish state to maintain and strengthen conceptions of a unified Turkish citizenry. It also resulted in Kurdish speakers feeling othered and as less than welcome if they were speaking Kurdish on the streets of urban Turkey, as is clear from Mehmed’s account of developing a nearly automatic reflex of switching from speaking Kurdish to speaking Turkish on the streets of Gaziantep.

My interlocutors spent their formative years in urban environments, and particularly in Turkish cities. For some, their families moved directly from the village to Istanbul. Other families initially moved to provincial cities, before moving on to Istanbul. In these cities, as in the villages for those who had started school before their families were evacuated, their schooling was conducted in the Turkish language. Thus, my interlocutors had the linguistic knowledge to navigate the Turkish cities in which they lived.

Christopher Houston (2008) introduces the concept of the “Kemalist City.” Kemalism is the political ideology named for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk that served as the foundation for the modernizing state reforms instituted in the early years of the Republic of Turkey. For Houston, through these Kemalist state policies, and in particular the ones aimed at constructing or reconstructing cities such as Ankara and Istanbul, the built environment became a social actor in the promotion of Turkish nationalism. Houston (2008) then goes on to link this physical concept of space with the aural space created through language reforms, claiming that through the establishment and enforcement of Turkish as the national language, the Kemalist regime imposed particular sounds on the citizens who moved through the



physical spaces constructed by the state. This aural space “was intended to produce the acoustic dimension of the new nationalist built environment...[:] a project to soundproof the institutions of modernity” (122) against non-Turkish sounds, specifically languages other than Turkish. It is within the constructed spatial and aural environments of these “Kemalist Cities” in the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish State that Kurds living in urban Turkey must negotiate their ethno-linguistic identities.

Mehmed continued by describing the difference between knowing formal Turkish and actually being able to communicate in daily life with Turks: “When I moved to the city, I already knew Turkish. There was another problem. We learned Turkish from teachers and television, but Turks learned it from their parents. The Gaziantep accent is a unique Turkish accent. It was weird for me. I could never be successful in talking like them. I was used to formal Turkish, but daily language was alien to me.” Thus, in addition to the distinction between speaking Kurdish and Turkish, Mehmed also felt a distinction between the formal Turkish he learned in school and the colloquial Turkish spoken by the Turks he encountered in his daily life. This echoes Meeker’s (1971) description of the *Lazi* and serves as an interesting example in which standard *Istanbulu* Turkish, or the Turkish typically spoken in Istanbul, is the marker of difference, rather than a regional dialect. Even if the foreigner, in this case Kurds in Turkey, learns the language imposed on them by the entity from whom they are seeking hospitality, it may still serve to mark them as a foreigner. Beyond personal experiences, like the one described by Mehmed, in which he felt othered based on the way he spoke Turkish in school, a common

concern expressed by my interlocutors was for their mothers, who often did not speak any Turkish at all.

The experiences of their non-Turkish speaking mothers in urban Turkey were described by several of my interlocutors. Not only did their mothers not know Turkish, as they had lived their whole lives in their villages speaking Kurdish, most of them were also illiterate. So, while their children, who had been receiving education in Turkish in their local primary schools, the mothers had none of the language education necessary for navigating the Turkish city. While talking with Welat in 2013, I asked about his family's experience moving to Istanbul:

Lydia: When did you come to Istanbul?

Welat: 1992

Lydia: How old were you then?

Welat: Five years old. When we immigrated, it was painful for us. ... Home was sometimes like a prison because you don't have any friends. My mother, for maybe ten years, she didn't leave home, because she doesn't speak Turkish and she doesn't have any friends here. ... When you come here, the government takes all of your things; they burn everything.

Lydia: In the village?

Welat: Yes, back in Mardin. ...

Lydia: Did they give you any warning? How did it happen?

Welat: No, they just came and burned the village. There was no information. No warning. In that time the Kurdish movement was very strong. The village wanted to help the Kurdish movement. There were protests in Dargeçit, in Mardin.

As if destruction of their village were not enough, Welat shared the upheaval of moving from a Kurdish village to a Turkish city. This abrupt change brought about feelings of disconnectedness, expressed through his assertion that they did not have

any friends in Istanbul. The most striking part of Welat's account, perhaps, was his assertion that his mother did not leave home for as long as ten years because she did not speak Turkish. That he followed this information about his mother with recounting that the government, by which he meant the military, had "burned everything" in the village, seemed to imply that these two things were linked in Welat's mind: his mother not going out in Istanbul because she did not speak Turkish, and the fact that those who had impelled them to leave their village were members of the Turkish military.

Welat also relayed a story about learning Turkish and the feelings of otherness that came with it: "My brother and sister gave up on school. They didn't know Turkish, and their teacher was sometimes violent with them. They felt pressure at school, and they didn't want to go to school, because school was like a small prison for them. The reason is, when you go to school you don't know their language [Turkish]. Actually, the most important thing is, when you are participating in class, it's like your mouth is different, and all of the other children laugh when you speak in class." This last sentence, in which Welat expresses the frustration of his mouth not being able to properly form the sounds of Turkish is likely familiar to anyone who has worked at learning a foreign language. It certainly resonated with me, as I was struggling to learn Turkish myself when we had this conversation. Welat goes on to describe being made fun of by the Turkish children in his class for what they seemed to have perceived as an inadequacy because Welat sounded different when he spoke Turkish with a Kurdish accent. This, then, is another example of language being used to mark Kurds as foreigners. When taken

with the experience relayed by Mehmed above, it points back to Navaro-Yashin's (2002) contention that the education system has been an important means of attempting to assimilate Kurds (and others) into "good Turkish" citizens.

This pressure to speak Turkish, specifically the "correct" version of Turkish, and the sense of being an other that came from not speaking Turkish, as described by Mehmed and Welat, echo Derrida's (2000) discussion of the language and the foreigner. Though Mehmed and his family were citizens of the Turkish state, as Kurds and speakers of the Kurdish language, they were marked as foreign. Their Kurdishness was not accommodated by the Turkish state; it was not welcome in Turkish cities. Mehmet's discussion of language was echoed by Ahmed, a 30-year-old history doctoral student at a university in Chicago, Illinois. Ahmed's family moved from a village in the province of Muş to the city of Adana when he was five years old because his father was appointed to a new job in Adana. When asked what "Turkish citizenship" means to him, Ahmed replied, "Something that keeps an eye on you, always. Being under surveillance, not feeling at home with your own language, and having to speak Turkish." Clearly, for Ahmed, Turkish citizenship is intimately tied up with language expectations and state surveillance, and it is something he finds unsettling. The state easing restrictions on speaking Kurdish in recent years has done little to make Kurds feel more welcome in Turkish cities. This also echoes Welat's description of his mother being confined to their home in Istanbul because she did not have the Turkish language skills to successfully navigate the Turkish city. Language serves as a marker of difference for Kurds in Turkey and a means for excluding Kurds from full participation in daily life in Turkish cities.

The negotiation of identity, for Kurds in urban Turkey, is connected to concepts of citizenship. According to Secor (2004), “citizenship works not only at the state level to assemble identities and position them variously in relation to discourses of ‘belonging’ and ‘rights,’ but also at the scale of everyday, urban life... Cities are prime sites where identities are staked, belonging is negotiated, and rights are pursued” (353). Secor described an urban environment in which gender, class, religion, and ethnicity, in addition to citizenship, must be navigated in the formation of identity for the Kurdish residents of urban Turkey. This ethno-linguistic identity formation is further complicated by the particular historical-political context described above, since Kurds who assert their identity as Kurds are doing so against the nationalist narrative of the ethno-linguistically assertive Turkish state.

Though identity is not her main project, Öykü Potuoğlu-Cook (2006) is looking at performative gentrification in Istanbul, through the lens of belly dance. By virtue of looking at the individual bodily practices of those living in the urban environment, however, she is addressing issues of identity. This is most evident in the distinction Potuoğlu-Cook draws between the women who engage in belly dancing for pay, and those members of higher economic status who take belly dance classes for entertainment. For the women who are professional belly dancers, there is a need to navigate and negotiate tensions between a lucrative job that is a major part of the tourism industry in Istanbul and forms of societal shaming. Here, we see market forces intersecting with cultural forces in ways that can help to shape identities; in this case, identities as performers. Regarding those women who consume belly dance for entertainment, Potuoğlu-Cook describes their practices as

“a classed and gendered self-Orientalism” (634), a reappropriation of the tropes of the Ottoman past; a reappropriation that is predominantly engaged in by middle-class or upper middle-class women. This “neo-Ottomania” (634) can be seen as an aspect of these women’s identities as women who occupy a particular socio-economic position in Istanbul society.

Nationalism, collective memory, and the built environment intersect in Turkish cities to influence identity formation and expression. Amy Mills (2010) looks at identity in a particular neighborhood in Istanbul, Kuzguncuk, to explore what it means to live in a neighborhood that was ethnically and religiously diverse, but no longer is, and the ways life in this type of neighborhood might influence conceptions of identity. Central to this is the ways in which the concept of and production of cosmopolitanism, or a “sense of world citizenship” (30) and nationalism play out against one another in this particular Istanbul neighborhood. One of Mills’s main arguments is that “so-called cosmopolitan spaces represent European identity and are economically and culturally exclusive, as they leave out many others, be they religious, rural, Kurdish, or otherwise not secular, upper class, and Turkish” (31). So then, while the elites that live in Kuzguncuk like to point to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious past of the neighborhood as a symbol of the neighborhood’s continuing cosmopolitanism and their identities as cosmopolitan individuals, they simultaneously work to keep “others” out of the neighborhood. They like the idea of a diverse past, but do not want to live in a diverse present. Rather, they have internalized the dominant narratives of the ethno-nationally

assertive Turkish state, and therefore are suspicious of anyone who can be classified as “other.”

A contentious marker of difference is the Turkish state identity card. Citizenship, and being identified as a Turkish citizen on an identity card is no simple thing for Kurdish citizens of Turkey. Most people in Turkey have a strong awareness as to what parts of the country are majority Kurdish and those which are not. Therefore, when someone born in the Kurdish majority region presents their identity card, the person looking at the card can immediately infer the identity card bearer’s ethnicity. When asked about his thoughts regarding Turkish citizenship, Mehmed said, “I do not feel anything about Turkish citizenship. I do not want to carry anything that contains the word ‘Turkish.’ In this context, citizenship is not for me. Yes, I am a citizen of this country, but my identity card makes me another kind of citizen.” By “another kind of citizen,” Mehmed was referring to the presence of his place of birth on his identity card. For Kurds, the presence of this information, and having a birthplace in one of the predominantly Kurdish provinces in southeastern Turkey, immediately marks them as different, as Kurdish, as an “other.” Laure Guirguis (2016) describes a similar marker of difference on identity cards in Egypt, where religious affiliation marks Coptic Christians as “other,” vis-à-vis the majority Muslim population of Egypt. The Muslim majority in Egypt represents the nation, just as the Turkish majority represents the nation in Turkey. In both cases, this marker of difference is literally carried for life, because it is printed on a person’s identity card. Additionally, while identity cards serve as a marker of Turkish citizenship with everything that Turkish citizenship implies, including the

imposition of Turkish ethnicity on citizens who are not ethnically Turkish, identity cards are constant reminder of the Turkish state's treatment of its Kurdish citizens.

One reason Turkish state identity cards are particularly contentious is because the Kurds who carry them know the information on the cards is often false. One day, while talking over tea, Welat pulled out his identity card. On the front, I saw his name, the name of his father and mother, his place of birth, and his birth date. "The date is not correct. It was later that they [the Turkish government] gave us identity cards. We went to a government institution, and my father said, 'This is my son, this is my daughter.' ... A government official decided. They said, 'All of you will go to this government institution, and they will give you birth dates.' I don't want to carry it, but I have to because the police can ask for my ID card anywhere. It's bullshit." Not only was his birthdate wrong, so was his place of birth. Welat clearly had strong feelings about his identity card. It seemed to serve as a constant reminder that the Turkish state had imposed identifying information on his family, and that the state did not care enough to get the information correct. Welat is not alone in this. All of my interlocutors who were born in villages have had Turkish identity cards with at least an incorrect birth date, if not more than that.

As with so many things in Turkey, land has been politicized. I remember telling Turkish coworkers at Bilkent University that I was planning to travel to the Diyarbakır and Mardin for a long weekend with some other colleagues in the spring of 2012. Their reactions were not encouraging, in fact, they asked why we would do such a thing. "It is dangerous," they told me. This was emblematic of Turkish state discourse about the land east of an invisible, but very real, border between the



“safe,” predominantly ethnically Turkish north and west and the “dangerous,” predominantly ethnically Kurdish southeast. I saw this same discourse echoed by the United States government, as well, when, while participating in a Department of State-sponsored intensive summer language program in 2013, my fellow participants and I were forbidden from traveling to southeastern provinces because of “safety concerns.”

One afternoon, while talking to Reşo at a café near İstiklal Street in Istanbul, our conversation was interrupted because he got a phone call. He stood up and walked away from the table to take the call and was gone for several minutes. When he came back, I noticed that he seemed nervous or worried. I asked him if everything was okay. He explained, “My friend thinks one of our friends has been arrested. No one has heard from him for two weeks. I’m really scared.” A little later, Reşo got a text. He read it, and then said, “It’s my friend. They found him. He just said, ‘Don’t worry.’ I don’t know where he was. He does this sometimes. He will just disappear; not talk to us for a few days.”

Not being able to get ahold of his friend was distressing to Reşo because our meeting was taking place in the midst of a particularly tense period that had begun in July 2015, of renewed armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish military. This phase, in the “low-intensity war” that has been ongoing since the mid-1980s led to the imposition of strict curfews in towns in the southeast that were seen by the Turkish government as particularly “problematic” or supportive of the PKK, including Nusaybin, Sur, and Cizre. It had also led to the destruction of entire towns, or parts of them. One of the more horrific reports from this phase of the conflict, that

the Turkish military had killed more than 150 civilians in three basements in Cizre (Charlton 2016), had come just a month before I talked to Reşo. In light of the increased political tension, Reşo's concern for his friend's safety as a Kurd was certainly understandable.

Our conversation turned to recent events in Turkey and Rojava:

Lydia: What do you think about the current political situation in Turkey?

Reşo: You saw. I just got the phone call. One of our friends disappeared. My knees got weak. You get scared when it happens to you. Three years ago, I wouldn't have thought it would be like this. Cities of Kurdistan ruined. I'm not very hopeful or optimistic about the future. I'm pessimistic. I think things will get better, but in 10 years, 20 years. I don't think people will forget this. We will have more protests.

Lydia: Do you want to stay in Turkey?

Reşo: I think I can do something here. I can have a job, I can buy a home, I can have a wife. I won't give up. I know people who have given up, who thought they couldn't do anything in Turkey.

Lydia: What do you think about the situation in Rojava?

Reşo: I am so happy about this. When I saw this news. It means peace, at least for some people. Not just for Kurds, for peace. If they get a state—a federation—if they are democratic, I think it will be peaceful. More peaceful, I hope.

Hope. Despite his very real fears for his own safety and that of his friends, and his pessimism for the short term, Reşo still maintains hope for the future of the Kurdish people and hope for some form of increased autonomy for Kurds in the region.

These problems with identification cards are particularly interesting when considered in light of Das and Poole's (2004) contention that state forms of identification are one way through which states can exercise some form of control over their citizens and attempt to make the state more legible. Any potential

legibility is created by the Turkish state, with seemingly little regard for the reality of Kurds' lives. So, Kurdish citizens of Turkey may be made more legible by the state on the state's terms, but the process of their being made legible seemingly serves to further alienate them from the state. Indeed, I argue that this process is evidence of the inhospitable nature of the Turkish state vis-à-vis its Kurdish citizens.

### *Hospitality and Citizenship*

The presence of perceived foreigners challenges the very concepts of the structure and legitimacy of the state, particularly an ethno-nationally assertive state. Yet, hospitality, or the gesture of welcoming the foreigner, can be seen as an expression of sovereignty. The gesture of welcoming, of offering hospitality, implies a claim to power or sovereignty over the space into which the other is being welcomed. Jacques Derrida (2000) begins his discussion of hospitality by addressing the concept of the foreigner. For Derrida, the status of foreigner is related to language, as foreigners do not speak the language of the society in which they now find themselves. Derrida asserts:

Among the serious problems we are dealing with here is that of the foreigner who, inept at speaking the language, always risks being without defense before the law of the country that welcomes or expels him; the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc. This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence.  
[15]

Thus, language serves as a way to mark the foreigner as a foreigner, an “other,” and it is a violent marking. Yet, for Derrida there is also an idea that foreigners can be understood in some way; at the very least, they are understood as being foreigners. Further, foreigners are “in question;” that is, they are in a liminal state of sorts, in which they are knowable and recognized but never fully incorporated into society. This “being-in-question” (3) status of the foreigner can be destabilizing, as their liminal state can highlight and serve to call into question the existence and sovereignty of the state.

Citizenship, as a category, is a tricky concept to definitively define, as is evident from the literature (Bloemraad et al. 2008; McNevin 2011; Luibhéid 2013). According to Irene Bloemraad, Anna Korteweg, and Gökçe Yurdakul (2008), “Citizenship is usually defined as a form of membership in a political and geographic community. It can be disaggregated into four dimensions: legal status, rights, political and other forms of participation in society, and a sense of belonging” (154). The ways in which these four potential dimensions of citizenship might interact, however, can vary from one context to another.

Context is particularly important when talking about citizenship, as each nation-state has the power to define and redefine how citizenship works within its borders. Eithne Luibhéid (2013), in her discussion of the ways in which the pregnancy of potential immigrants to Ireland has been reclassified by the state in order to make immigration more difficult, points to the historical connection between citizenship and birth, what is called “birthright citizenship” (15). Birthright citizenship can fall into one of two categories: *jus soli* (citizenship determined by

where one is born) and *jus sanguinis* (citizenship determined by the citizenship of one's parents) (Bloemraad et al. 2008). Beyond the ways through which we can determine to which state(s) one is entitled citizenship, is the question of what citizenship can mean for both the citizen as well as the state. Anne McNevin (2011) draws attention to the state-centric nature of the concept of citizenship, as well as connections between citizenship and the neoliberal global economic system: "In its conventional form, citizenship is tied to the systems of sovereign states that emerged from the European Treaty of Westphalia more than 360 years ago. Since then, this system has expanded through processes of colonization and decolonization to be global in scope" (16). McNevin then moves to an analysis of the ways in which migrants can challenge concepts of citizenship, thereby highlighting the malleability of citizenship and the importance of context. For example, citizenship in Turkey, according to Anna Secor (2004), "has increasingly been seen not merely as a legal category, but as a set of discourses and practices that are translated unevenly across unequal social groups and local contexts" (354). Citizenship, as a concept, can serve to both give identity and legitimate belonging. Secor further contends that "citizenship, as a set of practices and discourses, is open to constant renegotiation" (366). Thus, it appears that citizenship, the mark of legitimate membership in the state, is a fluid concept that can be altered or expanded. This has certainly proven true in the context of Turkey.

As has been mentioned, the Republic of Turkey was created in 1923, from the remnants of the former Ottoman Empire, after the conclusion of World War I and a hard-fought War of Independence. The geographical area that became the modern

Turkish state was comprised of a mix of ethno-linguistic and religious groups (Mango 1999). However, shortly after the establishment of the Republic, and under the leadership of Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the state set about establishing the Turkish nation-state as a nation of Turks and "Turkifying" (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Houston 2008; Güvenç 2011) the populace. Ethno-nationally assertive state reforms were centered on creating a homogenized concept of Turkishness, Turkish citizenship, and the Turkish state (Houston 2008; Özyürek 2006). State rhetoric has consistently supported this notion of Turkey as a nation of Turks and has sought to ostracize those elements of the populace who do not fall in line. A stark example of this is the trope of Kurd as "Terrorist."

#### *Kurds as "Terrorists" in the Turkish Context*

When I first came to the school, the teacher was asking, "Where are you from? Where does your family live? How are you? How was your day?" These kinds of questions. When I said, "I'm from Mardin, and my family, they live in Istanbul," most of the class, they looked at me like this, "You're from Mardin? You're a terrorist." (Welat, Chicago, 2016)

Being called a "terrorist" was a commonality expressed by my interlocutors. Their experiences being called terrorists, taken together with my own experiences hearing the term used by ethnic Turkish people in conversations about Kurds and news media accounts that used quotes including the term, have made it clear that it is a common derogatory term used against Kurds in Turkey. I see the use of this term as tied to ongoing othering and minoritization (Klein 2020) of Kurds in Turkey. Historian Janet Klein (2020) traces the minoritization of Kurds in Turkey from the latter years of the Ottoman Empire, through World War I, to the early years of the

Republic of Turkey. She contends that the minoritization of Kurds was tied to territoriality, as the Turkish state sought to erase territory named as “Kurdistan” from maps, and thereby to establish Kurds as a minority in Turkey, rather than allowing them to become a majority in the territory they had historically inhabited in what was newly named the territory of the Republic of Turkey. This minoritization of Kurds is certainly tied to ongoing othering of Kurds in Turkey. I see clear connections between the territoriality of minoritization, as described by Klein, and the use of *memleket* (hometown/familial place of origin) as a marker of difference and “otherness,” as expressed by my interlocutors, as I will describe in Chapter 5. As I will show, the use of the term “terrorist” is tied directly to Turkish state narratives and rhetoric. Contending with this rhetoric is an experience that almost all of my interlocutors share.

I had first met Welat when he was a political science student at Bilgi University in Istanbul. At the time of the conversation from which this extract comes, he had migrated to Chicago and was working as a furniture salesman. Welat recounted this experience of starting high school in Istanbul, and the verbal abuse he suffered at the hand of his fellow students when they found out that his family was originally from Mardin. Mardin is a province in the Kurdish-majority region of southeastern Turkey, a region commonly referred to by my interlocutors as Northern Kurdistan, or simply Kurdistan. At a conference on the Kurdish language held on 25 May 2013, hosted by the Bilgi University Cultural Group, a Kurdish student group to which Welat belonged, ethnic Turkish sociologist and advocate for Kurds in Turkey, Ismail Beşikçi, stated, “In Turkey there is not a name for the Kurds.

The only name for them is ‘terrorist.’” This is a bold statement, but it is supported by my own experiences in Turkey and the stories my interlocutors shared with me.

I chatted with Zana, a 20-year-old linguistics student, about her experience as a Kurd in Istanbul. She said:

I am so relaxed in Istanbul, because there are a lot of Kurdish people, especially in my life, and my friends, most of them are Kurdish. When I went to Ankara, I have a friend from Rojhilat [the Kurdish-majority region of Iran], and we spoke in Kurmanji. We were on the Metro, but we had some big bags, and I saw these looks in people’s eyes, like “We will kill them,” because they were looking at us like we were terrorists. It is so sad. I didn’t like Ankara and Eskişehir, and I think the only city to live in Turkey, for Kurdish people, is Istanbul. You can’t live in another city.

For Zana, the people she saw while waiting for the Metro did not verbally express that they thought Zana and her friend were terrorists. However, the looks on their faces clearly expressed this feeling to Zana. I had a similar experience while riding on a bus with Welat in the summer of 2013. The bus was quite full, so I was kind of sandwiched in between Welat and an older gentleman. Welat got a phone call. He clearly knew who was calling, as he answered in Kurdish. I felt the man on the other side of me immediately tense up as soon as Welat answered the phone, “Rojbaş!” These experiences highlight that, while it is technically not illegal anymore to speak Kurdish in Turkey, ethnic Turks seem to be skeptical of those who do.

One afternoon, in January of 2016, I was in the apartment that several of my interlocutors shared, sitting at the kitchen table having tea with Wedat. We were chatting about the political climate in Turkey and the relationship between Kurds and Turks in Turkey.

Wedat: When my friend’s mom sees me, she says, “Hello peshmerga” or “How’s it going terrorist?”



Lydia: How do you feel when she says that?

Wedat: She's just kidding me, but I know, inside, she is scared.

Lydia: Scared of you?

Wedat: Yes, because I'm Kurdish.

A terrorist is "a person who uses violent and intimidating methods in the pursuit of political aims; *esp.* a member of a clandestine or expatriate organization aiming to coerce an established government by acts of violence against it or its subjects" (OED 2021). The peshmerga, in the Turkish context, are members of the PKK (not to be confused with the military forces of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, also known as Peshmerga). To call someone "peshmerga" or a "terrorist" is a slur. That a friend's mother feels she can call a Kurdish young adult "peshmerga" and a "terrorist," even if she is "kidding," is notable.

The term "terrorist" came up again when I asked Serhad, a 26-year-old journalism master's student and Uber driver, originally from Kars, about the first time he thought to himself, "I am Kurdish":

When we were in Kars, you know, you struggle with the government, with the soldiers, with the system, but you don't know what's going on. After we moved to Istanbul, I started school, and people were treating me really badly. I didn't know what was going on. They would say, "You are Kurdish," and they were pushing me. I said, "Okay, what is it? I don't know what's going on. Why are you guys attacking me like this?" When I started school, I said, "Okay, we are different than other people," you know? Like, in Kars, everybody is Kurdish, you know? You know something bad is going on, but you don't know what it is. But, when we moved to Istanbul, I noticed that people were calling me, like, Kurdish, or "dirty Kurdish," or "terrorist." So, that is when I realized it, when we moved to Istanbul.

As with my other interlocutors, Serhad's realization of his own Kurdishness coincided with his education in the Turkish state system, but also with being called

out as different by the Turks he encountered in his everyday life. The way he describes it, “terrorist” is a common slur used against Kurds in Turkey. His account also echoes that of Heval, a former journalism master’s student who had migrated to Chicago in 2016, that I shared in Chapter 1. Heval recounted becoming aware of his own Kurdishness while watching a state-owned television station and seeing members of the Turkish military calling Kurdish villagers terrorists. The narrative of the Turkish military that he shared, was one that painted all Kurds as terrorists in the eyes of the state, resulting in a sense of “collective terrorism” (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012:61) among the Turkish public that implicates all Kurds, regardless of whether or not they are involved in political activism on any level, let alone being somehow involved with the PKK.

While talking with Jîro, who had studied healthcare management at Dicle University in Diyarbakır before migrating to Chicago, I asked him what it means to say, “I am Kurdish.” He replied, “Well, for Turkish people, it’s a terrorist thing. For me, it means, like, fighting for freedom.” This juxtaposition, between what Jîro sees as the Turkish understanding of being Kurdish as being a terrorist and his own understanding of being Kurdish as fighting for freedom, points to what appears to me to be the origin of the Turkish state narrative of “Kurds equal terrorists” that, according to my interlocutors, has become an accepted narrative by many Turks: the conflict between the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, or Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state. These two factions have been at war virtually nonstop since 1984, despite a ceasefire from 1999 to 2004 and an attempt at a peace process in the period from 2013 to 2015. The Turkish

government and media routinely refer to the PKK as terrorists (White and Gündüz 2021).<sup>3</sup> In the early 1990s, the Turkish military used supposed support of the PKK as the impetus for razing entire villages.

Azad provided perhaps the most vivid example of this from his own experience:

When we lived in the village, some soldiers came to our village. I knew something was wrong with them, you know, they were not Kurdish. They were not friendly. So, one time, they gathered the people, like middle aged people, like my dad, he was around 30. So, they gathered people. Before that, they said, "Okay, you have to leave your village." Well, they offered two options: One was fighting against the PKK, taking up weapons, guns, and then going to the mountains and fighting against the PKK. The other option was, you have to leave, because you fed the PKK members. So, the villagers said, "We are not going to take up arms," you know, "we don't want to kill anyone." Well, they were not some people from outside, you know, so most of them, the villagers, they knew each other, and the PKK members. So, they rejected this offer. For example, one of them, our cousin, he joined the PKK, and then when he came to the village, my grandma always prepared some dried foods, like figs or grapes, and she tied them to the trees, you know, and then our cousin, he knew my grandma did that. When he came to the village he would go directly to those trees, and he knew some stuff would be there for them. One time, I remember, my crazy dad, he hosted like 80 PKK members. Yeah, it was crazy. And then, someone told the military. So, the soldiers came to the village in the morning, and then the soldiers were searching the places, you know, and our village is kind of big actually, we had around 150 houses. So, they couldn't find them. The PKK members said, "Okay, we will be quiet, because of the children and the civilians, we are not going to fight." So, we were lucky, and nothing happened. They just left.

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<sup>3</sup> See the following articles for just a few examples from the news media:

Burton Bollag, "Silenced Minority." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 Jul 2002.

Semih Idiz, "The Kurdish Phobia Rears Its Head Again," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 31 Jul 2012.

"Siirt District Mayor Unseated Due to Charges of Aiding, Abetting PKK," *Daily Sabah*, 30 Jun 2016.

"35 PKK Terrorists Killed in Operations in Turkey's Southeastern Hakkari Province," *Daily Sabah*, 30 Jul 2016.

"Germany Harboring Terrorists: Turkish President Erdoğan," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 3 Nov 2016.

"Turkey Won't Stop Pursuing Its Goals in 2017, Erdoğan Says in New Year's Message," *Daily Sabah*, 31 Dec 2016.

"Terrorists to Have No Relief: President Erdoğan," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 30 Mar 2017.

"Terrorists Being Buried in Trenches They Dig: Erdoğan," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 16 Dec 2018.

So, the soldier thing. I knew they were different. On their hats they had Turkish flag patches. They gathered people in the middle of the village, and they tortured people in front of the whole village. They rode people, like horses. And then, with their guns, they wanted to race, a human race. Yeah, the soldiers, some of the higher-ranking ones, they rode the people. Some of them, the soldiers, were heavy and the villagers fell down. The soldiers were cursing, and they beat them. And then, after, they took these people to the town. There was a prison there. My dad was one of them. They took them for almost one week or ten days. When he came back, he was... They didn't feed them, you know, and he was really bad. So then, after our evacuation, at that time I realized we have some problem with the soldiers. So, we are Kurds, but the state is something else, you know, obviously they are not Kurds.

Later in our conversation, Azad revealed that the soldiers had ordered everyone to the center of the village, even having an old woman who could not walk carried on a blanket, and forced those who were tortured to strip down to their underwear in front of everyone. It appears that by connecting these two stories, of the search for the PKK members hosted by his father, and the torture, which also involved his father, Azad is connecting the torture to the military's suspicion that the village was supporting the PKK. And the villagers' refusal to take up arms against the PKK is directly linked to their evacuation from their village.

### *Conclusion*

Kurds have long had a contentious relationship with the Turkish state. Beginning after the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Kurds have been subject to the Turkish nation-building project and continuing conceptions of what it means to be a Turkish citizen that conflate citizenship with ethnicity and privilege Turkish ethnicity over any potential alternatives, including Kurdishness. Questions of Turkishness, and by extension citizenship, in Turkey often center on the question

of language. As mentioned above, Turkishness has frequently been tied to language, as Turkish is the official state language and has been the mandated language of education in Turkey since the early years of the republic. Additionally, as seen in the accounts of my interlocutors, Turkish has been the de facto language on the streets in Turkish cities, sometimes serving to exclude other languages from the urban space. Language continues to serve as a means for marking citizens of Turkey who are not ethnically Turkish as internal “foreigners,” or others. Yet, the Turkish state does not extend hospitality to these internal others. Rather, as my interlocutors explained it, the Turkish state and ethnic Turkish citizens of Turkey seem to use language as a way to maintain a system of distance between “us” and “them,” that is anything but hospitable, despite the fact that “they” are also citizens of the Turkish state.

Indeed, the inhospitality of the Turkish state toward its Kurdish citizens has led to a situation in which the majority of my interlocutors have been doubly displaced. Most of them went through violent displacement events with their families as young children, as they were compelled to leave their villages due to the ongoing violence between the Turkish state and the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or Kurdistan Worker’s Party). Then, many of them chose to migrate to Chicago, for one or more of several reasons, including educational opportunity, economic opportunity, and to avoid mandatory military service in Turkey.

#### CHAPTER 4. LANGUAGE AS POWER; LANGUAGE AS RESISTANCE

Lydia: Do you follow Kurdish political issues?

Zana: Yes, because if you are Kurdish in Turkey, you have to be political.

Lydia: So, you consider yourself political?

Zana: If I say, "I am not," it is a big mistake for me, because you speak Kurdish, and your friends are Kurdish. It's a political [action], because you speak your own language.

Lydia: So, speaking Kurdish is a political action?

Zana: [with emphasis] Yes.

In this chapter, I argue that language has been politicized as a component of the ethno-nationally assertive state's nation-building project, and that this politicization can fuel resistance in a population even as its members migrate to new and less restrictive political environments. This politicization is made manifest through state policies and narratives that render language as a political symbol of the nation, such as those that promote the national language. These policies include such measures as language reform and standardization, as well as educational programs promoting use of the language. This promotion of the national language is furthered through statutes passed with such aims as outlawing the language of an ethno-linguistic minority group that is perceived by the ethno-nationally assertive state to be particularly "problematic." This results in situations such as children being prohibited from attending school in the language they have learned to speak in the home, what is often referred to as the "mother tongue," because it is often mothers who are the primary conveyors of this linguistic knowledge. My interlocutors consistently communicated to me that this sort of system is untenable.

Thus, language is further politicized by my interlocutors, who are members of an ethno-linguistic minority group living in an ethno-nationally assertive state with which they do not share a common ethno-linguistic identity. Through politicizing their own language, my interlocutors are able to use their language as a means of challenging dominant ethno-nationally assertive state narratives that have sought to silence them, other them, and even deny their existence as a separate ethno-linguistic group. One way my interlocutors have challenged these state narratives is through their university educations. That my interlocutors are university students places them in a privileged position, vis-à-vis other members of their ethno-linguistic group, as well as older members of their own families, as they are among the first generation of their ethno-linguistic group to attend university in large numbers. Their university educations seem to have contributed to their feeling emboldened to challenge the dominant narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive state in which they live. In doing so, they present an example of youthful agency in action and use language as a potent symbol of their resistance to the state. It is in their challenges to the narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive state in which they live that I see Kurdish university students in Turkey asserting their ethno-linguistic identities and pushing back against Turkish state narratives of what it means to be a Turkish citizen. In so doing, they are also striving for increased visibility, as they are engaged in activities that make Kurds and Kurdishness more visible in spaces deemed as “Turkish” by the Turkish state.

Kurds have long had a contentious relationship with the Turkish state, especially with respect to issues related to language. Beginning after the founding of

the Turkish Republic in 1923, Kurdish personal and place names were Turkified, the Kurdish language was banned, and the mere existence of a separate Kurdish ethnic group was denied (Houston 2008). From the early days of the Republic of Turkey, language has been politicized by the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state as a central component of defining and legitimizing the Turkish state. As discussed in the last chapter, these efforts in large part began with language reforms. As Susan DiGiacomo (2001) describes in her anthropological consideration of the case of the Catalan language in Spain, one of the first steps in language reform undertaken by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was the creation of a Language Commission (*Dil Encümeni*) in 1928 (Dil Derneği n.d.), which was the precursor to the Turkish Language Association (*Türk Dil Kurumu*), formed in 1932 (TDK n.d.). The tasks of these organizations included reforming the alphabet to adopt Latin script and standardizing the Turkish language, including removal and/or replacement of words deemed to be of non-Turkish origin, respectively. This was then extended through such public campaigns mandating that Turkish was to be the language of instruction in schools and the “*Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş!*” (“Citizen, Speak Turkish!”) program. Together, these reforms contributed to the ethno-nationally assertive state narrative that Turkey was a land for Turks who spoke Turkish. In much the same way that Camille C. O’Reilly (1999) examined the “politics of language and culture” (1), in the Irish language revival movement in Northern Ireland, I am interested in the politics of the Kurdish language, and the ways it is variously politicized by both the Turkish state and Kurdish university students in Istanbul. The political act of speaking the Kurdish language will be considered with particular



attention to the importance placed on language as a key component of “asserting” Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity and challenging the narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state.



*Figure 3 Turkish President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introducing the new Latin Script Turkish alphabet in the city of Kayseri in 1928. (Photo from Wikimedia Commons; public domain.)*

These Kurdish young adults, as citizens of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state, find themselves in a situation in which a claim to be a Turkish citizen who is not ethnically Turkish is provocative and challenges state narratives. I argue that in making claims to Kurdishness, they challenge the dominant narrative of

Turkishness that is promoted by the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state. As Das and Poole (2004) assert, “the state is imagined as an always incomplete project that must constantly be spoken of—and imagined—through an invocation of the wilderness, lawlessness, and savagery that not only lies outside its jurisdiction but also threatens it from within” (7). States must then continually define (and redefine) who legitimately belongs and who does not. The incompleteness of the state points to the need for state discourse, or narrative, to explain what and who, comprises the state. I argue that this need to constantly define the state leaves the space for challenges, and it is these spaces that my interlocutors target in challenging the narrative of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state. In their challenges, my interlocutors are speaking, and in some cases writing, Kurds and Kurdishness into public spaces in Istanbul. This carries over to the United States, for those who migrate, as my interlocutors in Chicago continue to challenge the Turkish state narrative by engaging in such activities as protesting in front of the Turkish Consulate.

### *Language, Nationalism, and the State*

The reality of having been educated in the Turkish language, which is the dominant language of Turkey, is part of the lived experience of my interlocutors. During fieldwork in Chicago, I was having dinner at the apartment shared by Azad, Welat, and Heval. Welat and his girlfriend, Mei, who was Chinese American, had made dinner and invited me to join them, along with Serhad and Wedat. At one

point, the guys were talking to each other in Turkish. Mei asked, “Are you speaking Kurdish or Turkish?”

Serhad: Turkish

Mei: Why?

Welat: We were educated in Turkish.

Mei: But, if you speak in Kurdish, will you understand each other?

Welat and Serhad, simultaneously: Yes.

Mei: Why don't you speak in Kurdish, then?

Serhad (sounding exasperated): Because we think in Turkish!

The implication of Serhad's statement was that after many years of education in Turkish, including primary and secondary school, and university for most of them (Welat had attended an English language medium university), they had been trained to think primarily in Turkish. This fact points back to the language reform policies of the early Republic of Turkey, including the policies that targeted education in particular (Navaro-Yashin 2002) and the “linguistic engineering” (Houston 2008:116) aimed at creating a Turkish space filled with speakers of the Turkish language. This sentiment, and the frustration felt because of it, was brought up by several of my interlocutors a number of times during my fieldwork.

Language is a symbol and mechanism of power. One clear example of how this is done is through the educational system, which, by teaching children the same standard language, and by extension the ways of thinking implied in that standard language, helps to reify the social hierarchies and power relations expressed by the standard language. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) argues power relations are made

manifest through systems of language. As a result, Bourdieu asserts that “there are no longer any innocent words” (40). Words delineate and reinforce power relations and social hierarchies. Bourdieu (1991) focuses on what he calls the “linguistic field,” or “a system of specifically linguistic relations of power based on the unequal distribution of linguistic capital” (57). One acquires linguistic capital by knowing the “standard language” (48) of a particular society. It is at this point that the educational system is implicated in the promotion and perpetuation of a standard or official language in a particular society. According to Bourdieu,

In the process which leads to the construction, legitimation and imposition of an official language, the educational system plays a decisive role: ‘fashioning the similarities from which that community of consciousness which is the cement of the nation stems.’ And Georges Davy goes on to state the function of the schoolmaster, a *maître à parler* (teacher of speaking) who is thereby also a *maître à penser* (teacher of thinking): ‘He [the primary school teacher], by virtue of his function, works daily on the faculty of expression of every idea and every emotion: on language. In teaching the same clear, fixed language to children who know it only very vaguely or who even speak various dialects or *patois*, he is already inclining them quite naturally to see and feel things in the same way; and he works to build the common consciousness of the nation. [1991:48-49]

Thus, education is clearly implicated in the nation-building projects of ethnographically assertive states.

The case of Turkey provides an excellent example of just this. Language and nationality became conflated in the early years of the Republic of Turkey. In attempting to define the nascent state, the Turkish language became a “key symbol” (Ortner 1973) of the Turkish nation. And thus, the Turkish state became ethnographically linguistically assertive, defining the nation and its citizenry largely on the imagined basis of a shared ethno-linguistic identity, most clearly symbolized by the Turkish

language. Clifford Geertz (1973) points to the selection of a national language as one of the components of nationalist ideologizing. He asserts:

[T]he 'language problem' is only the 'nationality problem' writ small, though in some places the conflicts arising from it are intense enough to make the relationship seem reversed. Generalized, the 'who are we' question asks what cultural forms—what systems of meaningful symbols—to employ to give value and significance to the activities of the state, and by extension to the civil life of its citizens [242].

In this passage, Geertz is saying that nationalism and language are often two sides of the same coin. The national language is so tied to the concept of the nation itself, and by extension concepts of nationalism and citizenship, that it apparently becomes something akin to a proverbial chicken and egg scenario.

Scholars of nationalism and the state have highlighted the connections between language and power, nationalism, and state-building (Eriksen 2010; Anderson 1991; Gellner 2006; Scott 1998). Benedict Anderson (1991) draws an explicit connection between language and nationalism when he asserts that “the nation was conceived in language, not blood” (145), thereby implying that use of a common language is a key aspect of creating and fostering nationalist sentiment. Ernest Gellner (2006) echoes this concept, and arguably takes it a step further, by proposing a conflation of culture and language and asserting that nationalism seeks to reconcile the cultural and the politico-territorial aspects of society: “Nationalism has been defined, in effect, as the striving to make culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof, and not more than one roof at that. Culture, an elusive concept, was deliberately left undefined. But an at least provisionally acceptable criterion of culture might be language, as at least a sufficient, if not necessary touchstone of it” (42).

An official language also creates a social hierarchy between the educated classes who know the official language and marginalized populations who do not know the official language. In looking at state-building projects, James C. Scott (1998) contends that states strive to make their citizenry more “legible,” that is more easily counted and controlled. To do this, states engage in forms of “simplification,” or means of “rationalizing and standardizing” (3) the populace. Scott further contends that “of all state simplifications... the imposition of a single, official language may be the most powerful, and it is the precondition of many other simplifications” (72). Through the mandating of an official language, then, ethnographically assertive states are able to require education in the official language, thereby shaping the way the citizenry thinks and speaks, and establishing a hierarchy based on linguistic knowledge.

This hierarchy, and its existence in Turkey between those who are fluent in Turkish and those who are not, was made evident in the way my interlocutors spoke about their mothers. Most, at one point or another during our conversations, described a similar situation. One of the most striking descriptions of the language divide came from a conversation with Welat, during preliminary fieldwork in Istanbul, when he was telling me about his family migrating to the city in 1992, and what life was like when they arrived: “Home is sometimes like a prison, because you don't have any friends. My mother, for maybe ten years, she didn't leave home, because she doesn't speak Turkish and she doesn't have any friends here.” Clearly, Welat felt that his mother's life in Istanbul was constrained by her lack of Turkish language skills. When Welat's family arrived in Istanbul in 1992, speaking Kurdish

on the street would have been incredibly dangerous due to the heightened tensions between the PKK and the Turkish military and the fact that the Kurdish language was still outlawed. Restrictions on the use of languages other than Turkish, including Kurdish, were loosened in 1993, during the presidency of Halil Turgut Özal, who was of partial Kurdish descent.

### *Turkish Nation-Building and Language*

The Turkish Republic was created in 1923, from the remnants of the former Ottoman Empire, which had been comprised of a mix of ethno-linguistic groups, including Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, and Greek communities. However, after the emergence of the modern Turkish Republic, the ethno-nationally assertive state, under the leadership of President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, embarked on a series of “Turkification” policies aimed at forcing the populace to conform to the state narrative of the Turkish state as a geographical area for the Turkish nation; a nation of Turks (Meeker 2002; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Houston 2008; Güvenç 2011). This narrative left no room for other ethno-linguistic identities.

In 1924 the Kurdish language was banned, which had a profound impact on education. David McDowall (2007) contends that the banning of Kurdish resulted in the fact that in 1925 only 215 of Turkey’s 4,875 schools were in the Kurdish region of southeastern Turkey. This was compounded by the initiation of the *Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş!* (“Citizen, Speak Turkish!”) campaign in 1928. “This campaign aimed to eradicate the public visibility and audibility of non-Turkish languages” (Aslan 2007:246). The campaign was perpetuated mainly by Turkish teachers, university

students, and intellectuals who were particularly committed to promoting national homogenization. Aslan goes so far as to call those who worked to advance the Turkish language campaign “Kemalist missionaries” (246), whose goal was the conversion of non-Turkish citizens of Turkey into “good” Turks in the name of Turkish nationalism.

As another part of the Kemalist reforms, Turkish surnames were first imposed on the ethnically diverse citizens of Turkey after the passage of the Surname Law in June 1934, which required all citizens to adopt Turkish surnames, effective 1 January 1935. In November of 1934, the Grand National Assembly bestowed the surname Atatürk on the president, thereby literally naming him “father of the Turks.” Atatürk, thus, symbolically became the lineage founder of the new Turkish national patriline, and father of the citizens of the Republic.

The Surname Law stipulated the following:

1) Every Turk must bear his surname in addition to his proper name; 2) the second article stated that the surname must follow the proper name in signing, speaking and writing; 3) and the third article forbade names which were related to military rank and civil officialdom, to tribes and foreign [i.e., non-Turkish] races and ethnicities; as well as surnames that were not suited to customs or which are disgusting or ridiculous. Male heads of households would choose the names, and in their absence, death or mental weakness the wife would do so. They were also against the use of ‘historical names’ without the proper genealogical evidence.... [Additionally,] surnames needed to be taken from the Turkish language. [Türköz 2007:894-895]

Requiring all Turkish citizens to adopt a Turkish surname served to literally name individuals as legitimate citizens of the Turkish Republic. Indeed, the Surname Law is connected to the Turkish language reform process that began in 1928, as a “list of approved pure Turkish names” (Mango 1999:499) was circulated to help heads of households decide on surnames for their families. These approved names “stressed



masculine qualities: Hard (*Sert*), Tough (*Çetin*), Uncovered (*Yılmaz*), Iron (*Demir*), Steel (*Çelik*), Rock (*Kaya*)” (Mango 199:499).

This new conception of Turkishness and what it meant to be a citizen of Turkey was imposed on the ethnically diverse citizens of the Turkish Republic who were faced with pressure to Turkify, and many did. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002), echoing Pierre Bourdieu (2003), contends that one of the main ways to impose Turkification on the populace was through the educational institutions, in which the language of instruction was Turkish. As she describes it:

Throughout the years of Republicanism, many people were brought up to be Turks in republican institutions, whether their ancestors be Abkhazian Muslim immigrants from Georgia, Slavic converts to Islam from Serbia, Armenian-speaking Muslims of the Hemşin region, or Arabs, Kurds, Lazs, Circassians, or other. Turkishness was internalized and adopted to varying extents and in various fashions. Some people had an easier time in assuming Turkishness as an identity than others. Some were willing to assimilate or assume this identity, while others were not... Muslim-born populations who might have wished to claim minority status and rights, such as the Kurds, could not do so without serious consequences (e.g., war). As Muslims, they were officially designated and categorized as Turks. [49]

Indeed, public displays of efforts to Turkify the citizenry can still be found on the sides of mountains and buildings in Turkey today, where one can see the phrase, “*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene*,” or “How happy is one who says, ‘I am a Turk.’” Yet, not all Turkish citizens were happy to call themselves Turks, preferring instead an alternative collective identity category. Among these groups were the Kurds

### *Resistance to Turkification*

I first met Welat during preliminary fieldwork, near the end of his last semester of university. He was a political science student, originally from a village in

the province of Mardin, attending Bilgi University, a private university at which the language of instruction was English. During our first meeting, we spent several hours talking as we walked around the Beyoğlu area in central Istanbul. As the day wound down, we started ambling up İstiklal Caddesi, toward Taksim Square. İstiklal was bustling on this early evening. We came upon a group of three young male musicians, singing in Kurdish. They were standing in front of a sheet of plywood that had been placed on the façade of a building that was under construction; the plywood had been spray painted with all manner of graffiti, providing a colorful backdrop for this little concert in a language that had been, until relatively recently, banned by the Turkish government. A crowd had formed a semi-circle around the performers. The general mood was positive, almost joyous. Many could be seen singing along, or at least mouthing the words. The crowd sporadically clapped along with the music. At one point, a couple of young men started dancing around the performers, moving in a circular pattern, just inside the ring of spectators. They were joined by other young men, until, by the end of the song, there were five dancers. Several of the spectators had cameras or smart phones out, snapping pictures and taking videos. The crowd was overwhelmingly young, and mostly male. There were smiles, cheers, and enthusiastic applause at the end of every song.

Welat intermittently translated lyrics for me. One song included the phrase, "Kurdistan, Kurdistan, your name is so sweet; all Kurds fight for you." Another song was about the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan: "You are like a sun in the Middle East." Political songs. Protest songs. Kurdishness on display. Kurdishness

being belted out for all those around to hear. There was evident joy at this display of Kurdishness, from the performers and the crowd. Yet there was also, seemingly, an air of defiance. This defiance was clear in the lyrics of the songs the three men were singing. After Welat translated the lyrics about Ocalan, I asked, "They are singing political songs?" "Yes," he replied. "Political songs. Kurdish songs are about two things: politics or love."

The second time we met, we decided to go for tea. We turned left off of İstiklal Caddesi, then right, then left again, then through a door on the right into a dark entryway. We crowded into a small elevator with two men who appeared to be in their mid- to late-20s. After exiting the elevator, we walked up a narrow, winding flight of rainbow painted stairs, at the top of which we found ourselves in a sunny, welcoming room. There were booths lining three walls, and wooden tables and chairs filled the middle. A bar and the stairs were on the fourth wall.

We sat down at a booth along the far wall and ordered *çay* (tea), which was brought to us quickly, steaming hot and in the tulip-shaped glasses that are ubiquitous in Turkey. I recognized the voice of Ciwan Haco, whose music I knew had been banned in Turkey in the not-so-distant past, serenading us over the sound system. There were several other tables, with couples or small groups seated, with tea, engaged in conversation, many smoking, some playing *tavla* (backgammon).

"Is everyone Kurdish?" I asked.

"Yes," Welat replied with a smile. "Here we can live our culture."

I started by asking about the name of the place, *Kaçakçay*, which Welat had mentioned translated to "illegal tea":

Lydia: It means "illegal tea"?

Welat: Yes, illegal tea. Kurds don't like Turkish tea, so they bring tea from Persia, from Syria. Families would bring it to their family members across the border. So, it's illegal tea.

I later learned that the term '*kaçak*,' in addition to "illegal," can also be translated as "contraband" or "smuggled," which made sense, as Welat was describing smuggling non-Turkish tea across the border from Persia or Syria. Apparently, in Turkey, even the tea must be nationalistic. And Turkish (i.e., grown in Turkey). According to my interlocutors, while packaged Ceylon tea, which is what *kaçakçay* is, is available to purchase in supermarkets in Turkey, many Kurdish shop owners will sell unregulated Ceylon tea that has been brought into Turkey illegally because it is less expensive. Thus, the moniker "*kaçakçay*."

The name of the café was also a cheeky nod to the agentive practice of smuggling goods of various sorts across the porous Turkish borderlands as described by Fırat Bozçalı (2020), in the case of oil smuggling across the Turkey-Iran border, and by Ramazan Aras (2020), with regard to the smuggling of various goods across the Turkey-Syria border. Smuggling goods across the border, in an area that was divided up by external forces after World War I, has a long-standing history. Trade routes were maintained in part because of kinship and social networks that predated the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and were, thus, able to withstand the arbitrary lines drawn on the map. Taking pride in this history, by naming a café, staffed and frequented by Kurdish young adults, for the practice of smuggling tea, is tied to the challenging of narratives in which my interlocutors are engaged. Indeed, publicly naming a café for an illegal, and thereby counter to the

state, practice is claiming a connection to the practice of tea smuggling and the challenge to state power and sovereignty that illegal economic activity represents. This particular café was also seen as a safe space to be Kurdish, to speak Kurdish, to listen to Kurdish music. A place to, as Welat said, to “live our [Kurdish] culture.” By drinking “illegal tea” at a café in central Istanbul, then, Welat and the other students with whom I spent time at *Kaçakçay* were making assertions of their Kurdishness. I could see the appeal for Kurdish students to frequent a café such as *Kaçakçay*. It was a hidden away place where they could speak their language, listen to their music, discuss their politics, and drink their tea. It was, indeed, a place to “live” Kurdishness.

Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity, and the basis for identifying as Kurdish, has been described in a variety of ways, by a variety of scholars, working in a variety of places, at a variety of times. Lale Yalçın-Heckmann (1991) looked primarily at issues of kinship and tribal organization in her ethnographic account of Kurds in a village setting in Hakkari, Turkey, where she conducted fieldwork in the 1980s. Early on in her account, Yalçın-Heckmann connects Kurdish identity to language and interactions with the state. She begins by claiming that “Kurdish identity... is most clearly based on speaking Kurdish as the mother tongue” (27). This is an ethno-linguistic description of Kurdishness. She also describes Kurdishness as in opposition to the Turkish state. She says Kurdish identity “interacts with the state, its representatives and agents in the region. The immediate relations and encounters with governmental, military and civil administrators (who are local or non-local, of Kurdish or non-Kurdish origin) shape most of the concepts villagers

hold about the state, the government and national political structures” (27). This echoes Barth’s (1998) assertion that ethnic identities are negotiated in perceived boundaries between ethnic identities. In other words, ethnic identities come into focus when they are seen up against other ethnic identities. Ethno-linguistic identity as counter to the ethno-nationalism of the state came up again and again in the accounts of my interlocutors, as in the comment about Kurdishness being political made by Zana that is quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Being Kurdish, and asserting one’s Kurdishness is political precisely because, in its very articulation, it is a challenge to the dominant state narrative of Turkey as a state for Turks. Moreover, because the Turkish state has set up a totalizing picture of what a Turkish citizen “looks like;” anything that deviates from this state-articulated ideal is automatically positioned as against the state’s concept of Turkish citizenship.

This concept of Kurdishness as something counter to the Turkish state is also described by Martin van Bruinessen (1992) in his comprehensive account of socio-political organization among the Kurds describes such organization at various levels, from local to state. In describing the Turkification policies of the early republican era, and Turkish state responses to Kurdish revolts that had taken place during the same time period (e.g., the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925), he asserts that “gendarmerie posts and schools brought the state closer to the tribesmen and taught them that they were no Kurds anymore but Turkish citizens. Everything that recalled a separate Kurdish identity was to be abolished: language, dress, names and even the tribes themselves” (191). It is this erasure that my interlocutors are

fighting back against, in making their emphatic assertions of Kurdishness. They are agentively speaking and writing themselves back into the narrative.

Kurdishness being constructed as oppositional to the Turkish state and the modern Turkish nation-building project is echoed by Christopher Houston (2001). Houston claims that “contemporary Kurdish identity resides at the point of an intersection, the dangerous place where being (de-)constituted (assimilated) and constituting oneself collide” (2001:18). In describing Kurdish identity this way, Houston is asserting that Kurdishness (at least in Turkey) is found in the reaction of Kurds against the Turkish state’s attempts to Turkify the Kurdish population in Turkey. In their articulation of an alternative Kurdish collective ethno-linguistic identity category, Kurds in Turkey challenge the dominant Turkish collective ethno-linguistic identity category imposed on them by the Turkish state. Similarly, Cihan Ahmetbeyzade (2007) describes Kurdish identity in the form of Kurdish nationalism in the following way:

The minority Kurdish nationalism that resulted from modernization, standardization, and state regulations developed as a counterresistance to the impositions of the state. The imposed notion of a Turkish national identity and the prescription of a Turkish self are contested by many Kurds who recognize their own version of history and imagine their own ethnonational identities and communities. [163]

Kurdishness, then, according to this account by Ahmetbeyzade, is constituted against the imagined Turkish ethno-national community.

Again, this idea of Kurdishness in opposition to the assimilationist policies of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state is something my interlocutors articulated repeatedly. Not only that it was being done, but that it was an essential part of being Kurdish. Zana points to this when she says it would be a mistake to say

she is not political, because she is Kurdish. Kurdishness and asserting that particular ethno-linguistic identity is always already political. As Zana, and other interlocutors described it, the two are impossible to separate.

Another component of this narrative that relates to anthropological scholarship on Kurds, and Kurds in Turkey specifically, is Ahmetbeyzade's (2000, 2007), focus on gender issues. Ahmetbeyzade describes how ideas about the significant roles Kurdish women played in the Kurdish national struggle, especially the armed conflict that has taken place in the Kurdish majority region of Turkey since 1984. This has included turning "traditional" gender roles on their heads. As a result of Kurdish men being largely absent from the village setting, due to their voluntary or forced participation in the armed struggle, "peasant communities are largely represented by women in the Kurdish region" (2000:192). She continues by stating that "in the war zone Kurdish peasant mothers and wives create and re-create new oppositional gender-specific social roles as female heads of their households" (2000:193). While the majority of my research was conducted with young men, a young woman, Zana, was a key interlocutor in Istanbul. I see her boldness in engaging in a self-imposed graffiti project, as will be described later in this chapter, to be connected to the same significant roles played by Kurdish women Ahmetbeyzade describes.

Patriliney is a key concept in the anthropological literature relating to identity and citizenship in the Middle East (e.g., Delaney 1991; Kanaanah 2002; King 2018). Diane E. King (2014) shares how her interlocutors, Kurds in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the 1990s, described Kurdishness, along with religious identity, as something



that is patrilineally conferred, passing from fathers to their children, and that “since men beget members of their ethnic and religious group and women do not, ethnic and religious identity remains, in theory, singular from generation to generation... In the patrilineal Middle East, there are no ‘half’ ethnic categories” (76). This idea of no “half” identities is further described by her interlocutors in the following manner later in the book: “When group membership is reckoned patrilineally, you know who is in your group (tribe, class, lineage) and who is not in your group by knowing to which father each person was born” (118). Thus, identity, in this case Kurdishness, is considered by King’s interlocutors to be conferred through the male line. To be considered Kurdish, then, if one’s ethnic identity is being reckoned patrilineally, one must have a Kurdish father. King also describes finding that her interlocutors described Kurdish identity as revolving around what she calls “a man on the land” (66), or a patrilineage connected to a particular piece of land.

I did see hints of this connection to land in conversations with my interlocutors. For example, during the same conversation with Welat at *Kaçakçay*, I asked him about his village. He said, “When someone dies here [in Istanbul], they take the body back to the village. They believe their life is not here. Life begins in the village and finishes in the village.”

“Do you want to be buried in your village,” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

And with that, Welat pulled out his iPhone to show me pictures of his village. Clearly, then the village is an important part of Welat’s life. Wanting to be buried in the village is a direct reference to the “man on the land” concept. The importance of

the village in the imaginations of many of my interlocutors is a part of how they conceptualize their identities. I heard similar sentiments from several of my interlocutors. However, the displacement experiences of their early childhoods seem to have complicated this, as their lives are in Istanbul now, rather than in the village.

For Zana, this way of thinking, of wanting to be buried in the village was more a thing for her parents, than herself. She said, "I was born there [in the village], and my father and my mother want to die there. I feel that I'm not; I don't belong there. I'm here [in Istanbul]. I belong here." Welat was a few years older than Zana so he may have had more vivid memories of life in his village. Likely what is at play here is a generational shift in level of connectedness to the village. While Zana visits her village, with other members of her family, she sees her life as being centered in Istanbul, to the point that she is not sure that she belongs in the village. I heard a similar sentiment while talking to Reşo.

As I was preparing to return to Istanbul for dissertation research in 2016, Azad suggested I contact a friend of his named Reşo. Azad had met Reşo in Chicago, while Reşo was there for six months to take English language courses. At the time we met, he was a master's student in history at Istanbul Bilgi University. We met at a café, just off Istiklal Street. We chatted for a bit. I asked him about his hometown. He told me his family was from Sivas, a province in the east of the central region of Turkey. They moved to Istanbul in 1980, where Reşo was born. I asked if he ever went to Sivas to visit his hometown.

Reşo: I have only been there three times, because nobody lives there. Even my grandparents live in Istanbul.

Lydia: When did you go to your hometown?

Reşo: One time when I was a child. Six years ago, my grandfather died, so I went for his funeral. Then, I went again one year later for the anniversary of his death... My grandfather said, "I want to be buried there [in the village]." My family still has a house there, but I don't visit. There is nothing there, just nature and a small house. I don't think Sivas is important for me. On some levels it is important: it's my hometown. But everything I do is here [in Istanbul]. My family is here.

Lydia: Do you want to be buried in Sivas?

Reşo: No.

Lydia: What about your parents?

Reşo: I don't know.

Lydia: What do you say when someone asks, "Where are you from?"

Reşo: I don't like the question, where are you from? It's not important. It's a secondary question. What you do is more important.

Here, the generational divide in feelings about the village is more stark. Reşo's grandfather wanted to be buried in the village, and clearly, the family complied with his wishes. Yet, the only two times Reşo has been to his family's village were for events surrounding the death of his grandfather. He acknowledges his hometown as Sivas, rather than Istanbul, despite having been born in Istanbul. However, he does not visit his hometown, nor does he seem to have much desire to do so. Rather, he sees his family and his life in Istanbul. Reşo's seeming nonchalance about his hometown was a bit of a surprise to me. The anthropological literature (King 2014; Aras 2014; Yalçın-Heckmann 1991) points to strong connections to the land for Kurds, and as such I expected a stronger expression of connection to Sivas from Reşo. Yet, clearly, for Reşo, there is some level of disconnection from his hometown.

He says there is nothing there, that it is not so important to him, and in his dislike of the question “Where are you from?” he expressed a desire to be known for his actions, rather than the location of his ancestral homeland, which echoes Welat’s frustration with the “Where are you from?” question during the job application process. Serhad, who was a 26-year-old journalism master’s student and Uber driver in Chicago when I interviewed him in 2016 discussed both the feeling of not being fully connected in addition to kinship-related elements of Kurdishness.

Serhad was born in a village in the province of Kars, in northeastern Turkey, and moved to Istanbul with his family in 2002, when he was 12. He hadn’t gone back to his village since his family moved away. I asked him why and he said, “I don’t know. I was busy. I was enjoying Istanbul.” Then, I asked what his village meant to him:

Serhad: It’s like part of my childhood. I remember every street of the village, or the town, you know? But the things that we saw, that I saw, it wasn’t very nice, the political issues. You know, you saw some commandos, or soldiers, with the tanks and stuff, they come to your village. You don’t even know what they are, and you know, they occupy the village. They bring their flags and they put it there. It’s like, okay, who are you guys? What’s going on there? It’s scary to you. I don’t know. I don’t have good memories about the village, but, you know, some good ones, bad ones. But, to me, it’s like part of culture, you know?

Lydia: What do you mean?

Serhad: Like, Kurds are usually, like, nomads or villagers. They only settled in a few cities. So, to me, being Kurdish, is like being a villager or being a nomad. You know, that’s why I find in that place my identity.

Lydia: How would you describe your identity? Who are you? Are you a villager?

Serhad: I’m not a villager. I’m an urban person. You know, I lived in Istanbul for, like, 12 or 13 years, then I’m in Chicago, another urban city.

Lydia: Yeah.

Serhad: Yeah. Like, my identity, it's... I don't want to be a nationalist person. But the things that I saw or that I have experienced, you know, they push me to describe myself as a Kurd. Because, when someone asks me this question, I would say, "Oh, I'm a person, I'm a human," you know? But, when someone asks this question now, I'm saying, "Oh, I'm Kurdish."

Lydia: What makes you Kurdish?

Serhad: I think, the political issues, you know, when you have some big pressure on you, you just want to embrace what people put pressure on, you know? Like, they make pressure on Kurdishness, so I say, "Oh, okay, this is mine." Like, it's protected. And, my mom, she is like, I mean, when you see her, she is like Kurdish. I mean, she has a white [headscarf], she is brave, she's talkative, she's strong, you know? When you see her, you just say, "Okay, she is Kurdish." When I am talking about my Kurdishness, I just remember her, because she is, kind of, Kurdishness. ... Mothers are, kind of, the symbol of culture. Women are very important for culture, you know, they raise kids, and they give them the language. Kids spend more time with their moms, not their dads. So, they are kind of the symbol of culture, political issues, any kind of issues that are related to Kurdishness.

As he was talking about the importance of women, and mothers in particular, to Kurdish culture, I was reminded of several things I had encountered during fieldwork. First, the struggle for the right to "mother tongue education," one of the key human rights issues being pursued by Kurdish activists in Turkey. The mother tongue education campaign, which my interlocutors referenced, was a reaction to, and continuation of, the politicization of language in the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state. A response to the Kurdish language being banned in the early years of the Republic, through Turkish state programs such as the "*Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş!*" (Citizen, Speak Turkish!) campaign that sought to promote the use of the Turkish language and eliminate the Kurdish language in the Kurdish-majority areas of Turkey. Second, the Saturday Mothers, a group of female protestors, most wearing white headscarves, who have sat in silent protest along İstiklal Caddesi every

Saturday with the photos of family members who have been disappeared, since at least the 1990s. Third, the images I had seen of female PKK guerrillas camped out in the mountains, ready to fight the Turkish state and, more recently, female units of Kurdish soldiers fighting the so-called Islamic State in Syria. Indeed, there are images of strong Kurdish women, strong Kurdish mothers, that seem to be a key part of the Kurdish ethos, and Serhad seemed to be tapping into that in describing his mother as a key part of his own Kurdish identity. But his main emphasis in discussing his mother's role in fostering his Kurdishness is the teaching of the Kurdish language that happens in the home, perpetuated by his mother. In Turkey, where the Kurdish language was banned, and Kurdish language instruction has been limited to elective courses housed largely in folklore departments at a handful of Turkish universities, Serhad points to the importance of Kurdish mothers in ensuring the next generation learns the Kurdish language. Additionally, Serhad points to the political element of asserting a Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity in the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state.

In aiming to eliminate Kurdish social spaces, yet refusing to name them as Kurdish, the Turkish state both fostered feelings of Kurdish identity, or Kurdishness, and excluded the possibility of a Kurdish identity in the public ("Turkish") sphere. As Mesut Yeğen (1996) describes, in his examination of Turkish state narratives from the 1920s to the 1980s, the development of these feelings of Kurdishness was political, as the constitution of "Kurdishness" as a collective identity category developed against the nation-building project of the early Turkish state.

This sentiment of Kurdishness being constructed as a form of resistance to the modern Turkish nation-building project is echoed by Christopher Houston (2001), who conducted research in Turkey, and mainly in Istanbul, in the 1980s and 1990s. He claims that “contemporary Kurdish identity resides at the point of an intersection, the dangerous place where being (de-) constituted (assimilated) and constituting oneself collide” (18). Thus, Kurdishness in Turkey is found in the reaction of Kurds to the Turkish state’s attempts to Turkify the population; in their articulation of a Kurdish alternative to the Turkish collective identity category imposed on them by the state.

“Kurdishness” is constituted in reaction to, in contrast with, and as resistance against the imagined Turkish nation, and within the very social spaces where the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state attempts to use other adjectives in order to avoid using any derivation of the word “Kurd.” As Cihan Ahmetbeyzade (2007), who conducted ethnographic research among Kurds living in Istanbul in the late 1990s and early 2000s, describes it:

The minority Kurdish nationalism that resulted from modernization, standardization, and state regulations developed as a counterresistance to the impositions of the state. The imposed notion of a Turkish national identity and the prescription of a Turkish self are contested by many Kurds who recognize their own version of history and imagine their own ethnonational identities and communities. [163]

Additionally, according to Anna Secor (2004), “the word ‘Kurd’ was not to be pronounced, while the eastern and southeastern regions and their population were referred to as tribal, outlaw, reactionary, and backwards” (355). Yet, despite the attempts of the Turkish state to ignore or deny the existence of a Kurdish minority within its borders, Secor also found Kurds who were “moving from assimilation to

the assertion of identity” (364), as Welat and I experienced with the musical display of Kurdishness on İstiklal Caddesi.

“Kurdishness,” as I use it, is based on how my interlocutors tend to define it and entails a conception of collective ethno-linguistic identity. My interlocutors tend to foreground language when asked about what “makes” someone Kurdish. These echoes assertions found in the anthropological literature, including Lale Yalçın-Heckmann’s (1991) description of Kurdish identity being tied to speaking Kurdish as one’s “mother tongue” (27). In his list of “everything that recalled a separate Kurdish identity” (van Bruinessen 1992:191) that the Turkish state sought to abolish, van Bruinessen lists language first. Certainly, the nascent Turkish state banning the Kurdish language in 1924, only one year after the establishment of the republic, indicates that the state saw the Kurdish language as a threat to the Turkishness of Turkey.

The importance of language to conceptions of Kurdishness in Turkey is also borne out in broader explorations of the topic. The Turkish state’s focus on language, according to Secor (2004) is due to the fact that “Turkey has historically viewed claims to Kurdish linguistic, cultural, or political rights as sources of instability and threats to national unity” (356). However, the state ban on Kurdishness did not eliminate the language from Turkey. Indeed, as Nicole Watts (2010) points out, “ordinary people’s continued use of a Kurdish language (Kurmanji or Zazaki)” and “naming children with Kurdish names” (12) are common forms of resistance in Turkey. Kurdish language rights, including the right to



“mother tongue education” in Kurdish, are a major focus of Kurds in Turkey in the present (Hassanpour et al. 1996; Watts 2010; Çoşkun et al. 2011).

Kurdishness can be found in Kurdish reactions against the Turkish state’s attempts to Turkify the population, in their articulation of a Kurdish alternative ethno-linguistic collective identity category to the dominant Turkish ethno-linguistic collective identity category in Turkey. Mesut Yeğen (1996) describes “Kurdishness” as a collective identity category as being constituted vis-à-vis the nation-building project of the early Turkish republic. He argues that the social spaces that were the focus of much of the modernizing state project, “*tradition* (the social and political structures of ‘premodernity’), *the peripheral economy* (smuggling), and *religion* (the Caliphate and tarikats)” (225) were the same social spaces in which Kurdish identity was constituted. In aiming to eliminate these social spaces, yet refusing to name them as “Kurdish,” the Turkish state fostered feelings of Kurdishness, or the development of a distinct ethno-linguistic Kurdish identity, while simultaneously excluding Kurdishness from the “Turkish” public sphere. Thus, this understanding of Kurdishness as a concept that is articulated in contrast to Turkishness is tied to the experiences of my interlocutors who challenge state narratives.

Linking this back to language and sociocultural anthropology more explicitly, Houston (2008) asserts that Turkish linguistic policies were part of an “aural politics” (122) designed to silence Kurdish in public. Yet, as Houston (2008) describes, Kurds created private spaces for the maintenance of the Kurdish language as an important aspect of Kurdish culture: “In Turkey Kurdish is taught at private

educational foundations, half-disguised under names such as ‘Mesopotamian Culture Center.’ Their common rooms agitate with songs in Kurdish, their artists and listeners re-presenting the rhythm of being non-Turkish” (156). My interlocutors grew up in these types of Kurdish spaces in Istanbul. However, it appears that limiting their Kurdishness to the private spaces of their homes is no longer enough. Rather, my interlocutors and their contemporaries have taken their assertions of Kurdishness outside the home, into public spaces, such as the streets of central Istanbul and Kurdish language classrooms at Turkish universities.

### *Asserting Kurdishness*

The concept of “asserting” a collective identity category is related ideas of “claiming citizenship” (Nordberg 2006; see also Hahonou 2011). I have chosen to use “asserting,” rather than “claiming,” as it implies a more forceful action. Making an assertion requires a certain level of confidence that is not implied by the term claim. As my interlocutors are certainly confident of their Kurdishness, asserting their Kurdishness is a more accurate descriptor for what they are doing when they speak Kurdish on the street or participate in a protest. “Asserting,” as I use it to talk about “asserting Kurdishness” in Turkey, falls at the intersection of two ideas: 1) Biner’s (2007, 2010) concept of unmasking public secrets and making claims to space based on cultural heritage; and 2) Neyzi’s (2002) description of the tension between the competing ethno-linguistic identity claims made by the state and individuals who are citizens of that state. I will now elaborate on each, in turn.

In her description of Armenians and Syriac Christians living in Mardin, Turkey (in the southeast), Zerrin Özlem Biner (2007, 2010) draws on Michael Taussig's (1999) "distinction between 'secrecy' and 'public secrecy'... [Secrecy is] a site of power where social and political relationships are disguised in the form of fetish... Public secrecy derives from people's complicity in disguising the power relations behind the fetish" (2010:74). Secrets and public secrets can, according to Biner, be "unmasked" (76). To illustrate this, Biner describes a woman, Sofi, the grandmother of one of her informants. Sofi was Armenian at birth but had changed her name to Ayşe and converted to Islam. Her grandchildren and other relatives knew that she had been an Armenian Christian, and after her death they unmasked her public secret by referring to her as Sofi. As Biner describes it, "Ayşe was unmasked and turned back into Sofi through the revelation of public secrets in the fragmented narratives of her relatives" (2010:76). Sofi's relatives, then, were "claiming" her Armenian-ness. Unmasking, then, is a form of claiming, yet falls a bit short of making an assertion of ethno-linguistic identity. Thus, unmasking highlights public secrecy, and makes claims to knowledge of the existence of this public secret. However, these claims, at least as described by Biner, do not go beyond admission of knowledge for fear of potential retribution.

In addition to this unmasking of secrets, Biner (2010) also discusses making claims based on "cultural heritage" (86) in the city of Mardin. These claims involve competing claims to rights associated with structures and spaces made by Kurds, Arabs, and Syriac Christians. Syriac Christians are making claims to spaces that they assert they were forced out of during the Armenian genocide that began in 1915.

However, as Biner describes, Kurds seem to be indifferent to these claims, and the Arab elites in the city reinforce the silencing of this period of Turkish history through their non-reactions.

In her discussion of the claiming of alternative identities, Leyla Neyzi (2002) presents the story of Fatma Arıĝ, a member of the Sabbatean religious minority in Istanbul. In doing so, she addresses issues of national identity, assimilation, history, and subjectivity in contemporary Turkey. According to Neyzi, Turkishness was something to be performed, and in “performing Turkishness, subjects felt the need to hide alternate histories in the public sphere, and sometimes in the familial sphere as well” (138). This hiding of alternate histories echoes Biner’s (2010) discussion of public secrecy.

This, then, leads Neyzi (2002) to turn to histories and alternate histories, and specifically what she calls the “rediscovery of history” by the citizens of Turkey:

The rediscovery of history in Turkish society in the 1990s suggests that the Turkish modernity projects’ attempt to create a new basis for identity has been limited by the refusal to acknowledge the cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire... The turn to the past in Turkish society suggests the emergence of a new subjectivity (and demands for a new concept of citizenship) predicated upon having a *personal history* which necessitates the public acknowledgement of a plural cultural heritage. [138]

The history of the Ottoman Empire is, of course, a history of a plurality of ethnic and religious identities. This plurality, in fact, continued throughout the more recent history and present of the Turkish state, despite the attempts at Turkification of the early republican period. “Remembering” this plurality, “unmasking” the public secret, in an echo of Özyürek’s (2007) concept of “public memory,” creates spaces in what Trouillot (1995) would call the “silences” in Turkish history for the claiming of

alternative histories that counter the dominant historical narrative of the Turkish state.

The claiming of a personal history must be negotiated against the denial of alternative histories by the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state and in the public spaces of Turkey, as well as against the “suppression of memory within the family” (Neyzi 2002:152). This idea of alternative histories to the idea of individuals claiming identity in Neyzi’s presentation of the life of Fatma Arıĝ, allowing her to focus on “*individuals* engaged in the process of searching for their past, rather than a discrete community” (147). In Neyzi’s description Fatma Arıĝ desires to claim her personal history and her Sabbatean origins. In doing so, Neyzi argues, she is part of “a growing demand on the part of Turkish citizens for the right to a personal history which acknowledges the plural cultural heritage of the people of Turkey” (148). Neyzi demonstrates this in the case of Fatma Arıĝ, by explaining that her personal past as a Sabbatean has been denied by both her family and the public discourse of the Turkish state. Thus, in making assertions about her past, Fatma Arıĝ is countering both of these denials.

“Asserting,” then, as I use it falls at the intersection of the ideas described above, regarding ethnic/religious minorities claiming their identities and rights based on those identities. Asserting alternative (i.e., non-Turkish, non-Sunni Muslim) identities in Turkey must necessarily be articulated vis-à-vis the Turkish state’s nation-building project and the dominant ethnic/religious/linguistic narrative in Turkey since 1923. These ethno-linguistic identity assertions are presented as forms of counter-narrative to the constructed historical narrative of

the Turkish state and denials of the pluralist past of the land and peoples now contained within the internationally recognized borders of the Turkish state. These assertions are made out loud and in contrast to a history of silences, though they need not be made loudly.

I argue that the concept of asserting is a useful theoretical tool for examining Kurdishness in Turkey, as I have seen similarities between the kinds of claims described by Biner (2007, 2010) and Neyzi (2002) and the assertions made by Kurds, and specifically Kurdish university students, in Turkey. As described previously, Kurds have been subject to silencing (Trouillot 1995) by the Turkish state in variety of ways, including denial of existence and denial of language rights. Despite denials of Kurdish existence in Turkey, the fact that Kurds do exist was essentially a public secret that is now being publicly unmasked. I also like that asserting, as in making an assertion, implies the use of language, given the history of the Kurdish language being banned and the fact that the Kurdish language has become a potent political symbol of the larger Kurdish struggle for rights in Turkey. Additionally, the implication of language use in asserting is interesting, as I see it as a counterpoint to silencing, which can be seen as an absence of speaking, and absence of the use of language. Dominant Turkish state narratives have silenced Kurdish (and other) alternatives. Thus, in making assertions about their Kurdishness, Kurds are breaking these silences. These assertions also serve to challenge dominant state narratives about Kurds, including denial of existence, as in the case of Azad's history professor, who claimed Kurds do not have a history, and descriptions of Kurds as "terrorists," as I will discuss in the next chapter.

My interlocutors in Istanbul have linked their Kurdish identity to various factors, including language and politics. Welat told me, “I am a Kurd. The important things for the Kurds are their language, their traditions, family, friends, and sharing.” Language is the first thing he lists as important, echoing Lale Yalçın-Heckmann’s (1991) assertion that Kurdish identity is linked most importantly to language. Later in our conversation, Welat begins talking about identity as connected to language again. “I feel Kurdish. Kurds are, you know, Kurds. They speak their language, and they have a different culture, and they have an ethnicity and customs. And, when you were born into the same things, you feel like a Kurd.” So, here again language is foregrounded. Yet, Welat also introduces the idea of Kurdish identity being connected to a particular feeling, and this feeling can then be connected to ideas about being political. At another point in our conversation, Welat said, “I have one identity. It is politics. ... I have one political position. I am Kurdish. ... I want the Kurds to take all of their rights in a democratic situation.” Clearly, for Welat, his Kurdish identity is comprised of language, a particular feeling of Kurdishness, and being political, and specifically a form of being political that should counter the dominant discourse of the Turkish Republic.

Şervan, a 21-year-old law student, also talked about the importance of language to concepts of Kurdishness. “If a nation doesn’t have freedom, they can’t do anything. ... They can’t speak their language. They can’t live however they want. ... They can’t speak, they can’t write. I am 21 years old. I am only now learning how to write Kurdish. ... Language is important.” This discussion about language points back to Yael Navaro-Yashin’s (2002a) point about the education system being used for

indoctrination by the Turkish state. Both Şervan and Welat can speak and write in Turkish and English, because they were required to learn both of these languages as part of their education. Yet, though Kurdish was the first language each man learned to speak, it was not until they were at university that they were able to gain literacy in their mother tongue, as their university is one of those that offers formal Kurdish language classes. That these university classes are sanctioned by the Turkish state is particularly interesting, in that the state is allowing for the creation of spaces that challenge the dominant state discourse.

The sentiments raised by Welat and Şervan were echoed by other students with whom I spoke. Diyar, a 25-year-old master's student in journalism said that for a person to say they are Kurdish means "language, culture, and a common imagination for the future." When asked what makes her Kurdish, Zozan, a 22-year-old translation student, said, "My language, culture, and thoughts make me a Kurd. If you say, 'I am a Kurd,' the Kurdish language has to be your best-known language and you can use your language with other Kurds." And Rojda, a 21-year-old mathematics student, responded that "language and culture" are what make her Kurdish. Clearly for all of these students, the Kurdish language is intimately linked with their ideas about Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity and their assertions of that identity.

### *Kurdish Space at a Turkish University*

Welat was a political science student at Bilgi University, one of two universities in Istanbul to offer Kurdish language classes at the time. He had taken advantage of this opportunity and was enrolled in the advanced level Kurdish class.



I had asked Welat about his Kurdish identity, and specifically, when he first became aware that he was Kurdish. His answer was directly related to the Turkish education system and language:

Lydia: So, do you remember the first time you thought to yourself, "I am Kurdish?"

Welat: Yeah.

Lydia: Can you describe it to me? When did you first realize, "I am Kurdish?"

Welat: When, actually, when I first went to school, my teacher spoke Turkish, and everybody spoke [Turkish] with the teacher. I never spoke with my teacher, until the fourth year. And then, on my first day, when I went to the school, I said to my mother, "I'm not, I am not like my friends." So, I have a different identity. I was aware of my Kurdish identity.... And then, it continued. When I went to high school, reading about the Kurds. Also, on the Internet, not in books, because many things were banned. So, you cannot learn everything about the Kurds. Also, when I encountered the Internet, I met my Kurdish identity.

Lydia: So, first, the first day of school, and then again with the Internet?

Welat: The Internet, yeah.

Lydia: Okay, so what happened with the Internet? What do you mean when you say that?

Welat: I started to research the Kurds, and the Kurdish language, and Kurdish traditions, and then I found good things about the Kurds, their life, their... Because you don't learn anything about their life in Turkish books. It's like, it's like "mountain people," it's "danger," every time it's, you know, like that. And then, I started to research on the Internet and read books. My friends, or my brothers, they also read, and said, "I am Kurdish." Now, I know something about my culture, about my customs, everything. Now I feel I am Kurdish.

Welat very clearly describes learning about his Kurdishness, first in a Turkish classroom, and then through conducting research on the Internet. His experience in the classroom was one of being othered, though not being able to speak the language of instruction, and therefore not speaking to his teacher for four years.

When he realized that he would not be learning about his history or culture in the Turkish classroom, Welat took it upon himself to use the Internet to educate himself about the history and culture of Kurds. This highlights an emphasis on education and language, tied to Kurdishness, that I heard from my interlocutors.

Bilgi University was one of the first universities in Turkey to offer Kurdish language classes, beginning in 2009 (Anadolu Agency 2015). I spoke to the Kurdish language instructor at Bilgi, Ronayi, about the importance of the class. She told me, “Some students know Kurdish, speaking and listening, but they don’t know how to read and write. They are shocked to see texts in Kurdish for the first time.... Kurdish used to be invisible, but now it is very visible in the cities in Turkey. People used to speak Kurdish quietly in public; they were afraid, but now they are not afraid to speak Kurdish in Turkey.” It seemed that Ronayi felt she was contributing to the lessening of the fear to speak Kurdish in public, through teaching her Kurdish students more about their language.

I attended a Kurdish class with Welat on two occasions, to sit in and observe. All but one of the students I met were Kurds who might have grown up speaking some Kurdish at home, but had been educated in Turkish, and now wanted to strengthen their Kurdish language skills. On one occasion, during my second visit to the class, the students were presenting their final projects for the semester. It became clear that they had been tasked with putting together a report, in Kurdish, on any topic of interest to them. The topics ran the gamut, from how chocolate is made to the life of Kurdish linguist, journalist, and politician, Celadet Alî Bedirxan. One of the female students stood up and started talking. Welat quietly translated for

me. He told me she was talking about her uncle being disappeared. She was on the verge of tears for most of her presentation, and the instructor walked over at one point to give her a hug. The other students offered words of encouragement. I was struck, in that moment, by what this classroom and the environment created by their Kurdish teacher meant for these students. It was a safe space to be Kurdish, to speak Kurdish, and to speak about Kurdishness. It was also a space to learn all aspects of their language for the first time. I asked the instructor, Ronayi, how she had come to teach Kurdish at Bilgi, and she said, "The government said they would allow Kurdish classes. The students asked and the university responded."

After Welat moved to Chicago in 2016, I asked him about his experience as a Kurd at his university:

Lydia: At university, specifically, were you comfortable saying "I'm Kurdish" in your classes with Turkish students or Turkish professors?

Welat: Yeah, in my university, we had a Kurdish class. And, my teacher, her name is Ronayi. When I was in high school, she was my English teacher, and we knew each other. I felt my identity strongly in that class: I am Kurdish. I had one teacher; he was arrested several times by the Turkish government. The reason is that he was sometimes speaking nicely about the Kurds.

Lydia: Oh, okay, but is he Kurdish?

Welat: No, he is, kind of like, from the Black Sea area. Sometimes, when he was talking about the Kurds, some students, they say, "Don't make propaganda for the Kurds in the classroom. We are coming to listen to the lesson." It was kind of like they were being rude with the teacher sometimes. The class was Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish Problems in the Region. And, he said, "Well, we are in Turkey, we live in Turkey, we have some problems, we need to talk." And, when he tried to talk, the students, some of them, they said, "We don't want to listen to Kurdish propaganda in class." They became really, really rude sometimes. And, when it's like that class, you don't feel, kind of like, I'm going to say I'm Kurdish in class. But mostly, I say that I'm Kurdish and am proud of my Kurdishness... One of my friends, he studied at Marmara University. He studied journalism. Sometimes, we saw, he had some marks on his face, because conservative and nationalistic

people, they attacked him. And, he said, “I never said anything in that class, like I’m Kurdish. It was only my skin, that people discriminated against me and hit me.”

Lydia: But it sounds like you were pretty comfortable saying, “I’m Kurdish” on your campus?

Welat: Yeah, because it’s kind of like a more liberal school.<sup>4</sup>

Lydia: A more liberal school? Yeah. Okay. So, were there Kurdish student groups at your university?

Welat: Yeah, we had one group, it was really, really active.

Lydia: Tell me about it.

Welat: Yeah, it was the Bilgi University Cultural Group. We organized some events about the Kurdish problems, Kurdish movies, Kurdish music, Kurdish history. We tried to solve the Kurdish issues, problems, kind of like, more in the academic area. We had several big conferences. One, I remember you joined, the one conference. That one was the biggest one, and we worked with the İsmail Beşikçi<sup>5</sup> Foundation, too. Mostly, in our club, when a student comes from the Kurdish region, we think about, how are they going to survive in Istanbul? How can we help them? How can they be connected to each other? How are we going to share something? That’s why we, kind of like, established the club. And, literally, it became, for all of us, beneficial. We learned many things from that club, and we had many responsibilities. Mostly, our friends are not lucky like us, because they want to establish some Kurdish clubs in their schools, but the management of the school, the university, they don’t allow them. It’s seriously a big issue in the university. But Bilgi is good for us, because it was more liberal.

For Welat and his classmates, the Kurdish language classroom and the Kurdish student organization are two sides of the same coin. Their Kurdish language instructor, Ronayi, was involved with the student organization, as an advisor. So,

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<sup>4</sup> Universities in Turkey are notoriously political. Schools like Bilgi and Middle Eastern Technical University (*Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi*) were known for their liberal leanings, while schools like Gazi University were known for being quite nationalistic, and other schools, like Fatih University, were known for being affiliated with the Gülen movement.

<sup>5</sup> İsmail Beşikçi is a Turkish sociologist who has written extensively about the Kurdish population in Turkey. He has been imprisoned on multiple occasions on charges of “propaganda.”

Welat's friend group were taking language courses together, where they were discussing Kurdish issues, and this extended to their extracurricular activities as well, participating in the planning of events, including conferences, to academically explore Kurdish issues in Turkey, and the broader region.

The Turkish government, by allowing for the teaching of the Kurdish language, was also allowing for the creation of spaces in which the Turkish nationalist narrative, of Turkey as a country for the Turks, was openly challenged, through the speaking of a language other than Turkish, and through the topics that were discussed in class. This effectively turned the Kurdish language classroom at a Turkish university into what I call an "incubator of Kurdishness," because it allowed for the ability to reclaim their "mother tongue," to discuss what it means to be a Kurd in Turkey, and to process their shared history. These types of conversations are precisely what an educator might expect in a university classroom, though it was likely not what the Turkish state had in mind when it agreed to allow Kurdish language courses for university students.

### *University Students within the Anthropology of Youth*

The study of youth has been a classic topic of anthropological study, with early studies focusing on youth as a period in the human life cycle (Mead 1928; Turner 1964). As such, youth, or adolescence in the case examined by Margaret Mead (1928), was seen as something that happened to young people, a stage that had to be gotten through on the way to becoming an adult. Later studies saw a shift to a critique of the study of youth as subject to the forces around them and focused

instead on youth as agents in their own right (e.g., Willis 1981). Often these more contemporary studies took the form of the school ethnography (e.g., Bettie 2003). Still others include ethnography focusing on issues such as identity, belonging, and activism among various youth populations (Mir 2014; Vora 2013; Shankar 2008; Varzi 2006). It is this last set of ethnographies to which I now turn.

Identity exploration is a component of being a university student. As Shabana Mir (2014) describes, in the experiences of Muslim American women negotiating identity as undergraduate students at universities in the United States, “the undergraduate social world is the site of crucial identity work” (33), by which she means that in the university setting young people generally gain a better understanding of who they are as individuals and begin to assert their identities. For the young women among whom Mir did her fieldwork, this identity negotiation was done in a sphere in which they were “othered.” Coming face-to-face with the way they were perceived by non-Muslim student peers ultimately created spaces for agency. As Mir describes it:

My participants became objects to themselves when they met the “Muslim Woman” in their peers’ heads and internalized this image, but this objectification created possibilities of agency against symbolic violence. The possibility of agency is in fact catalyzed from the mix of conflicting Orientalist stereotypes that case Muslim women as objects of fear and objects of pity, as sexual objects and virginally chaste: this repetition and doubling, these contradictions, betray the weakness in Orientalism, and they engender the possibilities for stereotyped persons to transcend inscribed identities... My research participants “did agency” vis-à-vis multiple forces and centers of power. [38-39]

Mir found that her interlocutors were able to exercise agency in asserting Muslim identities countered “popular and highly destructive notions of Muslim identity as Other, as pathological and as ‘given’ and unchangeable” (42). Thus, in this case,

Muslim youth were disrupting stereotypes in their negotiation and assertion of their identities as Muslim that did not map neatly onto common stereotypes of Muslims, and Muslim women in particular. In this way, they seem to be countering a historical Orientalist narrative of Muslim-ness.

A component of realizing one's identity and asserting it in an ethnographically assertive state, such as Turkey, is the question of what citizenship looks like in that particular context. Neha Vora (2013) examines issues of citizenship and belonging among diasporic Indians living in Dubai. Vora calls these Indian residents of Dubai "impossible citizens" (3), because "their modes of citizenship and belonging occur not despite but through the very legal structures and technologies of governance that prevent them from naturalizing and that produce their temporariness as short-term workers tied to individual citizen-sponsors (*kafeels*)" (175). While the details are different, Vora's term "impossible citizens" recalls, for me, Yegen's (2009) description of Kurds as "pseudo-citizens," based on the idea that Turkish citizenship is simultaneously a political and an ethnic designation. As such, Kurds can only be political citizens, but not ethnic citizens, of Turkey.

Issues of identity and belonging among university students, specifically, are also addressed by Vora (2013) within the context of the South Asian community in Dubai. As Vora describes:

Indian and Pakistani students who attended schools like American University in Sharjah articulated identifications that were extensions of their South Asian noncitizen positionality in Dubai, but these identifications were also differently enabled and mobilized as they experienced first-hand the promises and failures of global and neoliberal citizenship that Western universities in the Gulf deploy. The narratives and experiences of these young people challenge the forms of belonging and exclusion through which South Asians in Dubai have historically been interpellated and through which

my other interlocutors expressed their understandings of citizenship, migration, and identity. The emerging forms of politicization and claims to “second-class” citizenship by South Asian university students point to potential larger-scale shifts in the relationship between Gulf States and their foreign resident populations, and to new claims to the city, the Emirati nation, and the region within South Asian diasporic futures. [147-148]

I see multiple connections between the situation of South Asian university students in Dubai described by Vora (2013) and my fieldwork with Kurdish university students in Turkey. There is a similar disconnect between education and lived experience, though the focus is a bit different. I have yet to hear mention of neoliberal “promises,” but there is certainly a disconnect between a pervasive articulation of Turkey as a nation of Turkish citizens who are ethnically Turkish in primary, secondary, and tertiary education (Navaro-Yashin 2002a; Altınay 2004) and the experiences of Kurdish students as Kurds. For example, Azad told me about being told by a university professor on the first day of class his first year at Istanbul University that there is no such group as “the Kurds,” echoing the “Mountain Turks” rhetoric of the early 20th century Turkish state. Yet, through organizations of Kurdish students, or in Kurdish language classrooms (at the handful of private universities that have them), young Kurds are able to come together and discuss their experiences as Kurds in Turkey. Thus, as Vora (2013) notes for South Asian students in Dubai, I have seen a political element to these interactions between Kurdish students in Turkey.

Language can be an important component of identity formation. As already discussed, my interlocutors often foreground the Kurdish language in conversations about Kurdishness. Shalini Shankar (2008) also points to the importance of language in identity formation among Desi teens in Silicon Valley. Shankar argues



that “how youth decide to speak a heritage language, with whom, and how this positions them at school is linked to cultural capital” (101). I find this particularly interesting in light of having been told by more than one interlocutor that being Kurdish means speaking Kurdish, the implication being that to be a “real” Kurd one has to know and use the Kurdish language. This is particularly striking in the context of urban Turkey, where, as Anna Grabolle-Çeliker (2013) noted a “decline of Kurdish language use” among the Kurdish migrants with whom she did fieldwork in Istanbul. Thus, it would seem that there may be a form cultural capital implied in the designation of Kurdish language use as a marker of being Kurdish among Kurdish university students in Istanbul.

Even seemingly “simple” or “small” acts can be acts of resistance for young people who desire to challenge what they perceive as oppressive ethno-nationally assertive state narratives and assert their Kurdishness. Similarly, Roxanne Varzi (2006) discusses ways in which Iranian youth, including university students resist the dominant narrative of the state that attempts to produce “Islamic citizens” (10), including through the attempted enforcement of an “Islamic public sphere” (7), thus highlighting youth as political agents. In one case Varzi discusses clothing as a potential site for resistance: “Even Islamic dress provides room for interpretation. Altered and played with, clothing meant for a specific use can be utilized in ways that transform its planned effect so as to allow for resistance” (125). In much the same way that clothing can be a marker of an assertion to an alternative ethno-linguistic identity, so too could something equally as mundane, such as the drinking of *kaçakçay*, as I experienced with Welat. And yet, despite the fact that my

interlocutors are creating and interacting in spaces in which they can assert their Kurdishness, the history of being compelled to leave their villages leads to an apparent sense of unsettledness for my interlocutors.

### *Belonging and Not Belonging*

I first met Zana, a linguistics student, in the summer of 2014, while on a weekend trip to Istanbul from Ankara, where I was studying the Turkish language. She is the younger sister of Azad, one of the Kurds living in Chicago, and he had arranged for us to meet.

Zana was doing an internship at the İsmail Beşikçi Foundation Library, an institute named for the esteemed sociologist, who for many years was one of very few ethnically Turkish academics speaking out about the plight of Kurds in Turkey. The library houses what used to be Beşikçi's personal library. It was a well-lit, sunny space comprising two floors of a building just off İstiklal Caddesi. After meeting me on the street, in front of the building, Zana escorted me up a flight of stairs and into the office, where she promptly offered me tea, coffee, or water. She quickly mixed up two cups of Nescafe and handed one to me and we chatted for a while. She offered to give me a tour, which I eagerly accepted, and she walked me through the stacks, pointing out topical sections of books and collections of journals and newspapers.



*Figure 4 Inside the İsmail Beşikçi Foundation Library. (Photo by the author.)*

My next meeting with Zana was just a few days after arriving in Istanbul for dissertation research, in February of 2016. During our conversation, I asked Zana to tell me about her village and whether or not she spends time there:

Zana: I visit my hometown because my father goes there in the summer, and my mother also goes there. When I find time to go, I go.

Lydia: Okay. About how often, usually?

Zana: Last time I went was two years ago. Two summers ago.

Lydia: So, it's been a while?

Zana: Yes. I want to go this summer. As you know, I work in a library, and it's so far to go. Like, one day to go by bus. If I go Sunday, I have to come back Friday, and three days is so short. I don't want to spend money on a ticket.

Lydia: Yeah, of course. So, you usually go in the summertime, then?

Zana: Yes, yes.

Lydia: Okay. So, what does your hometown mean to you? You haven't been there for two years. You live here. What do you think about your hometown?

Zana: My hometown is my hometown. We couldn't cut our relationship with our hometown, because my mother—my family—goes there in the summer, and it has a big meaning for me.

Lydia: What do you mean by that?

Zana: I was born there, and my father and my mother want to die there. I feel that I'm not; I don't belong there. I'm here [in Istanbul]. I belong here.

Lydia: You don't belong there?

Zana: I feel that Istanbul is okay. There are Kurdish people. I know everyone—not everyone...

Lydia: It seems like you know everyone.

Zana: Most of them. I feel it's like my hometown, but it's not my language, and it's not my school. Like, when I started to go to school, I didn't know Turkish and I don't remember anything about my first and second years in primary school because I didn't know Turkish and there wasn't space in my mind for this... Sorry, but I remember things about my third year in primary school because I knew Turkish. If you don't know the language, you can't remember anything about these memories. And, my mother's side lives in our hometown, and my father loves it because we have land in our hometown to grow things like tomatoes, peppers, and grapes. And, you know, my mother always brings something with her when she comes to Istanbul. We have a strong relationship with our hometown.

This sort of belonging and not belonging expressed by Zana is not unusual among the Kurdish university students with whom I spoke. Many of them were brought to Istanbul at such a young age that most of their lives have been lived in the city. Even if they do return to their villages for visits, they may be limited by time and distance, or their language abilities, in making strong connections with family members who may still live in or near the village. Zana explains that her parents

“want to die” in the village, which I took to mean they want to be buried there, a sentiment I have read about and heard from other interlocutors. However, Zana does not seem to share her parents’ desire. While her village is clearly important to her, and she has an understanding of its importance to her family, more generally, she uncertainty as to whether she fully belongs there. She seems to feel more at home in Istanbul, among the Kurds in her predominantly Kurdish neighborhood, Tarlabası. As we continued to talk, Zana explained more about Tarlabası, and life for Kurds in Istanbul:

Lydia: So, what is life like for Kurds in Istanbul?

Zana: Ah!

Lydia: I know; it’s a big question.

Zana: No. I was thinking being a Kurdish student in Turkey is so easy. I was thinking this, but two weeks ago I went to Eskişehir, and then I went to Ankara. In Eskişehir, I saw you can’t live if you are a Kurdish student in Eskişehir.

Lydia: Why?

Zana: Because the quantity of Kurdish people is not so much, and there are a lot of fascist people in Eskişehir. And, like, what you saw when I speak with my friends in Kurdish, I think, “It’s okay.” But, in Eskişehir, if you are speaking Kurdish, you can see people are aware and looking... I am so relaxed in Istanbul, because there are a lot of Kurdish people, especially in my life, and my friends, most of them are Kurdish. And when I went to Ankara, I have a friend from Rojhilat, and we spoke in Kurmaji. We were on the Metro, but we had some big bags. I saw again the looks in people’s eyes, like, “We will kill them,” because they were looking at us like we are terrorists. It is so sad. I didn’t like Ankara and Eskişehir, and I think the only city to live in, in Turkey, for Kurdish people, is Istanbul. You can’t live in another city... Kurdistan is okay.

Lydia: The Kurdistan part is okay?

Zana: In Turkey, Istanbul.

Lydia: Nothing in the middle?

Zana: Yes. Because, Ankara is a big city, and Izmir is a big city, but, you know, a lot of [people are] stupid, and in Eskişehir also. And, the other cities are so small, to live there, and there are a lot of stupid people, like in Tokat or Ozgat. They kill you if you speak in Kurdish. Yeah. And so, in Istanbul it's okay to live for Kurdish people. But, in other cities it is so difficult.

Lydia: But, have you ever felt scared here?

Zana: In Istanbul?

Lydia: Yeah, speaking Kurdish, or, with like, the current situation?

Zana: You know, I live in Tarlabası. You know, Tarlabası is Kurdish people's, like, village, like our village. I'm so, so happy when I go to the Kurdish area. Okay, Kadıköy is okay to live, but you know there are a lot of people who live there, and you know it is not your hometown. And, like, Taksim over there, there are a lot of Kurdish people, and this café [is owned by] Kurdish people.

Lydia: Yeah, I know.

Zana: And it is so relaxed... I am a student in Istanbul University, and, you know, there are a lot of Kurdish students in Istanbul University, so everything is okay. It is possible, you know, Arılık? ... Minority. If you are not a minority, everything is okay.

Lydia: You don't feel like you're a minority at Istanbul University?

Zana: Yes... But, when I was in primary school, we were the minority. We were afraid of, like, our teachers, because we were not Turkish people. But, in high school and middle school, everything was okay. You know, I met with my friends from Sakarya University, they are Kurdish, and they came here, and I asked them, "How is it in Sakarya, to be a Kurdish student?" They say, "Sometimes, we are afraid of [using] our language, because we can't find any place or time to speak Kurdish" ... So sad.



*Figure 5 A view of the Tarlabası neighborhood. The large sign on the building in the foreground includes a picture of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Mayor of Beyoğlu, Ahmet Misbah Demircan, advertising the “Yeni [New] Tarlabası” project, a gentrification project aimed at “renewing” this predominantly Kurdish neighborhood. (Photo by the author.)*

For Zana, Tarlabası is a safe space, where she can be Kurdish and speak the Kurdish language freely. She also feels safe speaking Kurdish at her university, because of the large number of Kurdish students who attend. The issue of Kurdish language rights is a very political issue in Turkey, and the importance of speaking Kurdish is something that has come up time and again in my conversations with my interlocutors. This is especially true when I ask about what makes a person “Kurdish.” Often, the first thing mentioned is being able to speak the Kurdish language. Feeling the freedom to speak Turkish out loud, in the open, in urban Turkey is tied to challenging the Turkish state narrative of Turkey as a nation-state of and for Turks. In speaking their language out loud, Zana and her Kurdish friends

are asserting not only their own Kurdishness, but also their right to take up space within Turkey. Zana expanded on this idea of taking up space through a self-imposed project she created for herself: graffitiing Kurdish phrases on walls around central Istanbul.

### *Writing Kurdish on Walls*

Zana mentioned language first, when asked about what allows one to claim Kurdishness:

Lydia: So, what makes you Kurdish? Why do you get to say, "I am Kurdish?"

Zana: My language.

Lydia: Your language?

Zana: Language is the first thing, yes. You know, I have a lot of friends from Kurdistan, but some of them don't know, and don't want to learn, Kurmanji, to speak it fluently. I say to them, "You are not Kurdish! Because you can speak Turkish fluently, without any mistakes, but you can't say your name in Kurdish, or where you are from."

Clearly, for Zana, being able to speak the Kurdish language is an important part of her Kurdish identity. Of course, as noted earlier, the Kurdish language is not only related to Kurdish identity for Zana; its use is also a political act. As, she told me, "It's a political [action], because you speak your own language." Zana takes this a step further by using written Kurdish as a political act as well. Zana had created a project for herself in which the Kurdish language and political action melded. She had recently started spray painting graffiti, Kurdish phrases, on walls around her neighborhood, Tarlabası, as well as other parts of the area around the Beyoğlu



neighborhood of Istanbul. She called this project “writing Kurdish on walls.” I asked her about it:

Lydia: So, why did you start writing on walls in Kurdish?

Zana: Five months ago, I saw a news story; it was about the best writing on walls [graffiti] in 2015. And, I looked at them and they were so funny. I loved them. And, I thought, “Why isn’t there any Kurdish writing on walls?” In Kurdistan, okay, there are a lot of people [who write on walls]; but in Turkey, no. Especially in Istanbul. I bought a can of spray paint, and I started to write. I started with a classic poem, by Renas Jivan. And then, I saw that a lot of people liked it, and I am still writing.

Lydia: What kinds of things do you write?

Zana: I say to myself, “They won’t be so political... It will be about Kurdish language, Kurdish culture, and Kurdish life, whatever we have.” I follow special days for Kurdish people, like Newroz, like Mahabad Republic Day. I wrote something about these days. But I’m afraid of going to prison because of this... Because being a Kurdish person is dangerous, and if you are writing some things on the walls, and in Turkey, and in Istanbul, it can be so dangerous. And, you know, the Turkish government wants to find some excuse to arrest Kurdish people.



*Figure 6 “Ez sergovend tu bingoven” (“I am the leader of the dance circle, you are the last person in the dance circle”), one of the phrases in Kurdish spray painted on a wall in Istanbul by Zana, April 2013. (Photo by the author.)*

As Zana had previously stated, being Kurdish, and speaking the Kurdish language, is an inherently political act. Yet, she feels so strongly about the political aspect of her identity, that she does something that she describes as dangerous, something she fears may lead to her being arrested, in order to promote the Kurdish language in public. And, the Turkish state had noticed her project, as evidenced by the fact that some of her graffiti had been painted over. In an earlier conversation about it, she informed me that she had spray painted a phrase on one of the main streets near İstiklal Caddesi, “but the municipality erased it. Mostly, I write in our neighborhood [Tarlabası]. It’s not a problem because Kurds live there. But, on the main street? They erased it with white paint. But, don’t worry. I will write there again,” she said with a giggle that bordered on mischievous. In this way, Zana is not

only asserting her Kurdishness but also making assertions on public space in Istanbul. By spray painting Kurdish phrases on wall in Istanbul, Zana is claiming space for herself and her language, in what has been, since 1923 and according to the dominant state narrative, a Turkish space. In making assertions in this space for herself, and by extension for Kurds more generally, she appears to be making the argument that Kurds have a right to see themselves in the environment of Istanbul, and that non-Kurds should see them there as well.

### *Conclusion*

Yeğen (1996) contends that Kurdish identity was constituted in social spaces, and that it was precisely these same social spaces that were the targets of the modernizing state project. In aiming to eliminate these social spaces, yet refusing to name them as Kurdish, the ethno-linguistically assertive Turkish state both fostered a feeling of Kurdish identity, or Kurdishness, and excluded the possibility of a Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity in the public (“Turkish”) sphere. Houston (2001) echoes this sentiment of Kurdishness being constructed, through spaces, as a form of resistance to the modern Turkish nation-building project. We see these social spaces of counterclaiming in Zana’s graffiti, spray-painted Kurdish phrases on the walls of central Istanbul, as well as in the Kurdish language classrooms of the university where Welat, Şervan, and their classmates learn how to read and write their language. Also, we see it in the seemingly complete lack of fear that Welat exhibited one day when speaking Kurdish in public. I was on a bus with Welat, traveling to a Kurdish music concert (a social space of claiming Kurdishness in its

own right), when he received a phone call. He answered the phone and began speaking to the person on the other end in Kurdish. I could sense an older gentleman on the other side of me tense up, yet Welat continued on for several minutes, seemingly not afraid at all for the entire bus to know that he is Kurdish, which he asserted through his use of the Kurdish language.

Asserting Kurdishness, for my interlocutors, is linked to ideas about language and being political. It is an act of defiance against the Turkish state and nearly 100 years of state denial of their existence, their linguistic distinctiveness, and their demands for equal rights. Their assertions of a Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity are made in public spaces in Istanbul, as challenges to the dominant Turkish state narratives that, in the not-so-distant past, and still in some ways today, deny Kurds the right to assert their Kurdishness in those same spaces.

## CHAPTER 5. CHALLENGING NARRATIVES OF THE ASYLUM-SEEKING PROCESS

I was sitting at the dining table in the kitchen of the apartment shared by Azad, Welat, and Robîn in the Jefferson Park neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago. Azad had brought ice cream as a surprise when he came home from work, and the four of us were enjoying it while talking about the day. The topic of conversation turned to the narrative Robîn was in the process of writing for his asylum application. Welat began teasing him about how long he was taking to write his narrative, saying, "I wrote my story in just one week!" Everyone laughed. I turned to Azad and asked, half joking, "Does everyone apply for asylum?" "Most of us," he replied. A couple of weeks later I would be asked to copy edit the final draft of Robîn's narrative for submission with his other asylum application materials, and just a week after that I would be asked to do the same for another young man, Jîro.

In this chapter, I both affirm and challenge anthropological literature on migrants, refugees, and asylum seeking. I argue that my interlocutors, through the ways by which they onward migrate and apply for political asylum, are challenging the narrative found in the anthropological literature of what asylum-seeking "looks like." To do so, I explore the onward migration experiences of those who have made the decision to leave the ethno-nationally assertive state in which they were raised, and of which they were citizens. In onward migrating, they are strategically pursuing a better life. In doing so, they initially migrate to the receiving country, in this case the United States, to pursue further education, specifically at language institutes. To do so, they apply for and secure student visas, in order to enroll in language courses after their arrival in the United States. Before migrating and after

arrival, they interact with members of the same ethno-linguistic group who have already migrated and established lives in the receiving country. In doing so, they engage in a system of information sharing, what I call a “hospitality network.” After arriving and spending some time in the host county, most of my interlocutors elected to apply for political asylum, on the basis of assertions of their particular ethno-linguistic identity. They were encouraged through the process by those who had already navigated the bureaucratic system of applying for political asylum. Through this process of migrating to the United States and applying for asylum, my interlocutors continue to make emphatic assertions of their Kurdishness, challenge Turkish state narratives, and challenge assumptions of what asylum seeking “looks like.”

In the anthropological literature, the asylum seeker is most often a tragic figure. The anthropological and anthropology-adjacent literature on asylum seeking appears to conflate “refugee” and “asylum seeker,” with an official designation of “refugee” as a necessary precondition for, or at minimum a concomitant condition to, applying for asylum (Rabben 2016; Fassin 2005, 2011; Ticktin 2006, 2011). Rebecca Hamlin (2021) describes a situation in which the classifications of “migrant” and “refugee” are set up as dichotomous categories, with migrants seen as economically motivated and therefore less deserving of assistance from the receiving country, and refugees seen as politically motivated and therefore more deserving of assistance, often in the form of being granted political asylum by the receiving country. Hamlin calls this dichotomy a “legal fiction” (5), as migrants and refugees do not fit neatly into these binary categories. My interlocutors certainly

challenge this classification system, as they have described their motivations for migrating to the United States as educational, economic, and political. Those who migrated to Chicago did so initially in pursuit of educational and economic opportunities, and then they elected to apply for political asylum. Hamlin (2014) has also highlighted that refugee status is often a prerequisite for applying for asylum in the United States. However, my interlocutors challenge this assumption as well, as they have not been officially classified as refugees. Yet, because of this supposed necessary precondition, the emphasis in the anthropological literature on asylum tends to be on refugees, fleeing imminent danger in their home country, such as war (e.g., Chatty 2010; Rabben 2016; Fassin 2011). Their arrival in the receiving country is also fraught, as they are often described as being held in detention centers, arrested, or even deported. Contrary to these types of depictions of asylum seekers, my interlocutors have exercised their agency in finding a fairly systematic way to migrate from an ethno-nationally assertive state to a receiving country that they find more welcoming and applying for asylum. My interlocutors do occasionally still interact with agents of the ethno-nationally assertive state from which they migrated and of which they are still citizens, for official purposes, such as renewing government identification or voting. However, their migration and asylum-seeking experiences do not seem to be as overwrought as those often reflected in the anthropological literature on migration and asylum seeking.

*Anthropology of Asylum Seeking*

Fraught accounts of tragic figures predominate in the anthropology of asylum seeking. Linda Rabben (2016) provides a wide-ranging overview of the history of the concepts of sanctuary and asylum around the world. By way of definition, Rabben asserts:

An asylum seeker could be said to be a person who is trying to become a refugee. According to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, a refugee is a person who “owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (chapter 1, article 1[2]) [9-10].

This definition links the concepts of refugee and asylum, implying that refugee status, or a contemporaneous argument that one is a refugee, is necessary for seeking asylum in a country other than the country of which one is a citizen, or in which one previously resided. Turning to the United States, Rabben asserts that, “the United States has used immigration policy to build the nation... [and] the United States has also sought to manage the kinds and numbers of people who could enter the county” (197). These attempts to manage who is and is not allowed to enter and/or remain in the county have resulted in a system in which “around 60 percent of asylum seekers in the United States never gain asylum” (Rabben 2016:198). Rabben further asserts that “asylum seekers face the prospect of arrest and detention as soon as they set foot in the United States” (198), and then goes on to recount several stories of asylum seekers who have been detained, arrested, and/or exiled, sometimes for incredibly long periods of time, during their asylum-seeking



processes. Rabben shares similar stories of detention, arrest, and exile in the Canadian, Australian, United Kingdom, and broader European contexts as well, seemingly implying that these types of experiences are typical for asylum seekers coming to these geographical areas.

Similar fraught accounts appear in other anthropological examinations of the asylum-seeking process, and the associated status of refugee. Didier Fassin (2005) examines the plight of asylum seekers in the Sanagate Camp, a “transit camp” (363) near Calais, France, who were hoping to either apply for asylum in France or continue on to the United Kingdom and apply for asylum there. Additionally, Fassin and Estelle D’Halluin (2005) and Fassin (2011) highlight the dual forms of state violence endured by asylum seekers: first, the physical violence done to them in their countries of origin, and second, the additional violence done to them by the host countries to which they have fled, in having to recount and prove the harm done to them in order apply for asylum. Miriam Ticktin (2006) points to the “inhumane and insalubrious conditions” (36) of detention centers in which refugees and asylum seekers might find themselves awaiting decisions about their cases in France. Ticktin (2011) also highlights the importance placed on narratives that foreground illness and/or victimhood in asylum applications. Both of these conditions, of course, center on a form of suffering and point to the ways in which those working with refugees and asylum seekers are implicated in these narratives. Wendy A. Vogt (2013) examines the experiences of migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, many of whom are hoping to apply for asylum in the United States, as they cross through Mexico, where they regularly encounter multiple forms

of violence, including “abuse, rape, dismemberment, and death” (764) as they move north. Each of these accounts focuses on the experiences of asylum seekers, most of whom are also considered refugees, who are made to endure terrible conditions in spaces of transition, such as camps and detention centers. Another site that features prominently in anthropological accounts of asylum seeking is “the border” (e.g., Coutin 1995; De Genova 2002; Cabot 2013; Vogt 2013) While asylum seekers necessarily need to cross an internationally recognized border, to enter into another country, in order to apply for asylum, seeking asylum can happen beyond the border. Indeed, my interlocutors who had migrated to Chicago initially came under the auspices of student visas, in order to study English. It was only after having been in the United States for some time that they initiated the political asylum application process.

In this chapter, I explore how Kurdish migrants, and specifically recent university graduates from Turkey, navigate the United States immigration bureaucracy. Specifically, ways in which these migrants interact with the student visa and asylum-seeking processes will be considered. Additionally, I will examine the ways in which my interlocutors are challenging the dominant narrative in the literature of the asylum-seeking process. In doing so, I am answering Heath Cabot’s (2019) call for the anthropology of asylum seeking to move beyond “tropes of victimhood” (266). I agree with Cabot that it is necessary to move beyond cliché stories of suffering in looking at the experience of refugee and asylum seekers, largely because the experiences of my interlocutors do not reflect these tropes of victimhood. Indeed, while my interlocutors the violence of being evacuated from

their villages with their families as young children, and while they have endured ongoing othering, discrimination, and physical and political violence as Kurdish citizens of the ethno-nationalist Turkish state, in coming to the United States, they are exercising their agency. My interlocutors do have to recount the discrimination and violence they were subject to Turkey. This recounting is painful for them. Yet, in writing their narratives, I see my interlocutors engaging in an agentic process of committing these stories to paper and presenting them to a foreign government, and the United States government in particular. Indeed, my interlocutors expressed a certain pride in telling their stories and, as Azad put it, “unearthing the real face of the Turkish government.”

My interlocutors were part of violent displacement experiences in Turkey as children, during the height of the armed conflict between the PKK (or, Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and the Turkish State in the early 1990s. Recently, these young adults have found themselves displaced again, as they migrate to the United States for a variety of reasons, including pursuit of educational and economic opportunities, avoidance of mandatory military service, and escape from an oppressive political climate in Turkey. This chapter will examine the ways in which these Kurdish young adults interact with United States bureaucracy through seeking political asylum while staying connected to their Kurdish identity and building community in Chicago. My interlocutors have utilized a combination of securing student visas before coming to the United States and subsequently applying for political asylum after having been in Chicago for some time in order to ensure long-

term residence in the United States, and as the first steps toward eventual naturalization and citizenship.

*“A Long History in Chicago”*

I first learned of a Kurdish presence at the World’s Columbian Exposition, commonly referred to as the World’s Fair, held in Chicago from 1 May to 30 October 1893, from Azad. He showed me scans of several pages from the Souvenir Programme of the Turkish Theater on the Midway Plaisance, an area that ran along 59th Street in what is now the Hyde Park neighborhood on the south side of the city. Among the performances put on at the Turkish Theater was “The Kurdish Drama,” a play in three acts. Act I is described as opening on “A company of Kurds, showing their home life—eating, drinking, weaving stockings, spinning, amusements.” I asked Azad about the scanned pages. He had learned of the drama while doing some research to see what he could find out about Kurds in Chicago and then had a friend scan a copy of a book in the library collections at Northwestern University that contained the program and other information about the Turkish Building at the World’s Columbian Exposition. As we were chatting about how interesting it was that there were Kurds performing at the World’s Fair in Chicago over 100 years ago, Azad said, “This theater really means a lot to me.” It was a source of pride for him to know that Kurds had been in Chicago so long ago. The subject came up again a few times during my fieldwork with Azad and his friends. On one of these occasions, Azad said with a smile, “The Kurds have a long history in Chicago.” My interlocutors,

of course, came to Chicago under very different circumstances than these Ottoman subjects who came as performers to entertain visitors at the World's Fair.

The Kurdish community in Chicago, at the time of my dissertation research, was predominantly made up of recent university graduates who attended higher education institutions in Istanbul or other cities in Turkey. These recent university graduates were overwhelmingly male. Indeed, at the time of my dissertation research there was only one female recent university graduate who was a member of the Kurdish community in Chicago. While, according to Azad, one of my interlocutors, the Kurdish community in Chicago began with a few migrants as early as the 1990s, the majority of Kurdish migrants coming to Chicago from Turkey have migrated since 2005. These migrants are part of a general wave of Kurdish migration to Europe and North America since the early 2000s.

Most of my interlocutors were part of violent displacement experiences as young children, having been impelled to flee their villages with their families during the height of violence between the Turkish military and PKK (or, Kurdistan Workers' Party) militants in the early 1990s, when their villages were evacuated and, in some cases, razed. They are also among the first generation of Kurds to attend university in Turkey in large numbers. Indeed, most of my interlocutors were the first in their family to attend university, and if they were not the first, it was an older sibling who was. After graduating from university, they were confronted with high unemployment among recent university graduates in Turkey, which stood at over 19 percent in 2016 (Gurcan 2016). Thus, many of those who have migrated to Chicago have been doubly displaced, once from their villages due to threat of

physical violence and again from Turkey due to a lack of employment opportunities. In addition to seeking employment in the United States, these recent university graduates were also engaged in or preparing for pursuit of graduate studies in the United States.

In addition, many were eager to avoid the mandatory military service required of all male citizens of Turkey. Azad explained the motivation to migrate to Chicago in the following manner: “People searched for a refuge. I was scared something would happen to me if I went into the military. I knew something would happen to me if I stayed in Turkey. So, I was thinking, maybe go to Iraqi Kurdistan or the U.S. I got a visa for here, so I came here.” I asked him what he meant when he said that something would happen to him. He replied, “Well, I was [politically] active. You never know when the police might come and take you.” Azad’s description of his motivation to leave Turkey points to the fact that many of the Kurds who have migrated to Chicago in recent years have been doubly displaced, once from their villages due to threat of physical violence and again from Turkey due to the absence of employment opportunities and an oppressive political climate. In addition to seeking employment in the United States, these recent university graduates also often hope to eventually pursue graduate studies at universities in the U.S. They also remain politically active in Chicago.

As for the current Kurdish community in Chicago, the early (i.e., 1990s) migrants have established families and most have moved to the suburbs, though they remain involved in the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago (*Navenda Kurdan a Chicagoyê* or KCC, now known as the Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois). The KCC

was, during the time of my fieldwork, housed in a commercial rental space in the Jefferson Park neighborhood on the northwest side of the city. Many of the more recent Kurdish (i.e., since 2005) migrants to Chicago live in or near this neighborhood, near the KCC. Azad informed me that Turks in Chicago have dubbed this area of the city “Little Qandîl,” as in the Qandîl Mountains where the PKK has its central command. I asked him what the Kurds living there, who had no specific moniker for their own neighborhood, thought about Turks calling the area Little Qandîl. He replied that he thinks it’s good, “because the Turks know you are there.” In 2016, Azad informed me that there were about 10-15 families with children and a total number of around 200 members of the Kurdish community in the Chicagoland area.

Since coming to Chicago, Welat has continued to follow the news related to Kurdish issues in Turkey. He has also gotten involved in the Kurdish community in Chicago, serving as a Board member for the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago (now the Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois). He has also had, as did all of my interlocutors, continuing interactions with the Turkish Consulate in Chicago:

Lydia: And then, what do you think about the Turkish Consulate here? Do you ever have to go there?

Welat: Yeah, I’ve visited them like three times. Two times it was for the election in Turkey. I volunteered for Kurds, the HDP [*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, or Peoples' Democratic Party, the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey], to not steal their votes.

Lydia: So, what did you do as a volunteer for the HDP?

Welat: I was kind of like, in the election organization. I was kind of like *müşahit*, observing, and when some Kurds come there [to the Consulate to vote], helping them with how you to use the machine.

Lydia: So, this was at the Consulate?

Welat: Yeah.

Lydia: So, you were there for several hours doing this?

Welat: Several, almost like one month and five days.

Lydia: You were there every day doing this?

Welat: Yes.

Lydia: Oh, wow. During the election?

Welat: Yes.

Lydia: So, you would make sure Kurds were able to vote?

Welat: Yeah. And we, our friends, we organized breakfast together, and we went to the Consulate when we could vote for our party.

Lydia: So, you voted with all of our friends?

Welat: Yes. We want them, the Turkish Consulate, to know Kurds are everywhere.

Lydia: And have you participated in any of the protests in front of the Consulate?

Welat: Oh, yes, I did.

Lydia: Yes, and?

Welat: I did, kind of like, several times. I guess it was four times. No, five times.

Lydia: Do you think it's important to protest in front of the Consulate?

Welat: Yeah, it's important, because when something happens in Turkey, if we became silent, who is going to know Kurds in Turkey are in danger? When you protest, many people come around you and ask what is going on in Turkey. What's happening to Kurds over there? And you start to inform them, and they go home, and they start googling the Kurdish issue in Turkey, the Kurdish issue in Syria. It's kind of like, more to make people aware about the Kurdish issue. And, when you protest, in a western country, it's much better than in Turkey, because in Turkey, the media never shows anything.



Even if you have, kind of like, millions of people protesting something. But, when you do something here, some American media, some foreign media, they talk about the issues. That is one of our goals here.

So, as I had heard from several of my interlocutors, Welat was engaged in being political as a part of his daily life, in one instance committing over a month of his time to helping ensure that other Kurds who were citizens of the Republic of Turkey were able to vote in Turkish elections at the Turkish Consulate, protesting the Turkish state in front of the Consulate, and doing his part to continuously remind the Turkish state and the world of the plight of Kurds, in an effort to raise awareness. He also expressed that this last part, increasing awareness, was easier to do in the United States, because the media was more apt to cover their protests than the Turkish media, if the protest were to be held in Turkey.



*Figure 7 Members of the Kurdish community in Chicago protesting in front of the Turkish Consulate, 20 July 2016. (Photo by the author.)*

A Turkish Consulate being located in downtown Chicago, as an extension of the Turkish state, means that the specter of the Turkish state continues to loom in the lives of my interlocutors. I asked Jîro about his experiences with the Turkish Consulate in Chicago:

Lydia: have you had any interactions with the Turkish Consulate here?

Jîro: Yeah.

Lydia: Yeah? Why have you had to visit the Consulate?

Jîro: Well, I was at school, for summer school. It's on Michigan Avenue downtown. I finished my class, and I called Azad, and I said, "Where are you?" He said, "We are in the Turkish Consulate." Two of our friends were doing some marriage process.

Lydia: Oh, like getting their marriage license, or something?

Jîro: Yeah. I went there. We were sitting in the lobby. We were speaking Kurdish, and there was a guy, he went to the conference at Northwestern University. Do you remember? There were two guys from the Turkish Consulate?

Lydia: Yes, I do remember.

Jîro: Yeah, okay. We were speaking Kurdish, and he heard us, and he came to play a video on YouTube. There is, like, a racist song for Turks, and they say, "Turks are good, Turks are perfect," something like that. In front of us. He played this video in front of us, I mean.

Lydia: Oh, like he knew you were sitting there?

Jîro: Yeah, we are Kurdish and speaking Kurdish, and they were, like, really angry with us, but they couldn't tell us, and then they played a video for, like...

Lydia: So, you could hear it?

Jîro: Yeah, we could hear it.

Lydia: Could you see it or just hear it?

Jîro: No, we saw it and heard it. We were, like, looking at each other. Yeah, it was, like, really fascist, like a racist thing. Yeah, I remember that. I won't forget it.

Lydia: So, you've been there for that. Did you go there to vote?

Jîro: No, not yet. I will, I think.

Lydia: And then, you've protested in front of the Consulate, yeah?

Jîro: Yeah, I protested in front of it, yeah.

Lydia: Do you think it's important to protest in front of the Consulate?

Jîro: Well, yeah, sure. But it should be, like, more people.

Lydia: Why do you think it's important?

Jîro: Because, if there was, like, many people, some newspaper might say, "Okay, there were many people, we have to write some articles, something about that, some news." And many people can hear about our protest. I think, if we are two here, and we are yelling, and there is somebody, they cannot hear us, but think if there are, like, ten people, and we are yelling together, they can hear, like, clearly. Do you understand?

Jîro, Azad, and their friends experienced racism within the Turkish Consulate, at the hands of one of the consular officers who was sent to observe a conference that had been held at Northwestern University in November of 2016, "Historical and Comparative Perspectives on Kurdish Politics," sponsored by the Keyman Program in Modern Turkish Studies and the Buffett Institute for Global Studies. It seems that facing these kinds of reactions to their Kurdishness in the United States via agents of the Turkish state, are tied to the feeling that protesting in front of the consulate is a good thing. Echoing Welat, Jîro sees joining his voice with those of his fellow Kurds in Chicago as a way to make their voices heard by the Turkish state, and perhaps, more broadly.

I asked Azad for more information about life as a Kurd in Chicago:

Azad: The Kurdish community, they are doing some good stuff, you know?

Lydia: Like what?

Azad: We have a Kurdish Center; we are a lucky group. And, we have some language courses. We have some protests, you know, when something happens in Kurdistan or Turkey, you know, against the Kurdish people. And then, at election time, we go to the Turkish Consulate to vote. Well, kind of, it's an active group. Like, there are many students and young people. They are trying to do something. If we have some newcomers, they help each other to find a place to stay or get a job. They help each other. Yeah, it's a good community.

Lydia: It sounds like it's supportive?

Azad: Yeah, they support each other.

Lydia: So, you've been involved with the Kurdish Cultural Center?

Azad: Yes.

Lydia: In what capacity?

Azad: Well, I was one of the founders of the Center. At first, we decided to buy a place and we collected money, around \$20,000. But we didn't. We said, "How about first, having a rental place?" So, now we keep the same place.

Lydia: How long has the actual Center been there?

Azad: It was established, I think, in 2013. Yeah, I taught Kurdish language for a while. And then, I helped some Kurdish students who came to Chicago, if they needed a place, or job, we tried to help them. And, we have tried to have some connection with some universities. The University of Chicago, Northwestern. And then, we have had a few events at the University of Chicago, you know, like a movie. Yeah, we watched a Kurdish movie there. It was really nice. And then, at Northwestern, they have some events on Turkey or the Middle East, and we join these events.

Azad and the other members of the Kurdish community in Chicago were proud of having a physical location where they could meet and host community events. In addition to the Kurdish classes that Azad taught, the Center hosted Iftar dinners during Ramadan, Eid celebrations, lectures, and for a few months, book club

discussions. They had a small kitchen, where tea could be prepared, a small library of books donated by members of the community, and a ping-pong table. It also served as a space for community support, including assisting newer community members with navigating immigration and asylum processes.

### *Securing a Student Visa*

The generation of Kurds of which my interlocutors are a part, is the first to have attended university in Turkey in large numbers. They were afforded educational opportunities that were not available to their parents and grandparents. Most have expressed the realization and/or development of their Kurdishness, their ethno-linguistic identity as Kurds, within the context of education. Most also came to the U.S. initially to pursue education, on student visas, primarily to study English at specialized institutes. This student status provided the opportunity to come to the U.S., and then once in the U.S., they were able to use the realities of what it means to be a Kurd in Turkey to apply for political asylum. Several had ambitions to pursue graduate studies of one sort or another at universities in the U.S. Earning a graduate degree would, of course, bring with it increased social capital.

My interlocutors seem to be using their student status in a flexible way. They see applying for a student visa as what they see to be the easiest way to gain entry to the U.S., and those already in Chicago counsel those in Turkey who are thinking about coming to the U.S. to apply to English language institutes in order to get the necessary paperwork to apply for a student visa (F-1). Once in the U.S., they are then able to apply for asylum. Yet, many also do actually hope to continue their

educations, through attending graduate degree programs in the United States, and most have done so. In going through this process, they transition from student to non-student, to student as needed to navigate the system and pursue their goals of asylum, citizenship, and graduate education.

Azad was the first member of the Kurdish community in Chicago I encountered. I reached out to him in the fall of 2012, after learning about the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago, to ask if I could visit the Center during my next trip to the city. He agreed. A few months later, I found myself sitting with Azad and four other men, talking about Kurdish issues over tea. Azad became an important gatekeeper, providing me with my first contact in Turkey, Welat, and facilitating introductions to other members of the Kurdish community in Chicago as I began my research in the city.

Azad was born in a village in the province of Mardin. His family was evacuated from their village in 1993, due to the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state. They initially moved to the town of Dargeçit, also in Mardin Province, and from there to Istanbul in 2001. Azad then came to the United States in 2010 through the Summer Work and Travel Exchange Program, a program sponsored by the United States Department of State that provides an opportunity for university students from other countries to come to the United States to live and work for one to three months (USDOS n.d.a), through which he spent several months working in the fish industry in Alaska. When he subsequently moved to Chicago, he had a student visa. I asked him about how his immigration status had changed over time and his experience migrating to the United States and applying for asylum:

Lydia: So, how has your immigration status changed since you first came to the U.S.?

Azad: When I came to Chicago, I attended an ESL school, and I had an F-1 visa. And then, after that, I applied for asylum.

Lydia: Political asylum?

Azad: Yeah, political asylum. After, I got a green card.

As I spent time with my interlocutors, I became aware that most were using a particular method of initially migrating to the United States. Specifically, they had applied for F-1 student visas while still in Turkey, in order to continue their educations by attending one of several English language educational institutions in Chicago. The F-1 student visa is the visa required for non-United States citizens to come to the United States to attend one of the following types of institutions: university or college, high school, private elementary school, seminary, conservatory, or “another academic institution, including a language training program” (USDOS n.d.b). It is a nonimmigrant visa, meaning the person acquiring the visa must attest that they do not intend to stay in the United States beyond the length of their program of study. The institution the student plans to attend must be approved by the Department of State’s Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). The student visa application process is somewhat complicated and involves, by my count, seven steps (for a concise list of these steps, see the Appendix).

This complex process is what each of my interlocutors in Chicago had gone through to come to the United States initially, in order to attend English language classes at an institute in Chicago. All the steps and fees that must be carefully navigated in order to procure a student visa recall anthropological discussions of

bureaucratic documents (Hull 2012), and what they reveal about the rules and knowledge required to successfully navigate the process. This points to the necessity of what I have come the “Kurdish Hospitality Network,” or the system by which Kurds who have been in Chicago for some time assist those who are planning to migrate to the city or are newly arrived, which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter. Those recent university graduates who are planning to migrate to the United States often reach out to the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago (now the Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois). for guidance. It is at this point that they are encouraged to apply to one of several institutes in Chicago that offer English as a foreign language course, and then subsequently apply for a student visa to come to the United States. Assistance with completing the necessary forms is also provided. In this way, those who have already migrated are able to share the knowledge they gained through their successful navigation of the process in order to assist other members of their community. These potential migrants are sometimes known to members of the community in Chicago, either directly or in a sort of “friend of a friend” way. This is how Welat came to migrate to Chicago. He was an acquaintance of Azad, as their families had lived in the same neighborhood in Istanbul.

After graduating from Bilgi University in Istanbul with a degree in political science, Welat had some difficulty finding a job. He told me,

Now, when you go to apply for some work, they ask you, “Where are you from?” You say, “I am from Mardin,” and they say, “Are you a terrorist?” or “Why do you want this job?” They ask you these questions. When we take Kurdish classes, it goes on our record. When we apply for a job at a nationalist company, their faces can really change when they see that, and I took three classes.



Welat's account of what it is like to look for a job in Turkey as a Kurd is striking. A person's birthplace was printed on the front of their Turkish state identity card, what is often referred to in everyday conversation in Turkey as a person's *memleket* (most commonly translated into English as "hometown," it also implies a familial place of origin). On the reverse was printed the province (*il*), district (*ilçe*), and neighborhood (*mahalle*) or village (*köy*), under the heading of "registry" (*kayıtlı olduğu*), providing more detailed information about a person's place of origin. When applying for a job in Turkey, it is common for there to be a place of origin question on the job application. Additionally, it is routine for an applicant to provide a copy of their identity card with their application materials. Either of these instances of sharing his *memleket*, or a verbal question asked during the actual interview could have been to what Welat was referring when he mentioned questions about where he is from being problematic during the job application process. According to Welat, being from a *memleket* in the southeastern, Kurdish-majority region of Turkey can lead to suspicion on the part of interviewers, echoing the territorially based minoritization of Kurds described by Klein (2020).

Welat's description of the *memleket* question recalled for me the discussion of "immersive invisibility" among Palestinians living in Tel Aviv described by Andreas Hackl (2018). Hackl describes a tactic used by educated middle class (or upwardly mobile) Palestinians living in Israel, in which they elect to minimize their Palestinian identities in order to better fit in with work colleagues. Of course, for Welat, being asked about his *memleket* makes any form of immersive invisibility impossible for him, as his answer immediately marks him as "other." However, my

interlocutors, rather than striving for invisibility, are actually actively engaged in making their Kurdishness more visible. This is seen in Zana's graffiti project, in Welat answering the phone loudly in Kurdish on a crowded bus in the middle of Istanbul, and in my interlocutors in Chicago protesting in front of the Turkish Consulate. Yet, more visibility also has the potential to bring more retaliation.

Welat also described being asked if he is a terrorist by potential employers, based on his response to the *memleket* question. This is an additional example of how the state narrative of Kurds as terrorists discussed in the previous chapter plays out in the lives of my interlocutors. This form of discrimination made an already difficult job market even more difficult to navigate for Welat and other Kurdish recent university graduates in Turkey. Additionally, Welat clearly felt that the fact that he had taken three Kurdish language classes while attending university that were listed on his transcript, which he might also have to provide to potential employers, led to his being discriminated against as a jobseeker. It was a cruel irony that the classrooms in which he felt free to explore and express his Kurdishness resulted in a marker of identity, a marker of otherness, that set him apart as an "undesirable" applicant in the eyes of potential employers. Implicated in Welat's frustration with the job search process is the various bureaucratic documents that serve to other him and his Kurdish contemporaries: the job application and identity card that reveal his *memleket*, and the university transcript that reveals the Kurdish language courses he took as a student. The difficult job market, coupled with ongoing discrimination, left Welat looking for alternatives. Ultimately, this led him to the United States. I asked him about his decision to move to Chicago:

Lydia: When did you come to Chicago?

Welat: Well, I came here in 2014.

Lydia: Why did you come?

Welat: First of all, in Turkey I didn't have too much practice in English. I came here to improve my English. One reason is that the circumstances in Turkey at that time were seriously problematic for Kurds. They started to arrest Kurdish students, academicians, politicians. That's why I want to come to the United States.

Welat is describing the government crackdown that occurred in Turkey in the wake of what were commonly known as the "Gezi Park Protests," a series of anti-government protests that began in Istanbul after the government announced plans to raze Gezi Park, next to Taksim Square in central Istanbul, in order to rebuild the Ottoman-era military barracks that had stood on the site, prior to creation of the park (Walton 2015). The protests were met with a swift and particularly violent show of state force (Babul 2017) that resulted in an ongoing crackdown on any activity seen as potentially threatening to the Turkish state. This show of force was also quite public, as it was broadcast on various news and social media channels around the world. The crackdown in response to the Gezi Park protests resulted in numerous stories of academics, students, and activists being arrested. These stories, and heightened security measures on the part of the Turkish state continued throughout the mid-2010s. I encountered the security apparatus of the Turkish state on several occasions during my fieldwork.

One day in April of 2016, I met up with Zana and her friend Rohat after my Kurdish class. We went to a bakery to pick up some treats, then went to a small park overlooking the Bosphorus to enjoy our treats and chat. From the park, we went to

DEPO, a small art gallery in the Tophane neighborhood, just down the hill from İstiklal Caddesi, to see their newest exhibitions. When we were done at DEPO, we decided to head toward Taksim Square, and started climbing the hill toward İstiklal.

As we came out onto İstiklal, we could hear protestors chanting to our left, near the Tünel entrance. We turned right, to head toward Taksim Square. As we walked, we found ourselves approaching a group of police officers, holding riot shields, in the middle of İstiklal, with a Toma (i.e., an armored water cannon vehicle) to one side. All of a sudden, the police spread completely across the street, shoulder to shoulder, holding their overlapping shields in front of them, and the Toma backed up to be in line with them. Zana quickly led us to the far left of the line of police, opposite the Toma, and we scurried past the police, through a narrow opening between the last police officer in line and the building. After we got past them, I turned to Zana, "Do you know what they are protesting." "Yes, I do," she replied, "You know secularism? They are protesting because of that." I asked, "Because of the politician who said secularism should be removed from the constitution?" "Yes." A little later, I asked, "Just to clarify, they are protesting in favor of secularism?" "Yes," Zana answered, "they are members of the CHP" (the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, or Republican People's Party, the Kemalist political party in Turkey).

Another example of increased state security in Istanbul came at the end of April, as I was preparing to return to Chicago. I was walking to Taksim Square, with Zana, and noticed hundreds of portable fencing sections stacked up against the side of a building adjacent to the square, in an area where I would normally expect to see a row of flower vendors' tents set up. I asked Zana what the fence sections were for,

and she informed me that they were there in anticipation of May Day protests. This display of the ubiquitous security apparatus of the state (Ochs 2011) was undoubtedly the continuation of the heightened security efforts of the Turkish state to curtail or silence those seen as politically other that began with Gezi, as those likely to participate in May Day protests were also likely to have participated in the Gezi Park protests (i.e., younger, more liberal, leftist factions of the populace). I raise these events here, to further elucidate the climate in Turkey in the mid-2010s that contributed to Welat deciding to migrate to Chicago.



*Figure 8 Anticipating May Day Protests, Taksim Square, Istanbul. (Photo by the author.)*

Welat first came to the United States on a student visa, to study English at an English language institute. I asked him about his visa status:

Lydia: And so, when you first came to Chicago, it was as an English student, right?

Welat: Yeah.

Lydia: You had a student visa?

Welat: Yeah, I had a student visa, an F-1. Later, I changed my visa. Now, I am not a student.

Lydia: You don't have a student visa anymore?

Welat: Yeah. I have a different status, I guess.

Lydia: What is your status now?

Welat: Asylee.

As many of his friends had, Welat had first come to the United States on a student visa, and then subsequently applied for asylum. After spending some time in the U.S. and taking several English language classes, Welat began the political asylum application process. An Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services form I-589, can only be submitted after a person has arrived in the United States, and must be filed within one year of arriving in the United States I asked Welat about his process of applying for asylum:

Lydia: Have you gotten your green card yet?

Welat: No, I don't have it yet.

Lydia: You're still waiting?

Welat: I didn't have any interview. It's almost been like two years, nobody has called me, nobody sent any letter about my issues. It's getting, kind of like, sometimes, I feel, why am I here? It's getting really depressing about that issue.

Lydia: Yeah, did they give you work authorization already, and a social security number?

Welat: Yeah, they already gave me the social security, and I got my work authorization. And, I have all the identification, city identification, driver's license, but the only thing is, you know, not knowing what is going to happen

in my future in this country, because it's getting, kind of like, too much time you are waiting, and that makes you uncomfortable.

Lydia: Right. So, how long were you here before you applied for asylum?

Welat: It was almost, like, seven months.

Lydia: Okay, so you waited awhile. When did you come in 2014? Early in 2014, right?

Welat: In 2014, yeah. February.

So, at the point of this interview with Welat, he had been in Chicago about 2 years and 10 months. While he had been given a social security number and granted work authorization, meaning he could legally work in the United States, he was clearly exasperated by the fact that there was little communication about his case and the length of time he had been waiting to progress through the process of the political asylum application process.

After arriving in the United States and taking several English language classes, my interlocutors would then begin the political asylum application process. In order to be eligible to apply for political asylum in the United States, two conditions must be met. The applicant must:

Be physically present in the United States (it doesn't matter how you arrived) for less than one year from the date of your last arrival, unless you can show that you qualify for an exception to this requirement; and  
Demonstrate that you were persecuted or that you are afraid you might be persecuted because of your race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular group. [USCIS 2020]

As presence in the United States is a prerequisite for applying for asylum, these young men had needed to find a way to come to the United States initially. The way through which they chose to do this was by furthering their educations, learning English (or improving their English language skills), and securing student visas to

do so. After arriving in the United States and taking English languages classes at an institution in Chicago, my interlocutors would then begin the asylum application process. This involved completing form I-589, a 12-page form, and writing a narrative describing the conditions of their lives in Turkey and an explanation of their fear of persecution if they were to return.

As I was conducting my fieldwork, I was asked on two occasions to help copy edit asylum applications. In July of 2016, I was asked to look over Jîro's application. At the time, Jîro was 25. Originally from a village in the province of Muş, his family had migrated to Istanbul in 2007. He was a 2014 graduate of Dicle University, in Diyarbakır, and had worked as a photojournalist and for aid organizations in Istanbul before coming to Chicago in November of 2015 (so, eight months prior to when he was preparing his asylum application). His narrative is illustrative of the types of information my interlocutors choose to include in their asylum applications:

In 2015, I was working as a volunteer for aid associations [in Istanbul]. We were gathering money in order to help the Kurds of Syria. With the aim of bettering myself, I went to some conferences and read a lot of books. Sometimes, I would call my school friends, but they would not answer the phone. I asked their families about them, but they also did not know where their children were. As for my journalist friends, they were taken into custody. Some of them were disappeared; we did not receive any news from them. I was constantly followed. In September 2015, on my way home, two people followed me. I noticed they were moving closer to me and I got scared, so I ran away. They caught me in a dark [alley] and started to beat me and swore at me, saying, "Dirty Kurd!" Some nearby people heard my voice and rescued me; otherwise, they would have killed me. When I got back home, my family saw me drenched in blood. We understood that Istanbul was not safe for me, so I would move to Muş. When I arrived in Muş, I found that a lot of the residents had migrated to other locations in Turkey. Kurds who were still living in Muş were threatened with death. There were dead bodies in the middle of the streets. Muş was also unlivable. As a result of that, I realized that I was not in a safe place, and that is why I came to the U.S.



Jîro's narrative tells of his life in Turkey, his attempts to move from one city to another to ameliorate his situation, and his ultimate realization that not just Istanbul or Muş, but all of Turkey was not safe for him. His narrative contained other similar stories of violence at the hands of both Turkish citizens and agents of the Turkish state. So, as he describes, he decided to leave Turkey and come to the U.S. to seek safety. When I interviewed Jîro in December of 2016, he was still waiting for his social security number and work authorization, the next step in the process. Being granted a social security number and work authorization means that one can legally work and remain in the U.S. while awaiting an asylum interview. Jîro received his social security number and work authorization in February of 2017 and is currently waiting for his asylum interview.

Concerns about safety were also raised by Serhad, when I was asking him about his experience migrating to Chicago. Serhad initially came to the United States in 2012 for three months, for a work and study program, after which he returned to Turkey. He moved to Chicago on 25 November 2014. He found members of the Kurdish community in Chicago via Facebook and contacted them before arriving. In a familiar story, Serhad had initially come to the United States on a student visa, and subsequently applied for political asylum. He received his social security number and work authorization about one year after he submitted his asylum application.

I asked Serhad what life was like for him, as a Kurd in Chicago:

When you're in Turkey, you know, people are against you, they don't like you, they stare at you. I mean, this is what I felt like, especially before I moved here. My last few months, it was a nightmare. Seriously, I didn't want to take the bus, I didn't want

to talk to people. Because, when you talk, they approach you like they don't like you, you know? So, you're just aware of that. On the bus, they know you're Kurdish. You don't want to speak, like, Kurdish on the phone. You don't want to talk about anything. So, it was terrible. Here, there's, like, more freedom, you know? People don't care what you are, who you are. It's nice. You can just talk on the phone on the train, I mean, in Kurdish. Here, there's more freedom. It's better.

Serhad expressed similar concerns about his safety in Turkey as others of my interlocutors, particularly if he were to assert his Kurdishness out loud. However, he also made a point of expressing his feelings of relative freedom in the United States to be Kurdish and to speak Kurdish in public.

Azad, Robîn, Jîro, Serhad, and the other recent university graduates who have migrated from Turkey to Chicago have all employed a similar method of coming to the United States as students, with student visas in hand, so that they could continue their educations by taking English language courses. Subsequently, after some time in the United States, they then made the decision to apply for political asylum. They were counseled through the process by one of their peers who has already successfully navigated the United States immigration bureaucracy. They are going through the process together, as all of my interlocutors were at various stages in the lengthy process. In addition to their Kurdishness, their shared hopes and dreams for an eventual Kurdish state, and their continued involvement in political issues they see as tied to their Kurdishness (such as voting in elections in Turkey and protesting in front of the Turkish Consulate in Chicago), the experience of going through the

political asylum application process together seems to strengthen the bonds between these young men and further contribute to their feelings of community. This feeling of community, in Chicago, and further afield in the U.S., is fostered by what I like to call the Kurdish Hospitality Network.

### *The Kurdish Hospitality Network*

I was sitting at the dining table in a three-bedroom apartment in the Jefferson Park neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago that served as a de facto social hub for young adult Kurds in the city. Also at the table were Serhad, Heval, Welat, and Welat's Chinese American girlfriend, Mei. We were all drinking tea and talking. The guys were explaining to Mei how the area they call Kurdistan had been divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria by international borders at the end of World War I. At one point, Serhad exclaimed, "I hate borders! We are Kurdish, we ignore borders." This statement highlights the experience of Kurds as members of what has been described as the world's largest nation without a state. These young adult Kurds, living far from their homeland, in Chicago, transcend borders to stay connected to the friends and family they left behind, to stay involved in the political process of Turkey, and to share their hopes and ideas for the future of Kurdistan.

The majority of members of the Kurdish community in Chicago have migrated since 2005, though a few Kurds migrated to Chicago in the 1990s. These early migrants have established families, and most have moved to the suburbs, though they remain involved in the Chicago Kurdish Cultural Center (KCC, now known as the Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois), as it was known while I was

conducting fieldwork. The name of the center has since been changed to the Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois. The KCC was housed in the Jefferson Park neighborhood on the northwest side of the city. The more recent group of Kurdish migrants to Chicago is part of a general wave of Kurds migrating to the U.S. and Europe from Turkey, beginning in the early 2000s.

There are, as might be expected, social connections between these Kurds who have migrated and the Kurdish friends and family members they left behind in Turkey. Most of the Kurds in Chicago are recent university graduates who came from Turkey in search of employment opportunities and/or further education. Most of these recent university graduates attended universities in Istanbul. I managed to sort of follow one of them, Welat, as he transitioned from university student in Istanbul to migrant in Chicago. I first met Welat during preliminary fieldwork in Istanbul in May of 2013. At the time, he was preparing to graduate in June of that year, and was taking one final Kurdish language class. His university was one of three in Istanbul that offered Kurdish language classes as electives at the time. After graduating, he attempted to find a job in Turkey, to no avail. He expressed at one point that having Kurdish language classes listed on his university transcript might have been hindering his job search. He told me, "When we take Kurdish classes, it goes on our records. When we apply for a job at a nationalist company, their faces can really change when they see that [Kurdish courses on the transcript]. I took three classes." The implication being that explaining away three Kurdish classes on his academic record would be more difficult than a single class. So, faced with a difficult job market, and the added difficulty of having Kurdish courses on his

academic record, Welat began the arduous processes of procuring both a Turkish passport and a student visa to come to the United States as an English language student. Turkish passports are notoriously expensive, as I was told by multiple people I talked with in Turkey and Chicago.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the fees, Azad told me that a background check is part of the application process, which adds an extra layer of complexity, and potentially difficulty, to the passport procurement process for my politically engaged interlocutors. As he was getting things in order to come to the U.S., Welat got in touch with his friend, Azad, from the neighborhood in Istanbul where both of their families now live. Azad arranged for Welat to move into an empty bedroom in the three-bedroom apartment where he lived in Jefferson Park with Heval. This was one of the first instances of a phenomenon I have taken to affectionately call the “Kurdish Hospitality Network” that seems to highlight how functioning in a global social space works in the everyday lives of these young adult Kurds.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2016, the total cost for passport application and passport book fees in Turkey were as follows: 1-year passport = 250.80 Turkish Lira (TL); 2-year passport = 355.90TL; 3-year passport = 465.80TL; 10-year passport = 620.60 (Milliyet 2015). In U.S. dollars, these fees were roughly equivalent to \$85.52, \$119.94, \$156.97, and \$209.14, respectively. In 2016, the annual household income per capita in Turkey, in U.S. dollars, was \$3,827.86 (CEIC 2021), or about 12,899.89TL.



*Figure 9 The physical space of the Kurdish Cultural Center of Chicago served multiple purposes for the local Kurdish community. (Photo by the author.)*

Welcoming new Kurdish migrants to Chicago is one of the functions of the KCC. This typically involves assistance with applying for a visa to come to the U.S. (often as an English language student at one of several educational institutions in Chicago), help finding temporary and/or long-term housing, assistance finding a job, driving lessons, gifts of household and other goods, assistance with navigating United States immigration bureaucracy, etc. Frequently, short- and long-term housing were provided by Azad and his roommates during the time I was conducting fieldwork. When I first arrived in Chicago to begin my year of dissertation research in January of 2016, Azad, Welat, and Heval were providing temporary housing for two other young men who were sharing the living room as a bedroom. One was in need of new housing as his previous roommate had recently

gotten married; the other was a recent arrival to Chicago. Azad joked that the living room had been converted into a “refugee camp.” The two men staying in the living room, Serhad and Wedat, were in the process of looking for an apartment that they planned to share with, Jîro, another Kurd who was, at the time, living at an Islamic center in the city that offers housing. Within about a week of my arrival in Chicago, they were actively on the hunt for an apartment.



*Figure 10 A typical breakfast spread in the apartment shared by Azad, Welat, and various other recent migrants in the Jefferson Park neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. (Photo by the author.)*

One day, after having breakfast with Azad and his roommates, I was getting ready to leave the apartment. Serhad asked, "Are you coming with us?" He, Wedat, and Jîro were about to leave to look at an apartment. "Oh, yeah, we can all go," Azad said, "That way we don't need to use two cars." So, the five of us piled into one car and went to meet the property manager at the apartment. It was a third-floor walk-

up. A three-bedroom apartment with a nice sized kitchen and decent light, even on the grey January afternoon. They quickly decided they were interested. The property manager passed out applications and employment verification forms. "We need your employment information and social security number. We will do a credit check," she said. At this point, I noticed what seemed to be worry on the guys' faces. Serhad gestured to the other two and said, "They are students, do you take I-20?" The property manager didn't know what this was. Jîro pulled his out to show her. She said she didn't understand, and that she would prefer a bank statement as proof that they had enough money to pay rent. Each of them needed to fill out an application. Azad handed Jîro his car keys and asked him to go down and get his backpack. He started to fill out one of the applications. Confused, I turned to Azad and quietly asked what he was doing. Azad replied, "He doesn't have money." It became clear that Azad was filling out the application on Jîro's behalf. Having been in Chicago for over three years and having permanent resident status, Azad knew he would have no problems with the credit check. Thus, he was using his status in order to help another member of his community secure housing.

The Kurdish Hospitality Network not only operates to help new Kurdish migrants with their arrival in Chicago. It also serves as a resource for Kurds from Chicago who might find the need to travel for one reason or another. For example, Azad had, after several years in the U.S., finally decided to pursue his goal of earning a doctoral degree in history. He had applied to eight schools and was accepted by two. He decided to visit the school he was leaning toward attending. At first, he was going to drive to the school with Serhad for a quick one- or two-night visit. However,



at the suggestion of another friend, Ronî, the three men decided to take a road trip together. The trip was about a week and a half long. Azad, Serhad, and Ronî were able to utilize the Kurdish Hospitality Network at several points along the way to find free places to stay with other Kurds. Shortly after starting his doctoral program in the fall of 2016, Azad got a call through the Kurdish Hospitality Network, from a friend of a friend he had never met before. This fellow graduate student wanted to spend some time using some of the library resources at Azad's university. Azad hosted him for two nights.

It is clear that life for these young adult Kurds, in Istanbul and Chicago, is being lived in a global social space. The unboundedness of their social space leads to flexibility in negotiating and moving through this space. One way this plays out in the everyday lives of the young adult Kurds with whom I have been conducting my research is through their utilization of what I call the Kurdish Hospitality Network. A key component of this network, in the context of Chicago, is assisting more recent members of the community with the political asylum application process, a process that is steeped in the history of the U.S. immigration system more broadly. They assist each other with navigating the U.S. asylum process, a complicated bureaucratic system that, while it holds out the promise of hospitality, is inherently inhospitable in its complexity.

### *Historical Context of United States Immigration*

The history of United States immigration bureaucracy is punctuated by racialized policies aimed at various specific populations of immigrants over the

course of U.S. history. These policies have often been justified as necessary for the protection of the U.S. and its citizens, usually under the guise of preventing crime or protecting the economic interests of the United States. Kanstroom (2007) points to the ways in which the immigration system has and continues to be racialized, from shifting concepts of “whiteness,” to specifically targeting certain populations (e.g., Acadians, Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans) for deportation. These changes can alter the category into which the government places individuals. As Kanstroom puts it, different groups can be “transformed into aliens” (45) by the way in which the government views different groups as “acceptable” or “unacceptable” immigrants. Those classified as “unacceptable” have, of course, changed in response to migration patterns to the U.S., as evidenced by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Japanese internment during World War II, and the “Operation Wetback” program aimed at deporting Mexican laborers. Since the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing “War on Terror,” the U.S. has focused much attention on how to deal with migration from the Middle East. (Razack 2008) This reached a critical point in early 2017, when President Trump announced the immediate implementation of Executive Order 13769, which included suspension of immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen), what has come to be known as the “Muslim ban.” It was within the political climate that culminated in this attempt at a wholesale ban of people from certain Muslim-majority countries that I was communicating with my interlocutors about their own experiences migrating to the city of Chicago.

All but one of my interlocutors during fieldwork in Chicago had applied for or were in the process of applying for political asylum.<sup>7</sup> The law that governs asylum is Title 8 US Code §1158, which states: “Any alien who is physically present in the United States or who arrives in the United States (whether or not at a designated port of arrival and including an alien who is brought to the United States after having been interdicted in international or United States waters), irrespective of such alien’s status, may apply for asylum in accordance with this section.” It goes on to assert that “the burden of proof is on the applicant to establish that the applicant is a refugee.... To establish that the applicant is a refugee... the applicant must establish that race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion was or will be at least one central reason for persecuting the applicant” (8 USC 1158). To apply for asylum, an individual must complete form I-589, the “Application for Asylum and Withholding of Removal,” provided by US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). I-589 is a 12-page application with 14 pages of instructions.

The process of applying for asylum is lengthy and can be complicated (Rabben 2016). Over the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed my interlocutors discussing the process, offering each other advice, and working together to finalize applications. I was asked on a couple of occasions to assist with editing the narrative

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<sup>7</sup> The one exception had been issued a Diversity Immigrant Visa through a program widely known as the “green card lottery.” According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services website, “The Diversity Immigrant Visa Program (DV Program) makes up to 50,000 immigrant visas available annually, drawn from random selection among all entries to individuals who are from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States” (<https://www.uscis.gov/greencard/diversity-visa> : accessed 15 January 2019).

accounts of their previous lives in Turkey, and the persecution they suffered there, as these narratives were key components of their applications. After applying for asylum, there were four milestone moments, involving a change in status and additional U.S. government documentation (and often, additional applications and fees) in the process: first, being granted work authorization and a social security number, meaning the applicant could legally work in the U.S.; second, being granted asylum; third, being granted permanent resident status (also known as a “green card”), for which the individual could apply one year after being granted asylum; and, fourth, if desired, and only after four years had passed since being granted permanent resident status, naturalization (i.e., citizenship). I now turn to the stories of two of my interlocutors, Azad and Heval, to shed light on the process.

### *Examples of the Asylum-Seeking Process in the United States*

The following accounts, in which Heval and Azad describe their onward migration and asylum-seeking experiences, serve as examples of the ways in which my interlocutors came to the United States and navigated the asylum application process. These two men have had different experiences with the United States immigration bureaucracy, yet they both demonstrate how my interlocutors are using their agency and challenging the dominant narrative found in the anthropological literature on asylum-seeking. Far from being tragic figures, they are actively engaged in strategically pursuing a better life as onward migrants in the United States.

## Heval's Story

I first met Heval shortly after he arrived in Chicago, from Atlanta, where he had been living for several months with a friend who had moved there in 2006. After arriving in Chicago, he moved in with Azad and was in the process of getting his paperwork together to apply for political asylum. Heval grew up in Suruç, a town in Şanlıurfa Province, in the southeastern Turkey. He went to Balıkesir, in western Turkey, for high school and then began his undergraduate studies at Dicle University in Diyarbakır, where he studied archaeology for two years before transferring to Ankara University, where he graduated with a degree in journalism. When asked about why he transferred universities, he said, "I had a problem with the Turkish police and other officials. They threatened me, and I had to leave... I was working for, I mean, as a volunteer, we were protesting the Turkish government because of their Kurdish policies. We were protesting and sometimes we would gather and discuss Kurdish issues, and that's why I had a problem with [the police]." Before leaving Turkey Heval had been studying for a master's degree in political science at Ankara University and working as a journalist. In April 2013, just two months shy of his anticipated graduation from his master's program, Heval migrated to the U.S. I asked him about this:

Lydia: Why did you leave so close to being finished with your master's?

Heval: I had a case in Turkish court, you know.

Lydia: So, were you arrested?

Heval: I was arrested. I stayed in jail three months, when I was in Ankara, and my case kept going, you know. They sentenced me to seven years and two months, but my attorney appealed to the high court... One day, I was sitting with my attorney, and I was saying, "What's going on? What's gonna

happen?" And he said, "Hey, Heval, let me be honest with you, you should go to another country if you don't want to go to jail. You should leave. I guess, the higher court is going to accept your sentence, and I recommend, you..."

Lydia: Just go?

Heval: Yeah, and that's why, I mean, in two weeks I applied to the American Embassy, and I got my visa. That's why I didn't finish.

Lydia: Ah. So, what were you arrested for?

Heval: I mean, I was detained many times. [laughs]

Lydia: For all this protesting?

Heval: Yeah. For example, I was protesting, I mean, you know there was an Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink?

Lydia: Yes.

Heval: Yeah, I attended his funeral and that's why, for example, I was detained.

Lydia: You were detained at his funeral?

Heval: Yeah, and the Turkish police questioned me, "Hey, are you an Armenian? Why did you go there?" I mean, like these stupid questions. And, as I said, I was detained many times, but I was jailed one time when I was in Ankara, and I stayed three months in jail, and then they released me, but my case kept going, you know.

Lydia: So, this time, when was it?

Heval: Let me remember the exact date... I just, I think I just graduated from university like two, three months earlier, and then they detained me and put me in jail. It was 2007...

Lydia: Oh, 2007? Oh, so you had been out of, you had been released a long time before this court stuff?

Heval: Yeah.

Lydia: Wow, that's a long time. That's like five years, six years.

Heval: Yeah, something like that.

Lydia: Okay. So, what did you do to be detained?

Heval: As I said, I went to Ankara University in 2003, and in 2007 I graduated, and they asked me about when I was in Ankara, they questioned me about [the period] between 2003 and 2007, when I was a student, and all my activities, you know. "Hey, we know you, and you were in Diyarbakır, and you are doing this, this, this, this," you know, and "When you came to Ankara, we just kept track."

Lydia: So, they were just keeping track of everything.

Heval: Yeah.

Lydia: So, it wasn't just one thing, it was this whole history of...

Heval: Yeah.

Lydia: Them finding you at different events, or whatever.

Heval: Yeah, they said, "At this time you went to this meeting, and you were in this protest or demonstration, and you attended Hrant Dink's funeral," and, I mean, a lot.

Lydia: It's like they were following you, or something.

Heval: Probably, but yeah, I realized maybe two, three times they were following me, yeah.

So, while Heval used the same method of initially coming to the United States as a student, he chose to do so because his freedom was at immediate risk, due to his ongoing court case.

I asked Heval about his decision to move from Atlanta to Chicago:

Lydia: So then, why did you leave Atlanta to come to Chicago?

Heval: I wanted to apply for asylum, you know, and I contacted the Kurdish Cultural Center and some friends said, "We have an attorney, and he can help you." That's why I decided to come here, you know, for my asylum case.

...

Lydia: So, when did you apply for asylum?

Heval: I think it was, like, December 2013, or November, something like that. I don't remember the exact date.

Lydia: After you came here, though, right?

Heval: Before, but I was in contact with my attorney, and I got a lot of information. I think I sent him a few documents. I know he applied at that time, at the end of November, December, something like that.

Lydia: And when did you get work authorization and a social security number?

Heval: Six months after I applied, I got my social security number. Five or six months.

Lydia: And you got them both at the same time?

Heval: Yeah.

Lydia: Where are you in the process currently?

Heval: Now? My case is in immigration court.

Lydia: Immigration court? So, you're still waiting for a green card?

Heval: I'm still waiting. I mean, I had an interview with immigration, and they sent my case to immigration court, and I went there for the first time, and they, they said, 2019. I mean, they postponed it, you know.

Lydia: They postponed it?

Heval: They said, like, four years later.

Lydia: Why?

Heval: I don't know.

Lydia: They didn't give you a reason? They just said, wait until 2019?

Heval: They just asked me my name and, "When did you come to United States? Which school did you go to?" Like, a few basic questions, and then they gave me a date. I am still waiting.

Lydia: So, it's a date, like, for a court appearance?

Heval: Yeah.



Lydia: Another court appearance?

Heval: Another court appearance, yeah.

Lydia: Oh, my goodness. And so, then, you still don't know if you're going to get a green card after that?

Heval: Yeah, of course, I don't have any idea.

The story of Heval's case highlights the lengthy bureaucratic process that is applying for political asylum in the U.S. At the point we were having this conversation, in December of 2016, he had applied for political asylum three years earlier and had gotten his work authorization and social security number after six months. He then had an asylum interview and went to immigration court, where he was told he would have to wait for four years for a second court date. During the intervening years he can work legally, but his status is very precarious, as he doesn't have the added protection a resident alien card (green card) can provide, nor has the countdown to naturalization begun. It is only after receiving a resident alien card that the additional four year wait beings for political asylees before they can apply for naturalization. So, if Heval successfully gets his resident alien card after his court date in 2019, he will be eligible to apply for naturalization in 2024, eleven years after he first came to the U.S.

### Azad's Story

Azad had initially come to the United States through a work and travel program, spending several months working in the seafood industry in Alaska. Before moving to Chicago, he had procured a student visa and, after his arrival, he

took English classes at an institute on the north side of the city. I asked him about his immigration status and applying for asylum:

Lydia: Do you remember when you first applied for asylum?

Azad: Yeah, it was, 2011, or maybe 2012.

Lydia: Do you remember how long it was before you got work authorization and social security?

Azad: Yeah, well, I already had social security because of the work and travel program. So, this time it didn't take a lot of time, just a few months. And then, I didn't have a lawyer. I wrote my story.

Lydia: You didn't have a lawyer?

Azad: No.

Lydia: So, you did the whole application yourself?

Azad: No, I had a friend. Well, I wrote my story on my own. It was in Turkish and then we translated it into English. At that time, my English was bad. But I knew my case. I mean, I didn't need a lawyer, you know, because they just fill out the application, that's all. So, I applied for political asylum. I went to an interview, and they said, "Well, okay," and they accepted it.

Lydia: And so, then, how long did it take to get your green card?

Azad: So, I mean, for this, after being granted [asylum status], you have to wait one year, and then after one year you can apply for the green card.

Lydia: So, was that application process pretty short?

Azad: Yeah. I had an interview within three months, so it was short. Now, it takes two or three years, because of these Iraq and Syria wars, a lot of people have applied for asylum.

Azad's experience, applying for political asylum in 2011 or 2012, highlights how the process continues to change over time. He applied for political asylum before any influx of those fleeing the Syrian civil war and/or the various conflicts

involving ISIL was able to have an impact on the political asylum application process.

As I talked with those who were still in the midst of the political asylum application process, I learned that they had made initial contacts with members of the Kurdish community in Chicago either through personal connections in Turkey, or through finding the Chicago Kurdish Cultural Center Facebook page and sending a message asking for more information about coming to the U.S. and Chicago, as well as assistance. In each case, my interlocutors were counseled to register for English classes at a language institute and apply for a student visa in order to come to the U.S. legally. Once in Chicago, one of the members of the community who had already successfully navigated the political asylum application process would advise the new applicant regarding how to complete their application paperwork, write their narrative, and gather other information to support their application. During the period of my fieldwork, the task of application mentor fell to Azad.

According to Form I-589:

To qualify for asylum, you must establish that you are a refugee who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality, or last habitual residence if you have no nationality, because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. This means that you must establish that race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion was or will be at least one central reason for your persecution or why you fear persecution.

I asked Azad about the advice he gives to other migrants who are preparing their asylum applications. "I tell them it should have a structure. It should have an introduction, a thesis statement, a conclusion, at least three body paragraphs," he said with a laugh. He continued, "Sometimes it is hard to remember what has

happened. I give them a small notebook to take to class, to work. I tell them to write things they remember. Then, we can look at them and choose what to include, what to exclude." I asked, "What kinds of things do you choose to include?" Azad replied, "Experiences with the Turkish military. I ask them about their student life at university, 'Were you political?' Welat published a few small [articles]; this can be a problem. You don't want to bother the [asylum] officers. [The story] should be organized and short." "Short?" I asked. "Yes, if you have a lot of information, you will get a lot of questions. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to speak, you may be confused about dates. You want good examples and clear dates." Azad went on to explain that a short narrative makes it easier to be sure that what one says in their interview with the asylum officer matches what was written in their narrative. Any discrepancies between the two, he said, "means you are lying, and they will deny you." I made a comment about how it must be difficult to remember things that happened, in some cases, years ago, especially things one might not want to remember. "Yes," he replied, "The things that you want to forget, or erase from your mind, this asylum case makes you [remember] them."

Clearly, then, the political asylum application process can be an emotional one for applicants. Old memories of mistreatment at the hands of Turkish state actors (usually the police) must be remembered and recorded. This must be done to make the case that if they were to return to Turkey, they would be persecuted for being Kurdish. This remembering and recording memories in a notebook is something akin to the collection of records (and in particular, documents) to support legalization described by Gray Albert Abarca and Susan Bibler Coutin

(2018) in their study of the cases of undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America in the United States. As in those cases, my interlocutors must present a collection of evidence of their experiences in Turkey, and particularly their interactions with the Turkish state in order to support their applications for political asylum. Rather than the financial and medical records described by Abarca and Coutin, my interlocutors are collecting their own memories, they record these memories in a narrative that is included as responses to several questions on the asylum application form. As in the case of the documents collected by those with whom Abarca and Coutin conducted their research, the narratives my interlocutors create with their collected memories are imbued with immense power. The point at which this power is made most manifest is during the interview, during which verbal responses to questions about their experiences in Turkey must match their written narratives.

Thus, even though they have moved away from Turkey, the political nature of who they are, of their existence, within the space of the Turkish state must be recounted in order to argue that returning to Turkey would pose a threat to their lives. And yet, Azad also told me about how writing their narratives and submitting them along with their asylum applications to the United States government was a point of pride for himself and the others who had applied or were preparing to apply for asylum. Azad told me: "We are proud to tell our story. Basically, we are putting the Turkish government's dirty laundry on the table... It's going to affect the Turkish human rights record. I did it on purpose, you know, because you want to put the Turkish government in, like, a difficult situation. So, we were really proud.

We want to show what is going on there [in Turkey].” Azad’s description of feeling proud about telling his story, his “narrative of violence” (Günay 2019), points to the agency inherent in telling one’s story. Through the telling of their stories, my interlocutors are engaged in an agentive process of taking charge of the narrative of their own lived experiences, challenging Turkish state narratives from afar, and challenging tropes of victimhood.

Through their asylum-seeking processes, I see my interlocutors challenging the narrative found in the anthropological literature of fraught refugee and asylum-seeking experiences, centered on the border and other sites, such as detention centers (Rabben 2016; Fassin 2005, 2011; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005; Ticktin 2006, 2011; Coutin 1995; De Genova 2002; Cabot 2013; Vogt 2013). Rather, my interlocutors came to the United States on student visas, initially. Only after spending some time in the United States, and after some encouragement from those who were already engaged in the asylum-seeking process, did more recent migrants to Chicago then initiate the asylum application process themselves.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have explored the migration and asylum-seeking experiences of my interlocutors. Their accounts demonstrate how they challenge the dominant narrative in the anthropological literature of refugees and asylum seekers that centers stories of victimhood. My interlocutors use their agency to employ strategies that allow for a less fraught migration and asylum-seeking process. In migrating from Turkey, the ethno-nationally assertive state in which

they were raised, to the United States, my university educated interlocutors use pursuit of further education as method to secure a student visa and come to the United States legally. After they are here, and with the encouragement and assistance of those Kurdish young adults who migrated before them, my interlocutors embark on the asylum-seeking process. This particular way of engaging with the United State immigration bureaucracy and navigation of the asylum application process challenges tropes of victimhood found in the anthropological literature on asylum seeking.

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have explored how young adults may respond to ethnographically assertive narratives of a modern state. In this case, they respond by pursuing and attaining higher education and emphatically asserting their ethno-linguistic identity. Thus, as I have shown, the environment of higher education can foster activism and challenges to the dominant narratives of ethno-nationally assertive states. The case of my interlocutors illustrates how university students create spaces to emphatically assert an ethno-linguistic identity that is counter to the state's concept of who constitutes an ideal citizen; a concept that has been promoted by the state through the education system as part of its nation-building project, as seen in the anthropological literature (e.g., Adely 2012; Kaplan 2006; Coe 2005; Luykx 1999). Further, through pursuing educational opportunities as a means to migrate transnationally and eventually apply for political asylum, recent university graduates challenge anthropological narratives of asylum seekers as tragic figures (e.g., Chatty 2010; Rabben 2016; Fassin 2011). Moreover, both of the groups that comprise my research population are foregrounding their ethno-linguistic identity in their interactions with the states in which they live.

My interlocutors have consistently been told by the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state, agents of the state such as the military and the education system, and ethnically Turkish citizens of Turkey that, as Kurds, they do not have a history, they do not exist as a distinct ethno-linguistic group, they are terrorists. It is these narratives that my interlocutors are challenging, in both Istanbul and Chicago. In both contexts, they are engaged in making emphatic assertions of their



Kurdishness and striving for increased visibility. In Istanbul, this has included challenging dominant state narratives in university classrooms and through Kurdish language graffiti. In Chicago, this has included protesting in front of the Turkish Consulate and submitting narratives of the various forms of violence they endured at the hands of the Turkish state as part of their political asylum applications to the United States government.

This dissertation, based on one year of fieldwork, conducted in Istanbul, Turkey, and Chicago, Illinois, during the 2016 calendar year, examines how my interlocutors, who are university students, are challenging the dominant narrative of the ethno-linguistically assertive state that seeks to erase and silence them. I also examined how recent university graduates are using the furtherance of their education as a means to migrate to the United States, where their navigation of immigration bureaucracy and the asylum-seeking process challenges dominant narratives of asylum seeking found in anthropological literature. In doing so, I explored the interplay between agency and state imposition, and how young adults who have migrated within one state and to another are navigating the states and bureaucratic systems in which they live.

The particular context in which my interlocutors live, or from which they hail, serves as an archetype of a modern nation-state that posits itself as a bounded territory of and for members of a particular ethno-linguistic group, with no tolerance for alternative ethno-linguistic identities. As such, I began with a summary of some of the relevant history and geopolitical context in order to frame an anthropology of agency in the face of an ethno-nationally assertive state. I then

turned to an examination of the ways in which language has been politicized as a component of the ethno-nationally assertive state's nation-building project in Turkey. Promoting use of the Turkish language through means such as language reform, the adoption of the Latin alphabet, literacy promotion, and the expansion of the education system were key components of the Turkification policies in the early years of the Republic of Turkey. Thus, the Turkish language, from the outset was part of a political, state-building project in Turkey. In recent years, this politicization is countered by the politicization of the Kurdish language by young people, such as my interlocutors. Through politicizing their own language, my interlocutors are able to use their language as a means of challenging dominant state narratives that have sought to silence them, other them, and even deny their existence as a separate ethno-linguistic group. In doing so, they present an example of agency in action and use language as a potent symbol of their resistance to the ethno-nationally assertive state. It is in these challenges that I see Kurdish university students in Turkey emphatically asserting their identities and pushing back against Turkish state narratives of what it means to be a Turkish citizen.

I addressed concepts of "the state," hospitality, and citizenship, and the ways in which my interlocutors interact with these concepts. The "messiness of the state" leads to a certain flexibility and room for challenges to the state narrative that I see my interlocutors taking advantage of in making assertions to a particular ethno-linguistic identity that are at odds with the narrative of the ethno-linguistically assertive state in which they live or from which they hail. I also looked at the double displacement of my interlocutors, both the violent internal displacement

experiences they went through as young children, and the international migration experiences they went through as recent university graduates.

Finally, I explored the way by which my interlocutors come to seek asylum in the United States, and how their experiences challenge narratives of asylum seeking that rely on tropes of asylum seekers as tragic figures. Rather than the fraught asylum-seeking experiences reflected the anthropological literature on migration and asylum-seeking, my interlocutors have managed to find a relatively calm system of migration and asylum-seeking that relies on first coming to the United States as students, via securing student visas to study English at language institutes in the United States, and then subsequently applying for asylum. Through their asylum applications, my interlocutors continue to challenge the narratives of the state from which they hail, as they are required to provide to immigration officers of the United States narratives of their own mistreatment at the hands of agents of the Turkish state.

My interlocutors are engaged in challenging narratives in several ways. They challenge the ethno-nationally assertive narratives of the state in which they live, or from which they hail. In doing so, they make emphatic assertions of their own ethno-linguistic identity and make themselves more visible, counter to the narratives of the state that have sought to silence and erase them. In sharing the experiences and stories of my interlocutors, I have framed an anthropology of agency in the face of an ethno-linguistically assertive state. I have shown how my highly educated interlocutors challenge the dominant narratives of the ethno-nationally assertive Turkish state, and how their particular onward migration and

asylum-seeking experiences challenge the narratives of asylum seekers as tragic figures found in the anthropological literature on migration and asylum-seeking. In so doing, I have shown how my interlocutors are agentively engaged in the emphatic assertions of their own ethno-linguistic identities and the fashioning of their own narratives.

## **APPENDIX: STEPS FOR SECURING A STUDENT VISA**

Following is a list of the steps a potential international student must navigate in order to procure a student visa to come to the United States. This list was derived from the United States Department of State student visa website (USDOS n.d.b), The steps are:

1. Apply to and be accepted by a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Student Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) approved institution.
2. Pay the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) I-901 fee (currently \$350 [USICE 2020]).
3. The institution issues an I-20 form to the student.
4. Complete a Nonimmigrant Visa Application Form (form DS-160) and pay the application fee (currently \$160).
5. Schedule an interview at a United States Embassy or Consulate in the country where the applicant lives.
6. Attend the interview, at which the following must be presented to the interviewee: passport, visa application, application fee payment receipt, photo, and I-20 form. Additional information, such as transcripts or proof of ability to pay educational and living costs in the United States may also be required at the interview.
7. Receive visa approval. At this point an additional visa issuance fee may be assessed, depending on the nationality of the applicant.

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#### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2013-2018 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky
- 2011-2012 English Instructor, School of English Language, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey
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- 2007-2009 Student Program Assistant, International House, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
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#### HONORS AND AWARDS

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