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## SPECTERS OF KURDISH NATIONALISM: GOVERNMENTALITY AND TRANSLATION IN TURKEY

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**Abstract:** This essay examines translations of the Kurdish epic poem *Mem û Zîn* into Turkish, tracing the logics behind these state-sponsored translations and examining how acts of translation are also efforts to regulate, translate, and erase Kurdish subjectivities. I argue that the state instrumentalizes *Mem û Zîn*'s potent nationalist currency in order to disarm present and future claims of Kurdish national autonomy. Using translation as a counterinsurgent governmental tool, the state attempts to domesticate Kurdish nationalist discourses even as it reproduces them, thereby transforming Kurdish nationalism into a specter of itself. Attending to this specter, however, allows us to see how these texts resist domestication: conjured by the state's technologies of counterinsurgency, the specter circulates as an inassimilable insurgent, an affect of resistance, the kernel of alternative social imaginings.

**Keywords:** counterinsurgency ♦ translation ♦ nationalism ♦ governmentality ♦ neoliberal multiculturalism ♦ spectrality

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O Lord! You know that poor Xanî  
Is captive like the pen  
His heart is truly in your hands  
His hand is certainly out of his hands

Yareb! Tu di zanî Xanî'ye jar  
Teşbîhê bi xameya giriftar  
Qelbê wî di dest tedaye elheq  
Destê wî di dest xwe nine mitleq

–Ehmedê Xanî, *Mem û Zîn*

The classic tale of *Mem û Zîn*, written by Kurdish poet Ehmedê Xanî in approximately 1692, tells the story of two star-crossed lovers named Mem and Zîn from different cities in the same region of Kurdistan. Mem and Zîn fall in love at the celebration of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, but Beko, the villain, prevents their romance by imprisoning Mem for over a year. In prison, Mem is on the verge of death when Zîn finally is able to see him. Mem dies soon after, and Mem’s friend Tajdîn beheads the villain Beko. Soon thereafter, Zîn dies of sorrow while weeping over Mem’s grave. Zîn is then buried in the same grave with Mem, and Beko is buried at their feet; although “love flowered from the earth” (“*şîn bû ji zîraeta evîne*”) of their grave, the body of Beko sprouts a thorn bush that grows amid the flowers.

Writing in the northern dialect of Kurdish known as Kurmancî, Xanî’s poetic rendition of this recurrent oral tale is framed by hundreds of verses about the richness and beauty of the Kurdish language. In one early chapter, titled “Our troubles” (“*Derdê me*”), Xanî exhibits what seems to be a very striking awareness of the powerful linkages between language and the formation of political community:

<p>Da xelq-i nebêjitin ku Ekrad          bê me ‘rifet in, bê esl û binyad.          Enwa ‘ê milel xwedan kitêb in          Kurmanc-i tenê di bê hesêb in.          (1996, 170-2)</p>	<p>So that people won’t say that the Kurds          have no knowledge and have no history.          Nor that all sorts of people have their books          and only the Kurds are lacking.</p>
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Xanî goes on to comment on the rich literary traditions in both the Ottoman and the Safavid Persian Empires, asserting that the Kurdish language also offers the possibility of a vibrant and colorful literature, and he connects this to the political conditions of the time:

<p>Ger dê hebuya me îtîfaqek          vêk ra bikira me inqiyadek          Rum û ‘Ereb û ‘Ecem temamî          hem’yan ki me ra fikir xulamî.          (1996, 168)</p>	<p>If we had unity among us          if we listened to each other          all of the Romans and Arabs and Persians          they would all be our servants.<sup>1</sup></p>
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Xani’s writings, and particularly this chapter, have been a useful source for Kurdish intellectuals and nationalists because they lend “a prophetic aura and historical legitimacy” to the Kurdish national project (Strohmeier 2003, 29). This chapter, for

instance, was published in the first issue of the literary journal *Kürdistân* in Cairo in 1898 (Strohmeier 2003). Also in the 1890s, another Kurdish poet named Hacî Qadrî Koyî, a vociferous nationalist, reads Xanî's book as "the book of our nation" [*kitêba milletê me*] and places himself within the genealogy of Kurdish nationalism as the inheritor of Xanî's literary and nationalist legacy (van Bruinessen 2003, 50). Kurdish writers since then, such as Celadet Alî Bedirxan and Mehmed Uzun, have relied upon Xanî's text in order to historicize claims to Kurdish nationhood and to legitimize Kurdish autochthony in the region (Strohmeier 2003; Uzun 2006a, 2006b, 2007; see also van Bruinessen 2003). Uzun, perhaps the most celebrated Kurdish-language writer of the 20th century, praises Xanî for "[placing] national consciousness and feelings into the lives of Kurdish people with poetic expression" (2006b, 27). Similarly, based upon Xanî's book, Kurdish scholar Amir Hassanpour makes the claim that Kurdish nationalism was one of the earliest instances of nationalism's emergence in the world (1992). Over the course of the 20th century, then, *Mem û Zîn* contributed to the formation and development of contemporary Kurdish nationalism, and in turn, this nationalist reading of *Mem û Zîn* has become the most dominant approach to the text.

In this article, I examine a number of transfigurations of *Mem û Zîn*: (1) the first translation into Turkish published in 1968, (2) a translation published in 2010 by the Turkish Ministry of Tourism and Culture, and (3) a television adaptation that ran from 2012-2013 on the state-owned and operated Kurdish language channel TRT Kurdî (formerly known as TRT 6). The first of these generated significant controversy and led to a five-year long series of trials for the translator. Conversely, the latter two were heralded in the media and by the state as positive developments in overcoming the ongoing ethnic tensions and strife between Turks and Kurds, a conflict that is the perpetual thorn in the side of the Turkish national project—so much so that it is impossible to imagine Turkish nationalism without the threat posed by Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdish question at large.

The impulse to regulate language has been a central element of nation-building and the consolidation of an ideal citizen-subject since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, and the Kurdish language was marginalized, forbidden, and criminalized in this process. As a consequence, the Turkish state's so-called "Kurdish opening" ("*Kürt açılımı*"), which began in 2008, and its concomitant negotiations with(in) Kurdish, should be approached critically. Much of the contemporary discussion of Turkey's Kurdish language policy by human rights organizations and civil actors has been framed through

narratives of democratization and pluralistic humanism, wherein the state's patronage of Kurdish cultural production and the translation of Kurdish artifacts into Turkish are the means by which Kurds supposedly gain rights, cultural capital, citizenship, and equality under the law. This teleological narrative of inevitable progress from violent and anti-democratic tribalism towards a humanist, capitalist society overlooks important dynamics of state power, discipline, and control. In fact, as I will argue, the legal sanctioning and subsequent emergence of these new, so-called autonomous avenues toward Kurdish 'freedom' are an expansion of existing governmental technologies; they are insidious mechanisms of domination that render themselves invisible by providing the illusions of choice and mobility through the possibility of limited recalcitrance. As Mitchell Dean writes, "contemporary liberal rule rediscovers freedom as a technical modality, and *is able to translate* (even if only roughly) the concerns of social and cultural movements into its own vocabulary" (Dean 1999, 155, emphasis mine). This article, accordingly, is concerned with such acts of discursive translation into the "vocabulary" of the state.

I would first like to begin by providing a brief account of some of the pivotal factors of Kurdish language politics in Turkey in order to contextualize the status of Kurdish language cultural production today. Then, I will examine the 2010 translation of *Mem û Zîn* commissioned by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture as it relies upon and departs from the 1968 translation of the text into Turkish. Given the state's sensitivity regarding the Kurdish language, its decision to commission the translation of a book like *Mem û Zîn* suggests that more complex dynamics are at play than mere notions of pluralism and geographic kinship. Why should the state feel compelled to draw attention to a cultural artifact that historicizes claims to Kurdish autonomy? Subsequently I will analyze the television show, *In the Shadow of Mem û Zîn* ("Siya Mem û Zîn"), and the ways that it departs from and restages the romance of the two main characters in order to disarm and transfigure the nationalist treble of the story into one that corroborates the Turkish national project. I argue that the show is a unique manifestation of a highly complex and still-evolving governmentality, one that privileges consumerist multiculturalism as a vehicle for remaking Kurdish viewers into obedient, disciplined, neoliberal subjects of the Turkish state. How does the show, as a translation—an "afterlife" (Benjamin 1968, 71)—attempt to unravel the nationalist promise of *Mem û Zîn* and reimagine the affective geography of Kurds in Turkey?

I will conclude with a theoretical meditation on how these translations are a symptom of the neoliberal transformation of state and society, and how they *spectralize* discourses of

Kurdish nationalism. I define the specter here as an indistinct yet persistent trace that manifests out of a subsumed subaltern history; it is an affective relic of that which is always disappearing but has never fully departed. The specter is a useful concept for understanding these translations within the framework of Turkish state governmentality precisely because it shows us that language and national identity are constantly under construction, and it attends to the inevitable recurrence of a Kurdish nationalist subjectivity as that which is “neither living nor dead, present nor absent” (Derrida 1994, 63). The spectral recurrence of Kurdish nationalism shows that even neoliberal efforts to assimilate the Kurds—through the simulation of cosmopolitan tolerance and the illusion of (limited) cultural autonomy—has not succeeded in laying to rest the Kurdish question. The specter, then, is both symptomatic and constitutive of neoliberal multiculturalism, even as it compels us to contemplate other possible presents and futures.

### **Linguistic Nationalism in the Turkish Republic<sup>2</sup>**

As mentioned, the Kurdish issue and the Kurdish language have always troubled the discursive promise of a homogenous Turkish nation, compromising the integrity of Turkish geographies and the totalizing promise of the Turkish language. Because speaking the Kurdish language was the most easily discernible difference between Kurds and Turks, the roots of Republican Turkey’s policies of ethnic homogenization extend as far back as the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The claim that Kurds have no separate, unique language or history can be found, for example, in the aggressive nationalist discourse of the Young Turks (*Jön Türkler*) who came to dominate the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP; in Turkish, *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The CUP conducted sociological research that, according to Zeydanlıoğlu, was used “in order to justify the Turkification of Anatolia in general and the Kurds in particular” (2012, 101).

After the foundation of the Republic, the Turkish language reform of the 1920s and 1930s was intended to consolidate, purify, and streamline the Turkish language in what Nergis Ertürk describes as “extreme self-surgery,” given the excess and the deep radicalism of the changes that were made (2011, 87). For Ertürk, the language reform in Turkey was responsible for fomenting a deep internal fear of the linguistic other, who was codified as and associated with death in early Republican nationalist literature: as she argues, “modern nationalism, in the Turkish context as elsewhere, is prone to destructive violence precisely in its suspicion of its own origin in a translative vernacular” (88). The

necessary creation of the other, based upon linguistic difference, was therefore crucial to early Republican era politics and has played a large role in the ongoing violence against minorities in Turkey. Official recognition of the Kurdish question as a problem challenges the state's century-long vision of linguistic and territorial homogenization (Yeğen 2011, 123). Consequently, it is useful to examine that century-long vision and its turning points in order to critically approach the state's interest in the contemporary translation of Kurdish texts into Turkish.

In the late 1920s, just a few years after the foundation of the Turkish Republic, a group of law students in Istanbul initiated a movement known as the "Citizen, Speak Turkish!" campaign, which received significant support from the state because it aligned so closely with official language policies and helped disseminate such ideologies at the individual level (Zeydanlıoğlu 2012, 103; Dickinson 2014, 121). The state also sanctioned and built education and cultural centers called "People's Houses" ("*Halk Evleri*"), in order to disseminate Turkishness across Anatolia, particularly in the Kurdish region (Dickinson 2014, 121). The "Citizen, Speak Turkish!" campaign and the introduction of the People's Houses contributed to the radicalization of policies regarding the Kurds and the Kurdish language, including the introduction of the "Settlement Law" ("*İskân Kanunu*", Law 2733) and the "Reform Plan for the East" ("*Şark Islahat Planı*"), which banned the public use of Kurdish and established standards for the resettlement of "those connected to Turkish culture" and "those not connected to Turkish culture." As part and parcel of these laws, Kurds incurred fines for speaking Kurdish in public and were forcibly relocated to other areas like Istanbul so they would speak Turkish only and conform to Turkish cultural practices (Law 2733; Aslan 2007; Fernandes 2012; Dickinson 2014). In 1937 and 1938, the state executed an operation in the province of Dersim (later renamed Tunceli), massacring tens of thousands of Kurdish Alevi; this operation was accompanied by the construction of boarding schools in the area as part of what General Staff Marshal Fevzi Çakmak called the "internal colonization" of the region (Üngör 2012, 130). One such school—run during these years by a woman named Sıdıka Avar, supposedly chosen for the job as a "missionary" by Atatürk himself—was populated by girls who had been kidnapped from Kurdish villages in the region (Avar 2011; Üngör 2012). Girls at the school had their heads shaved and were abused by the school's staff. Though Turkish language instruction was the priority, their curriculum also included courses on citizenship, national security, math, cooking, housekeeping, childcare, sewing, embroidery, and health care (Üngör 2012). In other words, the goal was to psychologically, culturally, and socially domesticate these Kurdish girls into upright Turkish citizens.

The state continued to maintain antagonistic policies towards its linguistic minorities over the next several decades. In 1959, a law was passed to rename villages, natural landmarks, and other places with non-Turkish names. Over 12,000 villages, “amounting to every third village in Turkey,” had been given new Turkish names by the year 2000 (Zeydanlıoğlu 2012, 107-9). Following the 1960 coup d’état, the military government developed a secret report filled with proposals to “solve the problem of Kurdish separatism and regional underdevelopment,” which reiterated previous techniques of assimilation, such as forced resettlement and sociological/anthropological research, and extended them into the cultural domain through an effort to translate Kurdish music into Turkish and broadcast the music in translation (Zeydanlıoğlu 2012, 108). The 1970s saw the radicalization of the Kurdish left in the wake of the increasing official circumscription of the Kurdish language and Kurdish culture, culminating with the formation of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* or PKK), a socialist group whose goal is to liberate the Kurds from the Turkish state. After the 1980 military coup, anti-Kurdish policies crystallized with the creation of a new constitution that sanctified Turkish ethnicity and the Turkish language as the fundamentals of Turkish citizenship; other laws regarding language passed during this time assert that “the mother tongue of Turkish citizens is Turkish,” thereby performing the imagined integrity of the Turkish nation (Law 2932).<sup>3</sup> In 1984, civil war broke out between the PKK and the state. From 1987 until 2002, a state of emergency was maintained in the Kurdish southeastern region of the country, a situation that allowed for martial rule, resulting in violent practices such as enforced disappearance, torture, and extrajudicial killings. During this time, speaking Kurdish remained a highly contentious act; Kurdish journalist İrfan Aktan has written about how the gendarme raided villages and arrest those who owned cassettes of Kurdish musicians like Şivan Perwer (Aktan 2013).

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, several developments helped ease the rigidity of state discourse regarding the Kurdish question. Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK, was captured in Kenya and returned to Turkey, where he was tried and remains imprisoned. Additionally, the rise of an Islamist political movement, most notably in the form of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP), as well as Turkey’s renewed efforts to enter the European Union, eventually led the state to acknowledge that the Kurdish question was a thorn in Turkey’s side. By 2008, the ruling AKP government had initiated the aforementioned “Kurdish opening,” with the aim of facilitating peace with the PKK and overcoming ethnic tensions between Turks and Kurds.

The Kurdish opening is a multi-scalar project that relies upon different branches of the government and civil society to help bring Kurds into the fold of the national community. The Religious Affairs Directorate, for example, elaborated a discourse of “religious brotherhood” (“*dinî kardeşlik*”) in order to privilege religion-based kinships over national ones (Görmez 2012). Similarly, as I described above, the Turkish Ministry of Tourism and Culture has initiated several projects aimed at promoting cultural recognition, which include the translation of *Mem û Zîn* and the creation of the state-run Kurdish language television channel TRT Kurdî, which broadcasts news and other programming in several dialects of Kurdish. In 2013, the government released a “Democratization Package” (“*Demokrasi Paketi*”) that promised elective courses in the Kurdish language<sup>4</sup>; an end to the 85-year-long ban on the letters Q, W, and X, which are absent from the Turkish alphabet but present in the Kurdish alphabet; and the allowance of political campaigns in Kurdish and other non-Turkish languages (Law 6529). In spite of these nominal developments, however, Welat Zeydanlıoğlu argues that “there have been no fundamental changes of Turkey’s Kurdish policy.... Turkey’s linguicidal policy continues” (2012, 120). This is in large part because the Turkish state continues to persecute Kurdish scholars, politicians, activists, and organizations. Similarly, anti-Kurdish sentiment remains a prominent force in social and public discourse, implicitly condoned by state officials (Zeydanlıoğlu 2012; Aktan 2014).<sup>5</sup>

An important and frequently overlooked dynamic of this Kurdish opening is the import of global capitalism and neoliberal forms of governance into Turkey. The AKP government has overseen Turkey’s astral rise in the global economy; in 2008, during the global financial crisis, the Turkish market remained relatively stable. Neoliberal governmentality in Turkey has transfigured affective and physical geographies and the ways that people move through those spaces and interact with one another. The roots of this neoliberalism reach back to the 1980s: Cenk Saraçoğlu claims that former Prime Minister Turgut Özal and his administration launched the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP)—an ongoing initiative aimed at developing the terrain of the Kurdish southeast into a productive zone for the benefit of the Turkish national economy—because they saw “the economic backwardness of Eastern Anatolia and the profound inequality between eastern and western regions of Turkey” as at the core of the widespread dissent in the region and as a pathologic symptom of the PKK’s rise and popularity (Saraçoğlu 2011, 89-90).<sup>6</sup> Here the work of culturally administering Kurds is explicitly linked with the same work of making them productive and engaging them as economic actors. While the translations and transformations of *Mem û Zîn* that I analyze below may not be



explicit elements of GAP's neoliberalizing work, it should nonetheless be clear that they fit into the larger rhetoric of fixing, modernizing, and urbanizing Kurdish life-worlds according to the state's normative governing vision. Neoliberalism is therefore both a symptom and a consequence of the Kurdish opening; it is a form of interpellation aimed at producing new Kurdish subjects.

### **Domesticating Translation and the Power of Language**

Given this history of Turkish linguistic nationalism through state policies relating to the Kurds, as well as the centrality of *Mem û Zîn* to contemporary claims to Kurdish nationhood, I now turn to the politics of translating a text like *Mem û Zîn*. In the introduction to her book *The Translation Zone*, critical translation theorist Emily Apter writes: "as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements.... Translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change" (Apter 2005, 6). Apter further argues that the way we understand and conceive translation after the September 11 attacks has fundamentally changed, that translation has become a tool for warfare and in particular for counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency as a technique of war compels the counterinsurgent to understand the insurgent better than the insurgent understands itself. Translation, as a technique of transforming and domesticating knowledge, thus becomes a way of enacting domination over the cultural and linguistic other.<sup>7</sup>

The state-commissioned translation of *Mem û Zîn* published in 2010 was written based on an original handwritten manuscript located in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum; a facsimile of this manuscript is published in the translation, on the left pages, opposite the Latinized Kurdish transposition and the Turkish translation on the right. The presence of the antique, handwritten manuscript of *Mem û Zîn* in the state archive, as well as the state's capacity to translate it, to know and apprehend it in its entirety, attests to a particular governmental logic that resonates with Ann Stoler's relational conception of the archive and governmentality. Because the archive is a site for the accumulation of cultural texts and artifacts—of knowledge itself—it is not enough to look at archival documents as representative of a particular moment in history. Instead, we have to read the presence of such documents "along the archival grain," making sense of them according to the governmental logics that expropriated them into the archive in the first

place (Stoler 2002, 100). I therefore read the state's translation of *Mem û Zîn* as a kind of archival counterinsurgency, an effort to actively dispossess *Mem û Zîn* of its historicity and to domesticate it into a repertoire of Turkish multiculturalism.

The translated text features a preface by former Minister of Tourism and Culture, Ertuğrul Günay, condemning the “repressive mindset” (“*yasakçı zihniyet*”) of the past, constellating *Mem û Zîn* within world literature, and claiming that this translation is useful “in terms of reflecting and documenting Turkey's deep-rooted, pluralist, historical, written, and intellectual reservoir” (“*Türkiye'nin köklü, çoğulcu, tarihsel, yazınsal, ve düşünsel birikimini yansıtmak ve belgelemek bakımından*”) (Xanî 2010, i-ii). This humanistic claim stands in stark contrast to the violent discourse on Kurds that defines much of the Republican era, while extending and affirming the historicity and territorial integrity of the Turkish nation-state. It also exemplifies the use of historiography-as-counterinsurgency, the dynamic of governmentality that I described above. Furthermore, that the Minister of Tourism and Culture regards the text as a testament to the strength of pluralist democracy in Turkey even as the text's translator reinforces a discourse that denies the legitimacy of the Kurdish language gestures toward an incongruous and ambivalent dynamic of neoliberal governance that I will attempt to unfold: that of the ever-present and ever-absent *specter*.

The Ministry of Tourism and Culture selected Namık Açıkgöz, a professor at Muğla University, to translate *Mem û Zîn*. Notably, Açıkgöz does not speak Kurdish, and his academic articles have primarily been written on Ottoman divan poetry between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Açıkgöz 2014). In one such article from 2007, Açıkgöz asserts that there is very little Kurdish in the text: “The Kurdish version of *Mem u Zin* bears a linguistic particularity that frequently arouses the impression of being Farsi. Ahmed-i Hânî says that the work is written in the Kurmancî dialect [of Kurdish]. However, in the work, outside of 25-30 verbs and a similar number of prepositions and other elements, the majority of the words are filled with elements of Farsi and Arabic” (2007, 39). Açıkgöz reiterated these claims in a 2010 interview for the online newspaper *Haber Vaktim*. In the interview, Açıkgöz asserts “Within the framework of my findings, Kurdish is a dialect of Farsi,” reinstating a long genealogy within state discourse on the Kurdish language that regards Kurdish as either non-existent or a perverse dialect somewhere between Farsi and Turkish (2010a). In a book-length rebuttal to Açıkgöz's translation, Kurdish scholar Kadri Yıldırım challenges this assertion with a quantitative analysis of the text: out of 26,560 words, claims Yıldırım, 19,601 (74%) of them are Kurdish, 6,015 (23%) are

Arabic, 918 (3% are Farsi), and 26 (less than 1%) are Turkish (2011, 9). While we should of course be wary of the notion that words are fixed essentially, timelessly, and exclusively to a particular language, the disparity between the figures is a telling indication that the degree to which *Mem û Zîn* can be called Kurdish is a politicized and contentious topic.

A scholar of Kurdish language and literature in the “Living Languages and Literatures” Department at Mardin Artuklu University, Yıldırım’s 200-page rebuttal, titled *A Critical Approach to the Culture Ministry’s Translation of Mem û Zîn*, illustrates not only that Açıkgöz committed a number of rather glaring errors in his translation, but also that he took a significant amount of his translation from the 1968 translation done by Mehmed Emîn Bozarslan. Yıldırım laments the selection of Namık Açıkgöz as translator, given that a number of clearly stronger candidates (such as Zeynel Abidin Zinar and Selim Temo) were recommended to the Ministry. According to the press release announcing Namık Açıkgöz’s selection as translator, the Ministry chose him “with great care” (“*büyük hassasiyetle*”) (Yıldırım 2011, 8). As Yıldırım notes in the book, it is difficult to emphasize just how significant it is for the state to be sponsoring and publishing a masterpiece of classical Kurdish literature; his disappointment, which “increased the more that I read of the book,” compelled him to write the rebuttal (203). Furthermore, Yıldırım limits his analysis to the first 30 chapters, claiming that there were so many mistakes and cases of plagiarism in the Açıkgöz translation that, “in order to keep our book from being too long, we did not provide any examples from the last 30 chapters of the book” (113).

In addition to extensively plagiarizing Bozarslan’s translation, Açıkgöz also fills in the lines that had been censored in Bozarslan’s translation. Açıkgöz has never translated a Kurdish text before, and his expertise in the realm of classical Ottoman literature relates only tangentially to the classical Kurdish of Ehmedê Xanî. In addition to securing a native Kurdish-speaking undergraduate student who would “provide me with his views about the Kurdish language,” Açıkgöz also tells readers in his translator’s introduction that “I drew on the M. E. Bozarslan translation [*M. E. Bozarslan yayımından istifade edilmiştir*] for couplets that were difficult to comprehend” (Xanî iv). A comparative analysis of Açıkgöz’s translation and Bozarslan’s translation shows just to what degree Açıkgöz had difficulty comprehending the Kurdish couplets: in one chapter consisting of 90 lines, 41 of those lines are identical to Bozarslan’s translation, slightly altered Bozarslan’s word order, or have one word replaced with a close synonym. This chapter is

not an anomaly, either: Kadri Yıldırım notes over 400 lines in the first 30 chapters that are identical in the Bozarslan and Açıkgöz translations (Yıldırım 2011). Furthermore, 24 lines had been left out of Bozarslan's translation—forcibly cut out of the text by censors because they contained the most controversial passages concerning Kurdish political and cultural community—that are now present in Açıkgöz's. In other words, what the state had forcibly suppressed from Bozarslan's translation (a genealogy of/for Kurdish nationalism) are recuperated in the Açıkgöz translation, itself commissioned by the state. The broad plagiarization of Bozarslan's translation is particularly significant because Bozarslan faced extensive trials for attempting to publish his translation of *Mem û Zîn* (van Bruinessen 2013). Consequently, we can see that Açıkgöz's reappropriation of Bozarslan's intellectual labor and political commitment to the Kurdish movement is more than mere plagiarism. It is an attempt to extend the state's domain over narratives of Kurdish cultural resistance in order to disarm the intellectual genealogies of Kurdish literature and deploy them within a new tradition of Turkish multiculturalism. We can also see this by looking at the way Açıkgöz characterizes the value of his translation.

In interviews given during the press junket aimed at promoting the translation, Açıkgöz spoke about the peace process in Turkey and provided his perspective on how *Mem û Zîn* should and should not be read. According to Açıkgöz, the only proper reading of *Mem û Zîn* is one that privileges the elements of Sufi mysticism and cherishes the love and the tragedy of the two lovers (2010b). Not only, he claims, is a nationalist reading of the text entirely misleading, but such a reading is insidious and threatening: “So what if a text like this is Turkish, so what if it's Kurdish? If you look at this text in an ideological way because of its language, then of course the other side is also going to become ideological” (2010b). Language, for Açıkgöz, is therefore a sterile set of traffic signs that direct a reader toward the intention of the author, which in his reading is a message of Sufic love. He continues, “Mem u Zin [sic] has become a buzz word [*iki lafından biri*] for separatist organizations... As if anti-religious Marxist-Leninist ideologies have anything in common with the content of Mem u Zin” (2010b). Ehmedê Xanî, as we have seen, is quite explicit about why he decided to write *Mem û Zîn* in Kurdish (he even titles a chapter of the poem “Reasons for writing the book in this language”), and he also links the use of the language to the political conditions of his time, calling for resistance against the Ottomans, the Arabs, the Persians, and the Tajiks by using both “the pen” and “the sword.” Furthermore, Xanî writes that he wants to use the story of *Mem û Zîn* as a “pretext” (“*behane*”) to “expound upon the trouble in [his] heart” (1996, 186).

My point here is neither to justify a nationalist reading of the text nor to disqualify a reading that focuses on its Sufic tropes. Rather, I am interested in the ways that Açıkgöz and the state at large attempt to supplant a nationalist reading with a Sufic (Islamist) one in order to domesticate the text and disarm it as a political object in the public sphere. In another article, Açıkgöz asserts that “of course literary texts are written in a language used by a person; however, in these kinds of works, language cannot go beyond being a mere unit of communication. In other words, literary texts actually do not have a language; they are the shared holdings [*ortak malı*] of humanity” (2010c). It is telling that Açıkgöz frames *Mem û Zîn* and literature writ large in terms consistent with commodity fetishism. For the AKP, as I described above, neoliberal democracy converges at the intersection of capitalism and multiculturalism with the intent of inducting a new citizen-subject whose practices of identification are inconsequential so long as s/he abides by and abets the material and cultural accumulation of resources.

Açıkgöz extends this metaphor of language as “holding”, comparing the book *Mem û Zîn* to raw material and natural resources: “It is especially important that *Mem û Zîn* was published by the state. As much as the minerals under this earth are ours; as much as everything atop this earth is ours; the loves and the sadnesses, the crying and the laughing of this earth are also ours. Our human spirit is in every love and every story nourished by this earth. Just like in *Mem u Zin* [sic]” (2010c). For Açıkgöz, as for the state, *Mem û Zîn* and the Kurdish language at large are akin to the minerals under the earth: raw materials that have been a natural fixture of the region for all time, but that nonetheless need to be refined, converted, transformed, and *translated* into usable goods for consumption. Indeed, as he says, it is especially important that *Mem û Zîn* was published by the state, whose institutional politics of representation mediate social relationships and ways of being accordingly. The publication is also a symbolic gesture that attempts to displace and disappear the histories of violence and denial that the Kurds have been subject to up until only very recently.

Açıkgöz’s conception of language as interchangeable pieces in the machinery of literature is decidedly informed by capitalist notions of language, and is in keeping with more formal state discourse on the topic: former Prime Minister Erdoğan, in his inaugural address for the state-run Kurdish language television channel, asserts that “Language, for me, is an envelope. What matters is the message inside” (Erdoğan 2009). Understanding language as a system of vessels to bear productive messages extends capitalism into language, whereby words become as though the interchangeable parts of a machine

producing commodified goods and ideas. They are the weaponry with which the Turkish state is waging a cultural counterinsurgency. Rather than indicating an end to the civil war, these translations are part of a larger apparatus that perpetuates the conflict, masking it behind practices of “dense semantic maintenance” aimed at managing discourse and social psychology (Pratt 2009, 1524). Such translations erase histories of domination, while enacting those same forms of domination made possible by such histories.

### **Multiculturalism and Affective Geographies in the Shadow of *Mem û Zîn***

On January 1, 2009, the state-run Kurdish-language channel TRT 6 was inaugurated on Turkish television. The on-air opening ceremony began with the playing of the Turkish national anthem and the raising of the Turkish flag. At 7:00 PM that evening, former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan delivered a special pre-recorded speech to the channel’s viewers. In the speech, delivered (primarily) in Turkish and dubbed in Kurdish, Erdoğan describes the channel as “the free voice of democracy [that] will glorify humanistic values, will nourish peace and calm, will not be separatist or exclusionary but unifying, and will contribute to the development and the deepening of democracy.” He ends the speech with a phrase in Kurdish that translates as “Best of luck to TRT 6” (“*TRT 6 bi xêr be*”).

Erdoğan’s speech to inaugurate TRT 6, now known as TRT Kurdî, traffics in the conventional language of the Republic, which is centered around notions of unity, oneness, and indissolubility. Yet the speech also offers a glimpse into the discourses of governmentality that structure the Kurdish opening: TRT Kurdî is intended to promote the values of proper citizenship and to interpellate Kurdish viewers into a multicultural Turkish nation, and in so doing, TRT Kurdî is intended to manage and contain dissent. Erdoğan’s linguistic switch at the end of his speech acts as a metonym for these new forms of governmentality, exemplifying the way in which the Kurdish language has become a tool for communicating and sustaining the Turkish nation. Much like the 2010 translation of *Mem û Zîn* into Turkish, then, TRT Kurdî and its programs are a platform for counterinsurgency.

I will now analyze an adaptation of *Mem û Zîn* that aired on the channel between 2012 and 2013. The show, titled *In the Shadow of Mem and Zîn* (“*Siya Mem û Zîn*”), is a contemporary reimagining of Ehmedê Xanî’s tale, in which Mem is studying engineering in Istanbul and Zîn is educated and headstrong, with a passion for horseback riding. I will examine some key scenes in order to explore how *In the Shadow of Mem and Zîn*

reimagines ethnic kinship and the geographies of Kurdish belonging. Then, I will examine the public reception and circulation of the show, a discursive repertoire that constitutes the show's paratext, i.e. the framing narratives and representations that interpellate the text, ensuring its reception by the viewing public. Understanding the institutional politics of text and paratext "reveals cultural agency and operates as a renegotiation of the past in the public domain and a reidentification of individuals from the same geographic origin as kin" (Iğsız 2007, 169). The notion of geographic kinship posited by *Mem û Zîn*, imbricated with discourses of multiculturalism, conjures a neo-Ottoman rhetoric in order to stage a heritage revival and an anachronistic history of supposed Ottoman concord and tolerance. According to the governmental logic of TRT Kurdî, built upon this neo-Ottoman multiculturalism, the Turkish state hopes to seize upon insurgent Kurdish subjectivities and remake them into upright citizens constellated within a multicultural Turkish nation (Young 2010, 147). TRT Kurdî transforms Kurdish cultural artifacts like *Mem û Zîn* into weapons, deploying them as a domesticating force against unruly Kurdish subjectivities.

The first episode of *In The Shadow of Mem and Zîn*, premiering on 27 February 2012, opens with an image of Mem asleep in a minibus on his way back to his village in the mountains. He is dreaming of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year celebration, of people dancing *govend* around a bonfire, when in the distance a hazy and dark figure appears. We only see her eyes before she turns and flees through the snowy forest. Mem chases after her, and when she finally turns around, Mem reaches out to remove the veil hiding the rest of her face before he is awoken by another passenger: the minibus is approaching a gendarme checkpoint in the mountain. The gendarme, speaking in Turkish, stop the minibus, make all of the passengers disembark, and check all of their identification papers: there is a close-up of Mem's distinctly recognizable Turkish government-issued ID. Upon the commander's order, the passengers re-board the bus and continue on the road.

The gendarme checkpoint is an all-too-familiar experience for people who have lived in and traveled through Turkish Kurdistan, and its continued institutionalization and routinization in the region exemplifies the ongoing symbolic and physical violence wrought by the Turkish state. Consequently, it is striking that the television show begins in this way: no longer are we located in Xanî's semi-fictionalized, timeless, Cizira Botan in the heart of Kurdistan. Instead, our story is unfolding in the contemporary geography of the Republic of Turkey, thereby crystallizing the integrity of Turkish territory and the

Kurds' place within it. Not only do the passengers in the minibus understand Turkish, but because the gendarmes' Turkish commands are not subtitled, it is also presumed that the audience should and will know Turkish as well. By presuming the soft multilingualism of its Kurdish viewers, the program aids and abets technologies of linguistic homogenization that conform Kurdish to the common communicative framework of the multicultural Turkish nation (Noorani 2013). The program is therefore elaborating a Turkified Kurdish subjectivity, one that complies with the Turkish state and its forces, even as it is still trafficking in the literature of Kurdish nationalism and belonging.

Over the course of the series, Mem and Zîn's relationship faces similar challenges to the ones that arise in Xanî's book. The strains on Mem and Zîn's relationship are a micro-scale staging of the geopolitical tensions that have shaped and continue to animate the Kurdish question in Turkey. While in Xanî's rendition Mem and Zîn can never be together because they represent the two incommensurable parts of a Kurdistan divided between empires, *In the Shadow of Mem and Zîn* frames the stakes of their relationship in slightly different ways. To be sure, Mem and Zîn cannot have a happy ending: to give them that would corroborate the allegory between the consummation of their love and the territorial realization of Kurdistan as a political unit. However, the show does not conclude with the death of Mem and Zîn, as Xanî's tale does. Instead, in the finale of the show, just after Zîn collapses and dies from grief, Zîn's sister Sitî emerges with a baby she had with Mem's friend Tajdîn. As everyone weeps, Sitî holds the newborn child next to Zîn's body, and the screen fades to black. In the next and final scene, which takes place several years later, Sitî and Tajdîn are going with their daughter to the grave that holds Mem and Zîn. Sitî calls the child by her name—*Zîn*—and they sit beside the grave and weep as Sitî kisses the rings that once belonged to Mem and Zîn. Their ghosts appear behind the grave, clad in white, before the scene closes with a shot of the grave, and we watch a final montage of the pivotal moments of Mem and Zîn's relationship over the course of the show (Siya Mem û Zîn ep. 56, 2013).

The creative liberties taken with the conclusion of the plot should be understood as more than the mere contingencies of adapting for the genre of television drama. What is Sitî's daughter—named Zîn, no less—supposed to represent? What does the show stand to gain from trafficking in ghosts? The performative gesture of naming Sitî's daughter Zîn is a promise that Zîn-as-allegory—the Zîn that is half of Kurdistan—will endure as a nominal, disembodied, and dehistoricized entity: it is a guarantee that Zîn's plight, her desire for consummation, is a mere shadow of the past. This fracture, between the Zîn of



the past and the Zîn of the present, is corroborated by the apparition of Mem and Zîn as ghosts, smiling at Sitî, Tajdîn, and little Zîn. In this regard, the name of the show, *In The Shadow of Mem û Zîn*, is particularly apt. It is no longer the story of an impossible Kurdistan—this Kurdistan has become a memory, a ghost—but one of an ever more probable Turkey.

Upon its release, *In the Shadow of Mem and Zîn* was framed by pro-government newspapers like *Yeni Şafak* and *Akşam* as “reflecting Turkey’s mosaic” and “[having] united all of Turkey,” and politicians who attended the show’s release gala praised the show for its significance as a conciliatory gesture. A few months after the show’s premiere, the show released a photograph of the cast and crew as a group with the title “We are Turkey” and captioned with “Important Kurdish Sufi mystic Ahmed-i Hani’s [sic] great work Mem u Zin has united all of Turkey. From Turk to Kurd, Georgian to Circassian, Albanian to Laz, the entire crew of Siya Mem u Zin is working up a sweat to make the show a success” (İnal 2012). In the image, each individual cast/crew member is identified, along with his or her ethnicity and geographic origin. Thus, rather than rendering identificatory signifiers as insignificant, this image circumscribes them as descriptors that modify, qualify, and adhere closely to one’s Turkishness. Instead of challenging identity politics, the image then valorizes and refines practices of differentiation, taxonomization, and categorization. The filiation of acceptable kinds of citizenry—“from Turk to Kurd, Georgian to Circassian, Albanian to Laz”—is accompanied by the filiation and expansion of technologies for governmentality.

In conjunction with the image, several of the main actors, the director, and the producer wrote short blurbs published in the *Sabah* newspaper about their ethnic identities. The producer, Aytekin Mert, states, “nobody [on the crew] is uncomfortable because of anyone else’s ethnic identity or religious affiliation. We meet on the common denominator of being human and being citizens of Turkey.” Similarly, the director of the show, Yusuf Güven, states that “what I learned from this photograph is that even if languages, religions, and ethnic roots are different, the language of brotherhood is also universal.” These claims, which along with the photograph, make up part of the show’s paratextual repertoire, carefully resignify non-Turkish identities through the rhetoric of multicultural intimacy and humanist belonging, whitewashing the histories of violence and inequality that marginalized and disenfranchised such identities in the first place.

These cosmopolitan discourses produce a cognitive dissonance amid the ongoing state violence in the Kurdistan region. Xani's version of the story of Mem and Zîn takes place in the Kurdish town of Cizre, and indeed, the tomb of the two lovers is a tourist destination. The town of Cizre is also a hotbed for political resistance and activity, with protests on behalf of the forcibly disappeared Kurds taking place every Saturday. In December of 2011, a few months before the premiere of *In the Shadow of Mem and Zîn*, the Turkish Air Force bombed a group of villagers in Roboskî, located in the mountains of Cizre, killing 35 of them (İnsan Hakları Derneği 2012). It is painfully ironic that the state deployed its adaptation of *Mem û Zîn* as a testament to pluralism in Turkey even as its ongoing use of systematic violence transforms the real-life setting of the story into a warzone. Ultimately, *In the Shadow of Mem and Zîn* is a useful prism for examining the techniques of governmentality unfolding within the Kurdish opening and the ongoing peace process. This coercive reconciliation uses the Kurdish language to resignify Kurdish cultural artifacts, exemplifying a phenomenon we might call the counterinsurgent potential of translation.

### **Conclusion: Insurgent Specters**

In an article on linguistic warfare, Vicente L. Rafael argues that although counterinsurgent translation “detains” its recipients, it also “brings forth the untranslatable, calling us to respond to what cannot be converted and contained, to what, however minor and marginal, evades even as it is constantly menaced by imperial evocations” (2012, 77). The power of translation to detain us within a realm of meaning and to simultaneously bring forth the untranslatable suggests that the work of linguistic counterinsurgency is the precise dilemma that emerges from the Turkish government's efforts to fix the meaning of Kurdish texts and identities.

Historically, the field of Kurdish cultural production was beyond the state's regulatory capacity because of the state's obstinate refusal to acknowledge the existence of Kurds or the Kurdish language. Instead the field was subject to intense, violent forms of physical, psychic, and symbolic erasure. The recognition of Kurdish identity and the Kurdish language as potentially valid forms of social being—under the neoliberalization of the state's relationship to society—nonetheless opened the way for the state to regulate, discipline, and domesticate those selfsame forms of being. By seizing upon the Kurdish language as a governmental vector, a weapon for counterinsurgency, the Turkish government has attempted to expropriate the very terrain of the fields of Kurdish cultural

production, socialization, and existence. Here, capitalism is joined with Turkish nationalism to materially and spiritually dispossess the Kurds, transforming Kurdistan into a geography of ghosts, a socioeconomic space that relies critically on Kurdish material and cultural production even as attempts to make its producers disappear (Roy 2014). The state project of dispossession aims to regulate existing discursive structures in order to compel those who speak the Kurdish language to be the agents of their own abjection and dispossession.

Meanwhile, the project of fixing a stable identity for the Kurdish other is never complete. Identity is always under construction, and consequently, it is perpetually a site for the contestation of the state's interpellative project. As an ideal form constituted by difference, Turkish national identity is perpetually haunted by the Kurdish other that it has sought to domesticate and subsume (Vali 2002, 69). In the case of *Mem û Zîn*, the state has consigned its nationalist currency to historical erasure. Its state-sanctioned translation and adaptation constitute an archival counterinsurgency: a willful remaking of history into the narrative of domination. Yet, the text resists this domestication: the nationalist message makes its perpetual return as a specter that haunts its translations across language and genre. This message is an untranslatable, evasive, "seething presence" that detains the governmental project of the Turkish state (Gordon 1997, 8).

The reappearance of the ghostly other is therefore an inevitable condition of the structures of feeling that exercise power in the state: indeed, as Jacques Derrida tells us in *Specters of Marx*, "haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (1994, 46). The political potential of this haunting resides in its capacity to render visible the cracks in the hegemonies of neoliberalism and nationalism in Turkey. Conjured by the state's technologies of counterinsurgency, the specter circulates as an inassimilable insurgent, an affect of resistance, the kernel of alternative social imaginings: it draws us beyond the political exigencies of the present to imagine the possibilities of other temporal and cultural worlds. Tracing the specter's return allows us to recuperate the autonomy of the linguistic and cultural other, to give it new life.

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<sup>1</sup> Xanî does not use these identificatory signifiers in a contemporary fashion. Indeed, his descriptions do not correlate to the notions we have today of state, ethnicity, history, and power.

<sup>2</sup> *The International Journal of the Sociology of Language* published an issue in 2012 titled "The Kurdish Linguistic Landscape: Vitality, Linguicide, and Resistance," edited by Jaffer Sheyholislami, Amir Hassanpour, and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas. This issue was tremendously helpful for my research, and several of the articles (Fernandes; Öpengin; Üngör; Zeydanlıoğlu) go into much greater detail on the history and dynamics of the Kurdish language in Turkey.

<sup>3</sup> In 1981, the Turkish Parliament passed Law 2932, titled "Law Regarding Publications Made in Languages Other Than Turkish," with the intent of forbidding the use of the Kurdish language. However, because official doctrine denied the very existence of the Kurdish language, the law could not expressly forbid Kurdish. Instead, the prohibition on Kurdish is achieved in a rather bizarre circumscription: "It is forbidden to express, disseminate, or publish thoughts in any language other than the first official languages of states recognized by the Turkish State." The logical absurdity of this clause belies the ambivalence of the state's approach to Kurds: the fierce and totalizing prohibition of something which, in the official imaginary, isn't supposed to exist.

<sup>4</sup> The letters Q, W, and X were implicitly forbidden by the 1928 "Law Concerning the Acceptance and Implementation of Turkish Letters," ("*Türk Harflerinin Kabul ve Tatbiki Hakkında Kanun*"). For more, see Ömer Şahin's article in *Radikal*, "'Q, W, X'in" 85 yıllık yasağı bitiyor," 27 September 2013. [Link](#).

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<sup>5</sup> As recently as September 2014, a young Kurdish man in the region of Antalya was killed by a Turkish nationalist on the grounds that he was speaking Kurdish in public (Aktan 2014).

<sup>6</sup> GAP gained new political currency with the AKP's Kurdish opening but also engendered significant controversy for several of its planned projects. According to the GAP website, "the project's basic objectives include the improvement of living standards and income levels of people so as to eliminate regional development disparities and contributing to such national goals as social stability and economic growth by enhancing productivity and employment opportunities in the rural sector." Similarly, the main objectives of the GAP Action Plan (which aims to accelerate the achievement of GAP's goals) are "Implementing economic development, ensuring social development, improving infrastructure, and developing institutional capacity." For more, see "GAP Nedir?", *Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*, [Link](#); see also "GAP EP Nedir?", *GAP Eylem Planı*, [Link](#).

<sup>7</sup> Most writing about translation as a tool for counterinsurgency has focused upon the actual experience of translating in zones of active conflict (Apter 2005; Pratt 2009; Rafael 2012). Here I am interested in techniques of counterinsurgency that extend beyond such zones of active conflict and into the lives of people who are not involved in such active conflict. Because counterinsurgency depends upon the pursuit of full knowledge of the insurgent, culturally and otherwise, in order to disarm her, we should also examine how the work of counterinsurgency is taking place outside of the battlefield.