

Exile is Arrival:  
Nineteenth Century Kurdish Poetry

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## Abstract

Nineteenth century Kurdistan witnessed marked individuality and creativity among Kurdish poets. This dissertation asks what conditions contributed to this burst of originality. What world did these poets live in and how did they use verse to transform that world? Employing close reading and the historical reading it developed in dissent to, this dissertation examines poets who, initially enabled by the patronage of the Baban princes, crafted Sorani as a literary dialect of Kurdish.

The pressure on these poets increased steadily over the century. Sweeping changes unbalanced the Ottoman and Qajar empires. Kurds, living in the borderlands, lived on the front lines of that shifting balance. By mid-century, the empires had dismantled the Kurdish principalities, Baban and Ardalán, who themselves vacillated between rivalry and alliance. In the political chaos that followed the fall of these princely houses, Sufism and nationalist sentiment thrived. Nineteenth century Kurdish poets articulated the heartbreak of this upheaval and more. They formed their exile into artistic arrival. They reinvigorated form and reimagined content. Courtly modes of praising and cursing became intimate and particular: poets became their own princes. Different from one another as they were, they took each other as literary heroes, they maintained extended poetic and curse correspondences. Over the course of the century, poets changed the discourse of poetry. Homoeroticism entered Kurdish verse. Poetry became the space Kurds had to explore, criticize, and celebrate Kurdishness. Poets experimented with ideas such as the scientific method, animal voices, and gender equality.

These poems contain a century of vibrant Kurdish thought. As poetry was, until the twentieth century, the primary genre of Kurdish letters, these poems represent an indispensable source for researchers interested in the era's political, religious, and social concerns. More, this dissertation constitutes the first attempt, in English or Kurdish, to see these poems as emerging from a coherent community—the community the poets themselves built. The study of these poems in conversation with one another enables us to speak more intricately than the broad, traditionally-accepted Kurdish literary term “classical” allows and to compare generations of Kurdish poets to their global contemporaries.

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## **Author's Declaration**

In 2011, I moved to Iraq to teach at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS). My students there were my first teachers about Kurdish poetry:

Mr. Shadman Hiwa and Mr. Hemn Bakr, students at the time, undertook with great professionalism a delicate task: introducing me, their female professor, to the infamous curses and my first “four-letter words” in Kurdish.

Ms. Dlpak Ali and Ms. Soma Abdulla, two young women brave enough to work on Sheikh Raza, continued the work with me.

Through the annual Translation Workshop at AUIS, which I founded and taught for three years, I understood that a critical mass existed of young people fluent in the regional languages who could, and wanted to, become the next generation of literary translators.

In 2015, Dr. Elizabeth Campbell, an historian at Daemon College, but then the Chair of Social Sciences at AUIS, joined me to begin Kashkul, a collaborative of Kurdish intellectuals, translators, and cultural preservationists. One of Kashkul's founding projects, still a major initiative today, is the translation and preservation of Kurdish literature.

Shene Mohammed, Kashkul's Assistant Director, co-translated the poetry of Nali, Kurdi, Sheikh Raza Talabani, Wafai, Nari, Bekhod, and Qana'. She also co-translated significant amounts of the Kurdish literary criticism I quote, compiled the poets' biographical details, and assisted in the great organizational act of pulling together and latinizing all the original sources for each translation provided in the appendices. In addition to her co-translation, Ms. Shene manages Kashkul's relationship with Zheen Archive, where we supply three part-time staff

members and assist in the digitization and cataloguing of their collections. As well, in many of the interviews I quote, she served as my interpreter.

Savan Abdulrahman, a researcher at Kashkul, co-translated the poetry of Salim, Haji Qadir Koye, Mahwi, Piramerd and Hamdi. She also co-translated secondary sources from Kurdish, including Piramerd's prose and nonfiction, mostly published through the newspapers, *Zheen and Zhyanawa*, that he either founded or served in significant editorial roles.

Mohammed Fatih Mohammed, a researcher at Kashkul who leads Crux, a project on Jihadist poetry and the cultural aspects of extremism, introduced me to the world of Kurdish archives, assisting and explaining as I navigated the contemporary world of Sufi Islam. Mr. Mohammed also revised the co-translations of Mahwi's poetry as an expert reader. He also served as my interpreter for several of the interviews quoted.

Bryar Bahha Alddin, a researcher at Kashkul who runs Mosul Lives, a project that records and collects the oral history of Mosul in order to help the city rebuild, co-translated Jamil al-Zahawi's autobiography, contributed considerably to the co-translations of his poems, typing up the Arabic originals, and serving as a proofreader for the Arabic words and phrases in the original Kurdish poems included in the appendices.

Aska Osmani, a dear friend, typed up the Farsi originals and served as a proofreader for the Persian words and phrases in the original Kurdish poems included in the appendices.

Lazha Taha, an intern at Kashkul, was instrumental in the Latinization of the originals from their Arabo-Persian script.

Srusht Barzan, an early Kashkuler, participated in the co-translation of both the poetry and literary criticism.

Lana Khalid, a former Kashkuler who currently serves as the Student Record Coordinator at AUIS' Academic Preparatory Program, worked as the initial co-translator of Jamil al-Zahawi's poetry.

Throughout the years, many Kurdish scholars have offered critical support:

Mr. Anwar Soltani translated Sheikh Raza Talabani's Persian catalog with me. His wife, Ms. Nasrin Soltani, who works with Mr. Anwar as a professional interpreter for asylum seekers in the U.K., hosted me for entire weekends of break-neck translating.

Dr. Nouri Talabani, who was then the Director of the Kurdish Academy in Erbil, granted me an interview about his work on the occasions of Sheikh Raza Talabani's poetry, and Dr. Sarbagh Salih, who has been unwaveringly kind, connected us.

Kak Amin Shwani introduced me to Kirkuk, the Talabani Tekiye, and all the people who work so diligently to support the tekiye: Sheikh Pirot Talabani, Sheikh Yusuf Talabani and his wife, Sheikha Sunbul. He himself is a scholar of Sheikh Raza's verse and, as I translated, would field my questions about certain words, lines, or obscure historical references.

Sheikh Pirot, a lawyer and public servant, Sheikh Yusuf, the tekiye's spiritual guide, and his wife, Sheikha Sunbul, a pillar of strength at the tekiye, all took time out of their busy schedules to speak with me. They invited me into the tekiye, into the worship, and formed my understanding of Sufism in Kurdistan today. They spoke of the legacy of Sheikh Raza and his family. They also introduced me to Sheikh Raza's last remaining relative and showed me the ruins of the poet's

home. After the interviews of the day concluded, Kak Amin and Sheikh Pirot would host us in their homes, cooking feasts for me and my interpreters.

Sheikh Ali Qaradaghi, a great scholar and collector, and his son, Dr. Amjad Qaradaghi, an architect and professor at Sulaimani University, gave me an orientation on Kurdish approaches to preservation, teaching me about kashkuls and providing me with Kurdish scholarship on the topic. Where he could, Sheikh Ali shared manuscripts of the poems provided in translation in the appendices.

Kak Rafiq Salih and Kak Sadiq Salih, the brothers who founded and run Zheen Archive, also provided manuscripts where possible. Their archive acts as a bulwark for Kurdish Studies and their dedication to hiring and training young people to join them in preservation and scholarship is outstanding.

Western editors and academics have provided outlets for publication and opportunities for conversation around the dissertation's translations and ideas:

Dr. John Grammer, the Founder and former Director of Sewanee's School of Letters, at the University of the South, invited me to lecture in Summer 2017 and Summer 2018 on the history of Kurdish poetry. Passages from those sessions, revised, appear throughout the dissertation.

In 2018, Clare Pollard, Editor-in-Chief at *Modern Poetry in Translation*, published translations of Sheikh Raza Talabani's "Elegy" and "Orphan of Sna," Kurdi's "Kani Sawa" and "Pearl of the Crown," as well as two accompanying translator's notes on those poems.

In 2017, M-dash, under the direction of Autumn Hill Books, published translations of Salim's "[375]", Nali's "Untitled," Jamil al-Zahawi's "Think of Nature," and a short introductory essay.

In 2014, Susan Harris, the Editorial Director at *Words Without Borders*, published Abdulla Pashew's "Union," co-translated with Hemn Bakr. She was the first editor to take notice of my work and I would not have met her without the early enthusiasm of the American Literary Translators Association, where my co-translators and I have presented multiple times.

## Introduction

This dissertation began by reading one poem. I had taken a teaching post at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and was curious about the poetry in the region. I started with the poet's name I had heard most often, Sheikh Raza Talabani, and asked two students to bring me poems of his they found remarkable. I could not read the poem without translating it: I did not know the Kurdish language well and I would "read" with my students, one word, one line at a time. We translated as we read.

The more we read, the more I wondered who this man was. He was a sheikh, the son and grandson of sheikhs and yet he played with insult, homoeroticism, and obscenity. He could rattle off curse poems, but also frequently sank into a poetic mode of pure devotion and praise. He claimed all subject matter as if none of it were transgressive. Where had he come from? What historical, social, religious, or political factors had contributed to his growth as a person and a poet? Attempting to put him in context, I began to read other poets from the age. Each poet I discovered surprised me. I found poets dragging scientific language into their poems, testing ideas of atheism, the role of doubt in faith, poets wrestling with the demands of the aesthetic life, the implications of the traditional Sufi conflation of the divine and the beloved, poets writing across a spectrum of homosexual intimacy—from friendship to carnal pleasure to romantic love, poets arguing for the rights of animals, even turning the voice of their poems over to these animals.

The more poets I read, the more I could see a cohort living and writing during the nineteenth century that would enliven the world's literature, even widen how humanity sees itself. Diverging from previously published material in both the Kurdish and European languages, which tended to focus on individual poets, I concentrated on how the individual fit into the compendium. The poems, as a corpus, could only be defined by their originality and creativity. Even more interesting, the poets, with all their conflicting ideologies and explorations, lived as friends, often sustaining lifelong correspondence through poetry. These poets, who could not have differed from each other more wildly, identified each other as peers, mentors, masters, and friends. They established themselves as such even within their own poems.

## *Research Questions and Rationale*

The more I read, the more I wondered how all these poets, so different from each other, wrote, and wrote to each other, at around the same time? This overarching question led to smaller sub-questions, some of which concerned the poets' literary and linguistic heritage—had they shared a similar religious and literary education and if so, what was it? What were the socio-political factors of the time? How were external pressures contributing to the cohesion of this collection of poets? Two of the most influential Kurdish principalities, the Ardalans and the Babans, fell in the nineteenth century to direct Qajar and Ottoman rule. Only half a century before the Baban principality fell, the Baban princes had begun to concertedly patronize Sorani as a literary language, in imitation of what the Ardalans had done for Gurani. How did Kurdish poets respond to the simultaneous exile within their own lands and loss of any significant Kurdish patronage system? Exiled and impoverished, how did Kurdish poets carry on? As Ottomans and Persians fought for control over the territory of the former principalities, how did Kurdish poets maintain, protect or construct their understanding of Kurdishness? How did these poets manage their cosmopolitan educations and fluencies with their own ethnic identity that was suddenly unsupported, even persecuted, by the state?

Much could be written around the context of the various Kurdish literatures, including Kurmanji and Gorani, but those dialects lie beyond the scope of this thesis, which will give a close literary analysis of the poets as individuals and as interacting members of an embryonic Sorani Kurdish 'republic of letters.' It will examine Sorani literature in light of interrelated aspects of the poets' context: events of Kurdish history heightened the Kurdish yearning for a homeland conceived in increasingly modern terms, broke the economic systems that had sustained poets for centuries, and foregrounded mystical Islam which became increasingly powerful in the shifting political landscape and maintained a pervasive and formative influence on these poets, exposing them to Persian poetry from their early days in the mosque, tekiye, or khanaqa.

Studying the issue of religion and politics raised more questions. Why did Sufism appeal to the public and grow in its influence? Why did the poets sour on Sufism as it became more a political force than contemplative order? How did people internalize exile? How did they rebuild their world? How did homoeroticism, in all its various forms, become an open part of the poetic discussion? How did social progress continue to include women's rights? Animal rights? The poems I translated with my co-translators gave me these questions, but also hinted toward their answers.

Though I draw on historical and religious texts, the primary text I use to confront these questions are the poems themselves. Westerners, especially today, see poetry as a private art form, circumscribed to small readership, readership so small as to render poetry at best decorative, at worst irrelevant, to discussions of politics, economics, religion, and history. Kurdish poetry, however, occupies an entirely different space in the collective, one might say national, imagination. All Kurdish writing, until the turn of the twentieth century, occurred in verse. Political and economic arguments, religious treatise, historical records: all of these were poetry. Poetry was the pervasive mode of communication. As such, it constitutes an essential source for a full understanding of how the Kurds as a people perceived their situation throughout the nineteenth century as an exile thrust upon them. I use the concept of exile, which is rich and polysemic in Kurdish discourse, ubiquitous in the poetry, as the analytical crux of the thesis: how did poets respond to and perhaps reinvent their exile?

This thesis, then, follows the various experiences and transformations of exile Kurdish poets wrought and how, through artistic innovation, they transform their exile into arrival. Fundamentally, what compelled me throughout this thesis was the poets' persistent reinvention of loss into gain. These poets faced a turbulent political world, disappearing economic stability, the rising corporeal power of ethereal brotherhoods, and rather than retreat into the artistry they knew, the patterns previous poets had made, they forged their own. They pushed into newness. That move—from exile to arrival—one that Sufism trains its disciples to invite—is the central obsession of this thesis.

These terms, "exile" and "arrival," terms that structure the dissertation from its most abstract level of its title to the most minute level of analysis, rise out of the poetry

itself and how Kurds of the nineteenth century understood and articulated their personal and political state. Personally, as practicing Sufis, often Mullahs and Sheikhs, and as Kurds, these poets needed to speak to two conditions of exile: (1) from themselves and from God, the beloved as well as (2) from their own lands. The term most commonly used throughout nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry for the first comes from Arabic, specifically, the Sufi tradition: “firaq” (فراق) or the more Kurdish spelling (فیراق). This term translates literally as “parting, farewell, separation, departure” and is a mournful term a poet uses to articulate a lover’s distance from his beloved, God. Its opposite would be “wṣwl” (وصول), which translates as “access, arrival, oncoming, incoming”—a word most commonly used in its noun form “wṣal” (وصال), or (ویسال) in its Kurdish spelling, meaning both “reunion” and “intercourse.” As Sufis, all Kurdish nineteenth-century poets knew these terms intimately and used them frequently. Of course, these terms are part of a much larger metaphor disciples used to describe their relationship to their God—the disciple as the lover and God as the beloved—and so are metaphors unto themselves indicating how familiar and close or how foreign and far a disciple feels himself from God. More politically, looking toward how these poets articulated the concept of exile as Kurds in lands governed by hostile elements, the poets used two words, both borrowed from Arabic: (1) *ghryb* (غریب), or spelled in a more Kurdish fashion, (غه ریب), meaning “stranger, foreigner, outsider” and having the corollary *ghorbet* (غوربه ت), meaning “place or state of being a stranger, foreigner or outsider” and (2) *mnfy* (منفی) meaning “an exile (person)” and *mnfa* (منفا), meaning “the place of exile.” Though now Kurdish poets use terms to articulate exile that originate from Kurdish, relating to the words for “being forced out of,” “being closed away from,” “being far from,” those terms were not in common usage during the nineteenth century. The poets studied in this dissertation drew from their education in and knowledge of the Islamic, and therefore Arabic, terms for exile and arrival, both of which were nouns that had edges of action—nouns that leaned toward verbs.

I chose these terms to structure my dissertation because the poets themselves chose to foreground them throughout the century of their work. Nineteenth-century Kurdish poets turned to these words to confront their devotion, but also their sense of

being cast away from—to confront the loss and displacement from Kurdish governance and the displacement that stretched out before them. Nineteenth-century Kurds forge from these terms a nexus of meaning that is personal and political, transforming the personal language of the devotee into the public language of the agitator, making intimate the political language of the exiled. The way nineteenth-century Kurdish poets use these terms serve as a metaphor for the whole project of nineteenth-century Sorani poetry and one of the founding questions of this thesis: how could the poets make from poetry a place to arrive amidst the immediate displacement of their era?

This thesis contributes on several levels. First, the translations make this poetry available for the first time in English, affecting several audiences: readers, poets and translators, and scholars, who can amend the partial understandings of, for instance, nationalism among the Kurds, understandings that were made partial by glancing treatment of the poetry in which Kurds discussed their national state. Second, the historical analysis begins to put these poems, and their authors, in context, to see these poets as a generation formed by the same complex of historical forces.

Third, the literary criticism, emerging from close reading of the poems, gives clear outlines to how Kurdish poets responded to their exile: through verse dedicated in many ways to one another. But the analysis also reveals themes and concerns in the poetry that have broad social implications for how we understand Kurdistan and the Middle East. By examining these verses we can more clearly see how poets, and people, dealt with their bodies, their spiritual aspirations, their national and educational aspirations, their sexuality, and their natural surroundings. These poems constitute an invaluable record of Kurdish life, of the history from this area of the Middle East.

Fourth and finally, the work of this dissertation allows for a broader discussion of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. It is not possible to look at the poetry, with its massive creativity and individuality, and the poetry's conditions—political turmoil, economic upheaval, and the rise of charismatic religion—without hearing the resonance with Romanticism. Kurdish literary criticism has its own distinct definition of Romanticism, a period that reaches its peak between 1920-1930. All the poetry in this dissertation exists as part of the broadly defined “Classical” period. Exploring these two

traditional Kurdish literary terms reveals opportunities for increased precision within literary criticism. If we speak more precisely about the poetic contributions and movements in the nineteenth century, we can begin a new chapter of comparative work.

Why do European and American Romanticism bear such similarities to the nineteenth century Kurdish poets and their context? When translation could not have brought, for instance, Walt Whitman to Sheikh Raza or Sheikh Raza to Walt Whitman, how did the two poets write with such kindred spirits—simultaneously, across geographic, nationalistic, religious, and cultural differences? Could the European and American Romantics have shared common poetic forefathers with the Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century? Could shared influence have formed a global literary movement? Though the bulk of that comparative work rests outside the limits of what this thesis can do, the conclusion will outline the foundations and point toward the future. This thesis situates these poems in their own context so that they may find their place within a larger global context.

### *Kurdish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century: The Sources*

To begin, we need to know what we already know of Kurdish poetry in the nineteenth century. The short answer for English-speaking readers is: very little. The longer, and intriguing, answer is what little we know comes to us through three sets of sources: (1) English secondary sources written either during the poets' lifetimes or directly after such as the travelogues of British political officers who served in the region during and directly after the time period in discussion as well as a French priest and scholar who lived in the region, learning its languages, just after the conclusion of World War I, (2) scholarly sources written in English within the last couple decades, (3) scholarly sources written in Kurdish throughout the twentieth century. In this section, I will examine what each set of sources shows us about the territory of nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry.

#### *Historical Secondary Sources in English*

The political officers' accounts, rooted as they are in the local personalities, families, and tribal relationships, are some of the few mentions in English I have found to date of any nineteenth century Kurdish poets. Two men—W.R. Hay and E.B. Soane—give passing reference to Sheikh Raza Talabani that, though brief, are instructive. A third—C.J. Edmonds—devotes significant time in his accounts to both the Talabani family and its notable poet, Sheikh Raza Talabani. Sheikh Raza and his poetry make such an impression on Edmonds that he renders his own translations of seven poems. The way he represents those translations, in addition to the choices he made as a translator, reveal his simultaneous fascination and discomfort with Sheikh Raza's language. As well, since Edmonds views poetry as an early indicator of cultural or national mood, he consciously includes another nineteenth century Kurdish poet, Haji Qadir Koye. Edmonds deems both poets luminaries in the Kurdish sphere, but grants Sheikh Raza deeper attention; he reflects only philosophically on Koye, not translating any verse.

Of all the accounts available in English, Father Thomas Bois', a translation from the French, is most comprehensive. Bois spends an entire chapter of *The Kurds* outlining oral, popular, and written literature. The section on written literature traces Kurdish poetry from "its beginnings to the first World War" (Bois 121). Relying on Kurdish literary publications and scholarship including Aladin Sajadi and his 634-page *History of Kurdish Literature*, Bois gives a succinct bibliography of Kurdish written literature since the fourteenth century, including all dialects (121-136). Most relevant here is that Bois examines, however briefly, eleven of the thirteen poets this dissertation studies. Sheikh Raza Talabani is the only poet to appear across all three travelogues and as a stand-out in Bois' catalogue—perhaps because he was a religious and political notable figure as well as a powerful poet.

Organized in order of increasingly intentional treatment, I will move from the political officer's personal interactions with nineteenth century Kurdish poets and their poems to Bois' more analytical presentation. This section will visit each political officer's narrative, looking first to Hay, then Soane, then Edmonds, before moving finally to Bois.

In his book *Two Years in Kurdistan: Experiences of a Political Officer 1918-1920*, Sir William Rupert Hay describes his crisscrossing of the Kurdish regions. At one point, over one hundred pages into his descriptions, he relates one portion of his journeys, "a

mile or two away from Gul Tappeh,” in which he “was caught in a heavy thunderstorm and soaked to the skin,” and ‘resorted’ to a local resident, Mahmud Yaba, for shelter. Yaba welcomes Hay into his home, tossing “a large pile of thorns and brushwood on the fire, which burst into an enormous blaze.” Hay changes into dry clothes and as both night and storm set in, decides to spend the night where he is, with Yaba (Hay 121).

“After a simple dinner of bughul and vegetables,” Hay says, “an old saiyid called Shaikh Riza (or more popularly Shaikh i Shait or the Mad Shaikh) rode up to the door, dismounted and came in.” The simple mention of Sheikh Raza’s nickname, the Mad Sheikh, would make this story interesting. Perhaps Hay was unaware of the Sheikh’s poetry, of his ungovernable and sharp tongue, but Hay attributes the nickname to the Sheikh’s disposition: “He was a jovial old gentleman possessing an enormous sense of humour, which is probably why the Kurds thought him mad.” As the gathering goes on into the evening, Sheikh Raza begins his prayers. Rather than retiring to a separate or private space, he clearly stays in the main room, near the conversation. Hay tells us that he said “his prayers in a loud voice” and “continually interrupted them to join in the talk.” Hay ends his reflections on the evening with a final complaint: the Mad Sheikh “and Mahmud Agha nearly drove me mad by keeping up a loud conversation long after I had turned in, and when that had finished the old shaikh continued to cough, hoick, and spit all night” (Hay 121). This is the Sheikh Raza Talabani we can imagine behind the poems, but have little evidence of in life—irreverent, reverent, friendly, irritating, and above all irrepressibly alive. He turns away from the conversation toward prayer only to interrupt his devotions for the conversation. He continues talking with his friend even after the larger gathering draws to a close. Even with all the conversation spent, he continues the noise on his own.

In the telling of his evening, an evening brought about by bad weather and the ensuing detour, Hay inadvertently created a record of the man behind the poems. Apocrypha like this occur in Kurdish literature, but their dates and occasion of origin are orally transmitted for generations before they are written down, leaving room for change, embellishment. Additionally, any Kurd passing on a story about Sheikh Raza Talabani would have known, and perhaps changed his telling to reflect, the character in his narrative. Hay has no knowledge of the poet, only knowledge of the man.

A quick aside: Hay's title, *Two Years in Kurdistan: Experiences of a Political Officer 1918-1920*, points to a problematic aspect of C.J. Edmonds' narrative. According to Hay, he would have met Sheikh Raza Talabani eight to nine years after Edmonds claims the Sheikh died. It is also possible that this 'Shaikh Riza' is not the poet Sheikh Raza Talabani. Hay makes no definitive reference to other markers that could substantiate this 'shaikh' from our 'sheikh.' Hay's 'Riza' does not mention poetry, Sufism, the Talabani family, Kirkuk, or Baghdad, but even if he had, the narrative could still not be confirmed 'Raza.' In a culture that relies on both oral and written literatures to preserve and pass on knowledge, all can alter in the telling, over the generations, from manuscript to manuscript. These alterations include even basic information such as the birth and death dates of the poets at hand. Identity in a tale such as this can be considered, but not declared.

Major E.B. Soane became a British political officer after he had spent some time in Tehran where he worked at the Imperial Bank of Iran. His Persian and Kurdish were so fluent that many mistook him for a Persian man, an impression that he cultivated, traveling at times under a Muslim name and embracing a Shia identity. His book *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise, with historical notices of the Kurdish tribes and the Chaldeans of Kurdistan* chronicles one journey he undertook through Kurdish lands.

Traveling through Kirkuk, Soane meets Sheikh Raza as "a notable of Kirkuk, one Reza, called by the Muslims Shaikh Reza, and by the Christians, who hate him, Mulla Reza, an inferior title" (Soane 134). Soane describes Sheikh Raza as a "worthy" and a "principal priest of the place" who, "though a Sunni and a fanatic at that, has no objection to seeing and being polite to the dissenters of Islam, the Shi'a" (Soane 135). In his poetry, Sheikh Raza does repeat sentiments of tolerance for the various sects of Islam. His poem "Love for His Holiness Hussein" ends:

Shi'ite and Sunni: I don't know. I am friend to whomever he  
Is friend, enemy to whomever he is enemy.

Revering the family and cursing the companions is shocking  
As carrying the name of Glory and eating shit. (Lines 13-16)

If we infer that "he" in the penultimate couplet is the Prophet Mohammed, the couplet is a clear statement that the schism in Islam matters little, if at all, to Sheikh Raza; he values instead espousal of devotion to the Prophet Mohammed. The final couplet takes

the sentiment further. As a Sunni, he states that “revering the family and cursing the companions,” an extreme way to paraphrase the traditional Sunni stance on the family and companions of the Prophet, is like “carrying the name of Glory and eating shit” (Abdurrahman *Sheikh Raza* 270). Soane does not explain his use of the word “fanatic.” We cannot know precisely what he meant. Yet, with lines like these, we can imagine that Sheikh Raza, though tolerant, might have expressed his views quite vociferously.

Soane describes Sheikh Raza as living in a house “adjoining the mosque wherein he officiated, one of the best houses in Kirkuk. His courtyard was laid out in flat beds in the Persian fashion, and a few mulberry trees veiled the bareness of the high walls.” Soane paints the man as “a very reverend signeur this indeed; the frown of sanctity sat blackly upon his brow, unlightened by his white turban.” Given Soane’s earlier epithet of “fanatic,” this description seems oddly dignified, perhaps slightly ironic. Received into the home, Soane bemoans “a gramophone, from whose trumpet a raucous Arab voice had just ceased to shriek verses of the Quran” and laments, “to such uses are European abominations adaptable!”

As the conversation deepened, Soane, in his persona as a Persian, declares himself “from Shiraz.” This is all Sheikh Raza needs to begin quoting Hafiz and Sa’di, two of his great literary heroes, in “excellent Persian” and to read Soane “some of his own poetry” from his “manuscript book.” We can only imagine what poems Sheikh Raza read; Soane does not record that detail nor what or whom the poems addressed. Soane does note that Sheikh Raza “versified in four languages—Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish; but preferred Persian to all of them, having a just contempt for the majority of Turkish verse, consisting as it does nearly all of Arabic and Persian” (Soane 135). These tidbits tantalize. What poems of his did Sheikh Raza read? In a 2015 conversation, Sheikh Raza’s descendent Sheikh Pirot related that the manuscripts he had held, eighteen poems in Sheikh Raza’s own hand, were burned or looted during the violent years of Saddam’s forced Arabization of Kirkuk. Others perhaps still exist, but if so, they are kept secret. Soane saw the poet read from his own pages, but his readers do not get to overhear.

Instead, Soane tells his reader more of Sheikh Raza's conduct. Sheikh Raza complains "bitterly of the progress Christians were making and doubtless would make under the *regime* of constitutional government." He continues, "in speaking, his eyes flashed, he grew excited, the latent fanaticism in him boiled, and he longed to see the blood of these infidels spilt." But, Soane says, Sheikh Raza's frustrations do not end with Christians. "With cries of disgust," Soane says, "against the lukewarm sentiments of the Turkomans, he denounced Musulman and Christian alike..." Here, again, is the Sheikh Raza we see in his poems. He spares no man, no woman, no sect, no religion. He dispenses his "disgust" equally and freely. Soane declares that "it took him the whole time of drinking three cups of tea to exhaust his fury," perhaps not surprising given that, Soane describes, "he sees himself foiled, and his proposals ignored." While Soane might not have known, he has glimpsed here an on-going frustration for Sheikh Raza: an inability to make his way in the world. While he could write poems, and prided himself on his vigor, he could not ascend the family structure to shape its religious or political aims. Specifically because of his fervor, which knew no bounds, specifically because of his poems, which also knew no bounds, he found himself barred from family leadership. After Sheikh Raza has spent his anger, Soane and his companion, a watchmaker and a fellow Shia, excuse themselves "expressing no opinion on his sentiments (Soane 135).

Given Sheikh Raza's reputation, his name was easy to appropriate. Kak Amin Shwani, a Kurdish scholar of Sheikh Raza, related stories in interviews from 2014 and 2015 of individuals who desired to curse a public figure, but feared the retribution, so wrote under Sheikh Raza's name. He cited another instance of a man who wished to incite violence between the Talabani family and neighboring families: he attacked certain individuals in verse using Sheikh Raza's name. While others I have spoken with, Dr. Nouri Talabani and Sheikh Ali Qaradaghi to cite a two relevant scholars, have echoed Shwani's stories in various versions, the stories are never precisely the same. The general idea, though, remains: in a society where certain speech can mortally endanger the speaker, using another's name creates safety. As one of my former students remarked, "Sheikh Raza says what we cannot say." Taking his name frees the tongue.

Aside from this incident with Sheikh Raza and the watchmaker, Soane gives a brief acknowledgement as the book begins. In the prefatory note, Soane says, "...I have been enabled to give some entirely new matter, for that on Kurdish history was supplied me in letters received from Shah Ali of Aoraman, Shaikh Reza of Kirkuk..." (Soane, v). These letters, unlike the poems Soane hears and does not record, are perhaps preserved in Soane's papers, likely part of the legacy the Soane Trust for Kurdistan protects. I am still working to find and access them. As Soane cites the letters as a major source of "entirely new matter," they seem important, if difficult, to find.

C.J. Edmonds, a long-time British political officer in the Sulaimani and Kirkuk regions, is the only of his peers to dedicate time and attention to the Kurdish poets of the time period. In his *Kurds, Turks, and Arabs: Politics, Travel, and Research in North-Eastern Iraq 1919-1925*, he notices both Haji Qadir Koye and Sheikh Raza Talabani. His comments on Koye imply a functional, if not extensive, knowledge of the poet's work and its influence. For Sheikh Raza, however, as a prominent member of the Talabani family and Kirkuk city, as a poet of "outstanding merit," Edmonds translates seven poems and dwells on elements of interpretation or explanation (Edmonds 59; 290). His are the only complete translations I can find of any nineteenth century Kurdish poet.

Edmonds did not meet Talabani, but understood him as "the most famous citizen of Kirkuk thrown up in modern times." Though Edmonds writes possibly nine years after Sheikh Raza's death, he declares Sheikh Raza as "probably still (in spite of his old-fashioned language with its large admixture of Arabic words) the most popular of all poets in Southern Kurdistan," with the possible exception of "Hajji Qadir of Koi, the early apostle of Kurdish nationalism." Edmonds offers his own translations, with commentary, of five complete poems: "Male Lambs," "My Dear Nephew," "A Game-Cock," "Tobacco," and "The Gift Mule." He also excerpts from several others including the poem inscribed today onto the Talabani Mosque and Tekiye walls: "Speaking of Lineage Until the Speech Reaches Him."

Of the five complete poems Edmonds chooses to translate, three center on animals: "Male Lambs," "A Game-Cock," and "The Gift Mule." Either Edmonds did not know or did not mention that these poems represent a larger genre within Sheikh Raza's work. Sheikh Raza adapted the traditional forms of Persian and Arabic court

poetry—praising the prince and cursing his enemies—to attain his own desires. Rather than praise his prince, he would praise a potential benefactor. The praise implicitly incurred a favor: Sheikh Raza praises this tribal leader or that city’s mayor and perhaps he will receive a fighting rooster, a healthy mule. The fourth poem, though about tobacco, fits this style: he is praising the giver and his gift. These favors would have been a source of sustenance and status in his world. Rather than curse his prince’s enemies, he would curse the leader who had failed to pay proper tribute to him, the Sultan who refused him a position. At times, such as in “Male Lambs,” he threatened the curse, begging his relatives or others to give him what he needed or wanted so that he would not have to unleash his tongue.

The curse Sheikh Raza holds back in “Male Lambs” is released in “My Dear Nephew,” the fifth and final complete poem Edmonds translates. Invective was not only a tactic Sheikh Raza used to get or denigrate a gift, it was his favorite mode of retribution or play. When snubbed, he would grouse to his page. When feisty and impish, he would provoke other through the page. Edmonds seems aware of, but does not relate the history of invective in Persian and Arabic poetry. He briefly tells his reader that “The outstanding merit of [Sheikh Raza’s] verse is what the Persian critics call *zur-i kalam*, vigour of diction.” Edmonds’ use of the word “vigour” here seems an understatement as he continues, “A large proportion of his compositions shows him to have been an unblushing blackmailer and scrounger. Several of his journeys seem to have followed on tiffs with the rest of the family...” (Edmonds, 290). A longer history of the curse poem and of the bearing Persian and Arabic poetry have on the nineteenth century Kurdish poets will follow when we turn to the poetry itself. For now, I only point out that Edmonds pointed to that connection in his exposition of Sheikh Raza’s poetry.

After he characterizes the verse, he revisits Sheikh Raza as an “unblushing blackmailer and scrounger.” He reveals that “the Talabani of Gil and Tauq were at almost permanent feud with their tribal neighbors, the Jabbari, the Kakai, and the Dauda, who are the targets of numerous obscene and scurrilous poems by Sheikh Riza” (Edmonds, 272). He asserts that “some of Riza’s best known poems consist of attacks on the tribal enemies of the Talabani family—Jabbari, Dauda and Kakai; but most of these, like many others aimed at individuals, are far too vitriolic and obscene to

be translated into English” (Edmonds 295). He proceeds to tactfully edit “My Dear Nephew” in his translation, precisely because, we must assume, he assesses the lines as “far too vitriolic and obscene to be translated.” In a footnote to his translation of “My Dear Nephew,” he admits, “I have been obliged to take two small liberties with the translation of the ante-penultimate line” (Edmonds 292). Comparing my own translation with his, I see his concern. His translation reads:

I went to my dear nephew’s private party  
This evening, feeling most polite and friendly and unassuming.  
I looked through the crack of the door; he and his cronies  
Were seated in two rows round Khidhr, Kazi’s son.  
You would have said the door-keeper had been specially warned;  
He drew himself up like a lusty Turk and said: ‘Who knows you?’  
I said to him: ‘It’s me, I’m So-and-so, I’m Uncle Shaikh Riza;  
Don’t you know us, Humaiyis Efendi?  
Is this shutting of doors for me? Speak out, that I may go away  
Or allow me... you beast, my feet are numbed with cold.’  
When I perceived what the object of the proceedings was  
At once I returned home again, but feeling vexed. (291)

While we agree on much of the substance of the translation, we differ at key moments where he has sanitized the original poem, which reads more along these lines:

I faced my dear nephew’s good situation  
tonight, with generosity and faithfulness and shame.  
Through the crack of the door I saw him and his followers  
seated in two lines around Khal, Kazi’s son.  
You would have said the guard had been advised.  
He puffed himself up like a Turk, saying, “And who knows you?”  
I told him, “It’s me, So-and-so, Uncle Sheikh Raza,  
as if you don’t know me, Hamiz Efendi.  
If this closed door is against me, I will go, but  
have pity, you fag, you slut. My nads are iced over.”  
Then, in Kurdish, he spoke, and said, “Oh, yes,  
you’re the sheikh of fraud, gambling, and donkey thieving.”  
At this, I understood the intention and  
slunk back home, stranded and stung. (Lines 1-14)

Sheikh Raza’s vigorous diction could stun any reader and make any translator pale. Perhaps Edmonds’ sensibilities would not allow him to take these poems from Kurdish to English in their totality. Perhaps Edmonds intended the ‘feet’ to be a wink, implying genitals. Perhaps the version of the poem that has reached modern readers has been sensationalized over time—though the ellipsis, Edmonds’ own punctuation and addition,

and the switch from “homosexual” and “whore” to “beast” suggests an active editorial presence. Edmonds offers his translation and we offer ours.

One final note on translation and versions: in C.J. Edmonds’ translation, the third line ends “round Khidr, Kazi’s son.” The Aras publication of these poems cannot be translated “Khidr, Kazi’s son,” because it lacks a critical space or connecting “ى.” In the Aras edition, the line would translate “around the heater.” In an earlier version, given to us by Kak Amin Shawni, the line clearly reads, “Khala, Kazi’s son,” with the necessary space and connecting “ى.” Edmonds’ explanation of his translation is compelling: that Khidr, Kazi’s son, was known for telling sexy stories and that Sheikh Raza was angered at not being allowed to listen. This is a history that Edmonds, touring the area at the time, would have known. Though the most current publications of the poem do not support this translation, both Kak Amin’s version and Edmonds’ translation does. Here is one small example of how the versions vary, how that variance affects translation and interpretation.

Father Thomas Bois offers the most complete catalogue of poets across the centuries of Kurdish letters. Of the thirteen poets discussed in this dissertation, Bois’ catalogue includes eleven. Bois lived in the Kurdish region of Iraq at the beginning of the twentieth century; he saw the first formal editions of these poets published—he got to know many of the great Kurdish scholars of Kurdish literature. For better and for worse, the books these scholars wrote continue to underpin the field of Kurdish literary criticism today. The scholars Bois names—Emin Feyzi (friend of Sheikh Raza), Rafiq Hilmi, Marif Kheznedar, and Aladin Sajadi (130)—I name.

Relying on these critics and what were then newly released editions of poetry, Bois remarks on two trends in the nineteenth century. The first includes “a whole group of Sheiks of Sulaymaniyah” (124) including “the Nakshbendi Mahwî (1830-1904), an exponent of Sufi theories” (124). The second trend Bois mentions, he defines as “lyricism” that “blossoms forth” as “patriotism makes its appearance for good and all” (124). This second lyrical, political movement includes: “Kurdi (Mustafa Sahibkiran 1809-1849); Salim (Abdirahman Sahibkiran) (1800-1866); Mifti Zehawi (1792-1890), who was a master in many kinds; Wafai (Mirza Rahim 1836-1892)” as well as “Nali (Mela Khizer) of Shahrizor (1797-1855)” who “extolled his fatherland of Kurdistan, and

the agnostic “Haji Kadir Koyî (1815-1892)” (124). The “Mufti Zehawi” Bois refers to, given the dates provided, is very likely Jamil al-Zahawi’s father; poetry was often practiced as a form of devotion or devout contemplation. Bois’ picture of the nineteenth century, as a time of burgeoning lyricism and nationalist sentiment, is accurate and his list of poets is, especially compared to other Western understandings and presentations of nineteenth century Kurdish literature, a respectable compilation.

Of the individuals in the catalogue, Bois gives more detail on two: Haji Qadir Koye and Sheikh Raza Talabani. Bois describes Koye as “full of [...] reactions, inspired in him by the progress of science, against the intellectual torpor of the mullahs and sheiks and the lack of adaptability of the latter to modern life” (124). Bois continues to describe the content of Koye’s work, saying, “[the poet] charges [the clergy] with selfishness, and with the intellectual laziness which is an obstacle to freedom of thought” (124). Bois concludes his comments on Koye by establishing the reach of Koye’s poems. Even in the twentieth century, Bois says, Koye’s “poems still arouse the enthusiasm of the young, and his spirit still influences many poets of the day, in spite of, or because of his materialist philosophy” (125). Sheikh Raza, Bois declares, is “a strange character, rather an agnostic and nevertheless a fanatic” who “must be dealt with apart” (125). Bois depicts the poet as having had “the talent of improvisation, not only in Kurdish, but equally well in Turkish and Persian,” corroborating both the fluency we know the poet achieved and the spontaneity that made him infamous. This mastery, Bois tells us, “is often profound and edifying,” though the poet “sometimes falls into coarseness and cynicism,” especially in “[h]is short satirical pieces,” which have “a racy quality” (125). In all his complexity, Sheikh Raza is, Bois writes, “still today one of the most popular Kurdish poets in Irak” (125).

The brief meditations on the characters of Koye and Sheikh Raza are the major details provided on the poets Bois discusses from the nineteenth century and conclude his comments on that century and its poets. Beginning his commentary on twentieth century literature, Bois identifies poetic patterns and thematic concerns of the nineteenth century that certain poets carry forward: rising awareness and agitation for the Kurdish land and identity as well as religious devotion and its rigors. Within this

movement, Bois points to three poets who figure prominently in this dissertation: Piramerd, Qani', and Nari.

"In Irak," Bois tells his readers, "the chief poet is Piremerd, meaning 'the old man,' Haji Tewfik (1867-1950), who manages to communicate to the hearts and minds of young people his love for the beauties of the Kurdish land and its history" (131). Piramerd came of age during the nineteenth century, only a few years after the fall of the last Kurdish principality; the poet lived out his years of the twentieth century, through both world wars, as a poet, translator, editor and publisher of primary importance. In more ways than his artistic concerns or characteristics, he connected the two centuries. Bois appreciates and accentuates Piramerd's role in the many transitions taking place throughout the poet's lifetime. Bois also pinpoints Qani' and Nari as two poets writing in the twentieth century, born in the nineteenth, who continue the work of their predecessors. Of Qani', he writes, "Qani' or Muhamed Shik Evdel Kadir, born in 1900, describes the various enchanting scenes of the Fatherland through a series of short fascicles, the very titles of which are like perfumes to the heart and spirit" (131). Of Nari, he says, though "purely mystical works are becoming rarer, they have not for all that disappeared, and Kake Heme Nari (1874-1944) still sings of the love of God and of solitude" (131). Though Piramerd is a towering figure, all three poets, Bois defends, work between the centuries, conveying to a new world the old concerns.

Bois' record of these poets is imperfect—incomplete, jumbled or unspecified dialectically, cursory—but also the most complete provided from a Western perspective. His readings, across primary and secondary Kurdish literary sources, are sensitive and mostly outside of any Western moral judgement. It is important to note that most established, historical sources in English come to us from British political officers and a missionary. Kurds, and the larger Middle East, sustained difficult relationships with foreign military and religious presence throughout the nineteenth century. The positions these Western men held brought them into contact with Kurdish poets and poetry; their positions also, to greater and lesser extent, limited how they were able to read these poets and their poems.

The fact that some of the initial Western reception of Kurdish literature has come through predominantly British sources matters greatly. Jordi Tejel Gorgas has traced the

differences between the French and British Mandates in terms of their impact on Kurdish society [2005, 2008a, 2008b]. Both as British citizens and as members of a proto-colonial presence, British political officers brought their personal and colonial biases to their presentation and translation of nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry. Given his personal and political sensibilities, for instance, Edmonds excised entire lines of Sheikh Raza's poetry. Christian missionaries were controversial figures during the nineteenth century particularly, an element of the history that surrounds this poetry I will examine in greater detail in my section on "Religion on the Rise." Beyond their conversionary aspirations, which lay behind their language acquisition, their presence exacerbated tensions between Christians and Kurds, Turks, and Persians. Throughout the nineteenth century, the East, both the Ottomans and the Persians, struggled to decide how they would respond to Western strength: whether by assimilation or outright rejection. Missionaries stood directly on this fault line, personifying what many perceived as the Western threat to Islam and Islamic power. The twentieth-century French priest and scholar Father Thomas Bois, based in Syria, offers a useful treatment of Kurdish literature, but it cannot stand outside the history in which it was made (see Tejel Gorgas 2005). Any Western scholar approaching these poems stands in debt to the work of these thinkers and writers, but their legacy is also complex. When I turn to questions of methodology, I will examine in more detail my positionality as a foreigner of, some might say, neo-colonialist nationality and Christian descent, as a quasi-descendant of Hay, Soane, Edmonds, and Bois.

### *Current Scholarly Sources in English*

The existing treatment of these poets and their poems in English falls, as Edmonds himself says, somewhat short though current work on Kurdish poetry in English is gaining ground. In 1998, A.M. Mardoukhi and Anwar Soltani edited an anthology of Gorani literature from manuscripts the British Library held. In 2006, Rafiq Sabir, Kemal Mirawdeli, and Stephen Watts edited and translated an anthology of Modern Kurdish poetry as part of Uppsala University's series on endangered languages. More recently, in the last few years, at the University of Exeter, Karwan Osman is giving Abdulla Goran

the focus he deserves as one of the giants among the Modernists. Yaser Ali has turned his attention to the contemporary poets of Badinan. These sources demonstrate the growing health of the study of Kurdish literature globally, but are less relevant to the immediate concerns of this thesis.

More relevant are the recent contributions of Farangis Ghaderi (2015; 2017), Joseph Andrew Bush (2014), Joanna Bocheńska (2010; 2014), Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (2010). Farangis Ghaderi completed a dissertation on the rise of Modernism in Kurdish literature; since her thesis (2016), which is in direct conversation with this thesis, is currently embargoed, it is of great help to have access to her articles on the the literary legacy of the Ardalans and the challenges of writing Kurdish literary history. Moreover, though the two dissertations emerge from different disciplines, it is worth noting the various contributions of Joseph Andrew Bush's thesis, "A Threadbare Prayer Mat': Sufi Poetry and the Textures of Everyday Life in Kurdistan." I will briefly examine the work Joanna Bocheńska has done on the continuum of Kurdish literary culture before concluding with an examination of what Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph's *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages*, a companion volume to Ehsan Yarshater's *A History of Persian Literature*, offers us. That volume contains some of the only contemporary English references to the great Sorani Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century and has contributed to my understanding of the hybrid nature—oral and written—of nineteenth-century Kurdish text as well as the historical, economic, and religious realities surrounding these poems.

In Farangis Ghaderi's available work, she stresses the diversity of Kurdish literature, outlines the difficulties of attempting to write Kurdish literary history, and explores the implications of both for scholars. She states simply, in her 2015 article "The Challenges of writing Kurdish literary history: Representation, classification, periodization," "Kurdish literature is diverse and heterogeneous and literary history should reflect this diversity and heterogeneity" (23). While this dissertation cannot offer "a Kurdish literary history," it can acknowledge the diversity and heterogeneity of Kurdish literature by clearly setting out its focus, which is on Sorani poetry of the nineteenth century (Ghaderi *Challenges* 23). In the same article, Ghaderi outlines the macro and micro difficulties of creating literary histories around or about Kurdish

literature: issues of inclusion and exclusion, of incomplete, persecuted, and secret collections—and on the more micro scale, issues such as uncertain biographical information about the poets, including birth and death dates. She details the need for greater focus on how historical systems of Kurdish reception affect the information we have on these poems today. If we cannot tell when a poem was written, we are limited in how we can relate it to the larger world around the poem, for instance. These are all issues I examine further in my methodology section. Finally, in her article, “The Literary Legacy of the Ardalans,” Ghaderi remarks primarily on the formation and fall of Gorani as a literary language. She draws attention to the fact that from “a highly cultivated language with a rich literary tradition, Gorani has fallen to a state where its existence is under severe threat” and that the “dramatic fall of Gorani literature following the demise of the Ardalans highlights the significance of patronage and state support in the development of languages” (*Literary Legacy* 52). Most importantly for this dissertation, however, is how “Gorani was gradually replaced by Sorani in the nineteenth century” and, Ghaderi notes, “the process of this shift is yet to be thoroughly examined” (Ghaderi *Literary Legacy* 52). While this dissertation does not analyze the decline of Gorani as a literary language, it does, to a limited extent examine the shift away from the Gorani dialect and track the repercussions from that shift for Sorani as a predominant literary Kurdish dialect of the nineteenth century.

Joseph Andrew Bush’s dissertation is an ethnographic study of contemporary Muslim piety in the Kurdistan region; “supported by archival research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” Bush uses “fragments of poetry” to understand “Muslims who disown pietistic forms of religiosity even as they read and recite the Sufi poetry that is associated with devotional practice in Islam,” Muslims “who defer or dismiss invitations from their family to a committed practice of Islam” (Bush ii). The few lines of poetry Bush quotes, of which several are relay translations, he cites to elucidate issues of reception (how are contemporary Muslim readers receiving these poems) and to construct arguments about contemporary Muslim piety in Kurdistan: its demands and how contemporary Kurds are living in various degrees of rebellion from those demands. He hopes to “demonstrate how poetry in contemporary Kurdistan animates intimate relations characterized by religious difference” (Bush 152). His thesis demonstrates a

daily integration with Kurdish society. The conversations he relates and analyzes indicate a deep trust between researcher and subject that implies care, attention, and genuine engagement.

His discipline is not literature or translation—his thesis only looks at poetry through the eyes of the Muslim “Other” he strives to understand; it is almost unfair to evaluate his characterization of Kurdish poets and their work from within the disciplines of literature and translation, but given the significant overlap in subject matter, I must.

Let me begin with the territory we share. The references to or quotes from poets in Bush’s dissertation are, as he says, mostly fragmentary, other than two poems he renders in full translation. Several of his translations are relay translations working from a Sorani translation which came from a Persian original. Though Bush refers to many poets and writers throughout the Muslim world, most relevant here are the nineteenth-century Kurdish poets and figures both Bush and I reference or quote from (named in the order of appearance in Bush’s thesis): Mawlawi, Piramerd, Mahwi, Nali, Salim, Sheikh Raza Talabani, Kurdi, Kak Ahmadi Sheikh, and Mawlana Khalid. Two of these poets, we have each translated from: Mawhi, from whom Bush cites a couplet from “[If I can’t see]” (available in full in my appendices), and Salim, from whom Bush cites four lines from “[In a field]” (available in full in my appendices) (62, 155). Bush relates Salim to Nali as one of the Three Pillars of the Babans who, in his words, “are popularly credited with initiating a revival of writing and literature in Kurdish, specifically in the Sorani dialect, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (112). He mentions Kurdi, though fails to identify him as the third of the Three Pillars, and incorrectly characterizes Kurdi’s poetry as “less well-known in contemporary Kurdistan” (155). He writes of Sheikh Raza Talabani briefly that he was a poet “...known as the most accomplished [...] in the genre of *hcu*, or lampoon poetry, with his “ribald humor” and “crass vocabulary” (126).

Though his in-depth analysis of daily conversations around piety, its demands and differences, offer wonderful insights into Kurdistan and contemporary Kurdish people, his awareness and depiction of Kurdish poetry leaves room for concern regarding individual nineteenth-century Kurdish poets, Kurdish poets and scholars in general, and the current state of poetry as a public artform in Kurdistan, specifically Sulaimani.

When discussing Mawlawi, Bush writes, “My aim is not to recover a library that is lost, but to explore the kinds of living and the kinds of uncertainty to which fragments of poetry have become attached in the first decade of the twenty-first century” (2). Kashkul translators, working on a book of Mawlawi's selected poems in translation, face one major challenge: Mawlawi has left his readers thousands of pages of poetry. The fragments, the remnants of the burned library to which Bush refers, are extensive. When Bush turns to examine Piramerd, it is to discuss how poetry took on national interpretations, a “new political valence,” as the twentieth century matured, citing Piramerd's treatment of Mawlawi's poetry as an example (7). Bush overlooks the national consciousness that had begun dawning as early as Haji Qadir Koye, nearly a century earlier, and taken shape throughout the nineteenth century. Bush also fails to connect Piramerd, as one who “sought to lay claim to a distinctly Kurdish poetic heritage,” to Piramerd's two most nationalistic projects: *Zheen* and *Zhyanawa*, the two major Kurdish periodicals the poet edited, printed, and/or founded (7). He describes Piramerd's poetry as “bleeding” into Mawlawi's “as he borrowed couplets and half-lines,” but does not spare a moment to think Piramerd may be, and perhaps in fact was, utilizing known poetic forms that would have been familiar both to Mawlawi and the larger world of nineteenth-century Kurdish poets, including, for instance Haji Qadir Koye, in whose poems scholars such as Joyce Blau and Farangis Ghaderi see strong indicators of Kurdish nationalism (7). I do agree, as do other Kurdish scholars and poets, that “...the life of poetry in Kurdistan [is] inseparable from the emergence of the *nationalist discourse*,” but Bush's idea of when that nationalist discourse begins is far later than a closer reading of nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry suggests (15). Periodization in Kurdish literature is extremely difficult and changeable, as Ghaderi demonstrates in her 2015 article and as I will examine in more detail throughout this dissertation, but in the methodology section and conclusion.

Beyond several missed opportunities in his characterization of individual poets, his treatment of the Kurdish literary community is troubling. Bush tells his reader, “I began by reading [Kurdish poetry] publications extensively, conducting interviews and holding extensive conversations with both contemporary poets and secular intellectuals. In those conversations, I learned that many practicing poets did not consider

themselves ‘critics’” (31). It is true, in my experience, that Kurdish poets do not often cross over into literary criticism, but literary criticism as a genre, though defined by Kurds more as interpretation and contextualization, is alive and well among Kurdish intellectuals. Literary criticism is not practiced in the West the way it is in Kurdistan, but as Kurds delineate the discipline, it is certainly present in the Kurdish academy. Bush never specifies which poets and intellectuals he met, leaving me to wonder how he came to the conclusions he did. I understand why he turns, “for the intensive study of poetic texts,” to “non-professionals whose deep love of poetry animated their ongoing practice of reading;” I, too, have found great insight and help from readers whose qualifications were non-academic, non-professional, but he dismisses, in a single sentence, any help Kurdish poets and critics could offer (31-32). His investigation into Kurdish critics and poets must have been brief to render them, in his mind, so un-insightful on their own literature. Bush must classify Sheikh Mohammed Ali Qaradaghi, a contemporary Kurdish scholar and critic we both cite, as a “religious intellectual,” or perhaps considers him a “non-professional.”

Finally, Bush’s depiction of Kurdish literary culture is, from my perspective, overly bleak. Though Bush attributes, I think correctly, the contemporary “universal curricula” of poetry in the secular schools formed in the mid-twentieth century to the legacy of the hujra, he speaks as if in mourning of the separation of poetry from “the *hucra*” and “the moral and intellectual training of Muslims” (8, 16). “Reassigned to the domain of ‘culture’,” Bush paints poetry as torn from its traditional definition of Islamic knowledge, which to some degree it is (16). That tear, however, has not damaged poetry’s vitality in Kurdistan. Poets read to massive crowds, books sell out within weeks, bootlegged copies appear weeks after that. And the tear is not a complete sundering: to this day, Islamic movements have their poets laureate who write with fervor and whose verses are taken as knowledge. Poetry, despite the addition of a new, more secular facet, has not become less popular or less relevant to the Kurdish people or nation.

Joanna Bocheńska, a scholar more focused on contemporary Kurdish literature, still defends the importance of studying classical Kurdish literature. In her article, “Continuity and change, Kurdish contemporary literature and its quests for identity,” she underscores the importance of the Kurdish literary tradition: “Contemporary writers

come back to the past, to the Kurdish oral tradition and works of classical literature and use it as an inspiration and lesson of beauty and dignity of the Kurdish language” (13). Calling Kurdish literature “a meaningful continuation,” she contends that contemporary literature has “been enriched by the religious, philosophical and ethical motifs rooted in the past – in classical Kurdish literature” (*Continuity and Change* 15). As she looks up the continuum, she sees the influences from folklore to the present, writing, “Kurdish contemporary literature is undoubtedly the continuation of its own rich folklore and classical tradition” (*Continuity and Change* 14, 18). As I maintain, Bocheńska states, “The literature cannot be viewed without references to the old Kurdish – and in wider perspective...” (*Continuity and Change* 18). Similarly, in her article, “Kurdish Contemporary Literature in Search for Ordo Amoris – Some Reflections on the Continuity of the Kurdish Literary Tradition and Ethics,” she remains devoted to the necessity of what she calls, “constructing the continuity of Kurdish culture”—an aim toward which I hope my dissertation can contribute (*Kurdish Contemporary Literature* 35).

Kreyenbroek and Marzolph’s *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages* covers several key concepts I will revisit as I discuss the various methodologies behind this thesis, including historical information on the Ardalans and Babans, major Kurdish principalities, as catalysts for literary change, when and how nationalism arose in the Kurdish consciousness, and the hybridity of text as well as issues of its historical reception. For now, let me outline the work of Joyce Blau, a contributor to the volume who looks briefly at six poets this dissertation treats in detail. Blau establishes the “Three Pillars of the Babans”—Salim, Kurdi, and Nali—and gives abbreviated biographies (*Written* loc. 1036-1060). She also gives brief descriptions of Haji Qadir Koye, who wrote “in simple language so as to be understood by all” and “had distinct social content,” and Sheikh Raza Talabani, who “introduced satire into Kurdish poetry” (*Written* loc. 1067-1079). Citing heavily from CJ Edmonds’ text, Blau says his poetry “is distinguished by his strong language (zur-e kalâm), bordering on the obscene” (*Written* loc. 1084). Blau also mentions Mahwi, known for his “qasides and ghazals [which take the (female) beloved as their central theme and] have a lyrical – mystical tone” (*Written* loc. 1090).

While it is rare and exciting to see a contemporary Western scholar naming and characterizing Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century, I can add that Sheikh Raza does not “border on” but dives into the obscene and I will argue that Mahwi does not hold a gendered, nor even a corporeal, beloved as his central theme, but God. Blau also, I think correctly, identifies the nineteenth century as a time of movement for “women’s emancipation,” taking as one of her examples Mestura, the second and favorite wife of “Khosrow Khan, the governor (vali) of Ardalân (d. c. 1834) who was a poet” (*Written* loc. 1104). Blau contends Nali was “a great admirer of Masture and dedicated one of his qasidas to her,” but here I must disagree with Blau’s characterization. Nali certainly considered Mestura enough of a poetic force and political presence that he felt she could handle the rather rough introduction he gave her into the Kurdish republic of letters, which was largely male. To say he admired her may be correct, but the poem, which this dissertation will examine in depth and offer in full translation in the appendices, can only tell us he sought to taunt and tease her with the same bawdy language Kurdish male poets of the nineteenth century used with one another.

With all the wonderful work being done by contemporary scholars in English, still, this thesis is the first text in English to look comprehensively at the time period of the nineteenth century and its poets. I offer full translations, transliterations, and the original texts of over two hundred poems from thirteen nineteenth-century Kurdish poets in the appendices. While I am delighted to introduce these poets to an English-speaking audiences more substantively than has ever been done, I am more focused on also situating and analyzing these poets and their poems clearly in their regional and global context.

### *Scholarly Sources from Kurdish*

Even with a growing body of English-language scholarship on Kurdish poetry, this literature review would be incomplete without understanding what Kurdish critics say of their poets. Kurdish literary criticism differs from western literary criticism in two key ways. First, unless you count the poetic meditations that poets would write on one another, there was no literary criticism until the twentieth century. When the genre did

develop, it became more about interpretation of individual poems and that interpretation could be, by Western standards, florid and under-cited prose, bordering more on the genre of personal reflection than scholarly literary criticism. As a representative example of this style, we can take Sheikh Abdulqahar's treatment of Mahwi in his *Experience of Kurdish Poetry*. Beautifully, he describes his interpretation of Mahwi's worldview:

Mahwi considered himself a wide and unlimited body of being in peace with natural, universal laws. To him, there was no difference between falling leaves and his hair, the oceans' water as it evaporated and his own aging, the emerging grass and his growing beard. The cycle of water evaporating from sea, turning into rain, and watering the earth again was equal to the cycle of blood inside human veins. For Mahwi, life was the poetry of human experience and people were poems in the collected works of the universe. (Sheikh 98)

As a reader of Mahwi, I appreciate al-Qahar's interpretation. His prose moves me, gives me new metaphors through which I can see new aspects of Mahwi's work. That said, this text is not recognizable to Western scholars as "criticism." Furthermore, as I mentioned above, very few of this criticism involve citations, so it becomes difficult to figure out where information is coming from and its degree of legitimacy, something Ghaderi notes in her "Challenges." Other issues of legitimacy and reception occur, but we will visit that conversation more fully in the chapter on methodology.

This interpretation often occurred as part of one scholar's efforts to gather together a poet's manuscripts, type them up, evaluate whether or not the poet actually wrote those texts, offer his ideas about what certain, more opaque lines of poetry might mean, and create a publishable edition of the poet's work. As an introduction to their book, the writer would compile his biography of the poet. As editors and annotators of the poets' work, often providing biographical information for the poets as well, I have turned to Sheikh Abdulqahar, Omed Ashna, Mahmood Mullah Karim, Abdullah Khidir Maulud, 'Umed Ashna, Mohammed Mullah Abd-al-Karim, Mohammed Mustafa, Mohammed Mullah Abd-al-Karim, Mohammed Mustafa, Fatih Abdul-Karim, and Khalifa Shukurullah Dwharwt. Even some of the poets themselves have bent themselves to producing secondary sources around their poems, most notably Piramerd, who could be defended as Kurdistan's first literary historian, but certainly as an avid critic, translator, and editor, as well as Jamil al-Zahawi, who wrote a rather detailed

autobiography. The masters of this kind of annotated edition and, more broadly speaking literary history are Sheikh Mohammed Khal, Mullah Abdul-Karim Mudaris, Dr. Marif Kheznedar, Dr. Izedin Mustafa Rasul, and Dr. Aladin Sajadi—all of whom I have drawn on in this dissertation. For more contemporary criticism, I have examined Ali Kamal Bapir, Ahmad Rashid Khurshid, and Rebwar Sewaili. For contemporary and personal perspective, I have conducted extensive interviews with Amin Shwani, Dr. Nouri Talabani, Sheikh Pirot Talabani, and Sheikh Yusuf Talabani.

While I may not have always agreed with the ideas these scholars put forward, while I may not have even agreed at times that their scholarship was literary criticism, I found all their work helpful in understanding the Kurdish perspective on Kurdish literature, which seems critical to disciplines like translation, but also ethnography and anthropology. If, for instance, Bush had given Sajadi or Kheznedar a close read, he would have found numerous references and explanations of how poetry came to be considered and taught as Islamic knowledge, which would have supported his overarching argument. He also might have found it harder to dismiss these sources, as they demonstrate such literary consciousness. In the introduction to the first history of Kurdish literature, Sajadi wrote,

One day I was reading a text and as I was pondering upon it, it occurred to me who am I? Am I English? No. Am I Arab? No. I am a Kurd and from the Kurdish nation which is an independent and recognised nation in the world. As I was immersed in my thoughts I came to the conclusion that a nation should have its own language, literature and history and if not, it is of no significance and will be neglected ... finally I decided I will write a literary history for myself, and for my people, of which we have been deprived, and so that our children can stand among nations with a [written] literary history. (Ghaderi *Challenges* 8)

Very few critics—like Sajadi and Kheznedar—examine more than one poet at a time, meaning that in Kurdish literary criticism, schools, generations and eras are understudied. We will examine what scholarship exists on the formation of literary schools in Kurdish literary criticism in the conclusion, where I will connect the way Kurdish critics construct their schools to more global literary concerns and questions.

### *Methodologies*

This section will outline the theoretical foundations of this dissertation. First, I will look more closely at Kurdish approaches to text, printing, and preservation and how they have impacted the very nature of the texts we read today. Though my thesis does not focus on the process by which collectors create public and private archives or the nature of textuality, both of these intricate and personal realities affect how we read the poems. Specifically, the Kurdish approaches to text, printing, and preservation introduce challenges to the very idea of a “definitive” edition—or translation—of a text. Past an examination of the texts we receive in general, I will describe how I decided which poems to include in this dissertation as well as the principles by which I translate and analyze those poems. Finally, I will consider the ethical implications of engaging in a discussion of these poems as a foreigner who will always be a student of the Kurdish language and culture.

### *Kurdish Approaches to Text, Printing, and Preservation*

Nineteenth-century Kurdish poets lived through significant political, religious, and economic upheaval, which touched the very processes of how these poets wrote their poems. For centuries, poems had existed as oral texts, transmitted by memorization, with the rare written text. Even the rare written texts were often copied down by individuals who attended performances of the poems. As the nineteenth century progresses, the nature of textuality, its hybrid existence of mainly oral and partially written, begins to shift more strongly toward the latter. Kurdish poets live in the throes of that transition and it affects not only their fundamental relationship with their own texts, but also how we receive those texts today.

Speaking of the state of literacy in the nineteenth century, Hassanpour says, “Although the volume of literary works had increased and a number of great poets had appeared, Kurdish culture remained predominantly oral” (Hassanpour, “The Creation” 50). In fact, Allison and Kreyenbroek tell us, “...written forms of Kurdish emerged relatively late” (2). “This is not to say,” Allison adds, “that Kurdish society is at a pre-literate level, with a uniform ‘oral’ world-view;” rather, she continues, “Literacy has been

known in Kurdistan for many centuries as a skill of the elite valued by the majority” (“Kurdish Oral Literature” loc. 1507-1515). In fact, Allison writes, it is the very

“prominence of literacy has also meant that the dividing line between ‘oral tradition’ and written text is not at all clear-cut. For more than a century, Kurdish oral traditions have been collected and published, becoming written texts. Conversely, texts written by renowned literary poets, such as Mewlewî or Feqiyê Teyran, may be memorized and pass into oral tradition, and much spurious material may even be attributed to them.” (“Kurdish Oral Literature” loc. 1517)

Allison sees this fluid relationship between the written and oral text as beneficial, contributing as it does to the richness of Kurdish literature overall (“Kurdish Oral Literature” loc. 1517). Blau points out the aspects of difference between the oral and written and how oral transmission of texts challenges our contemporary definitions of “text” and “correct”:

Unlike written texts, which undergo relatively small changes with time, oral traditions constantly evolve. Even when a text is recited from memory, it is unlikely that it will be the same in two performances; strictly speaking there is no such thing as a single correct version, merely versions which are observed at a given time or place. (“Kurdish Written Literature” 30)

Kurdish poets lived this difference, often working across the spectrum of “text”.

Hassanpour tells us, “In spite of their emphasis on the significance of a literate tradition, both Khanî and Hajî showed great respect for the oral tradition, which they considered to be authentically Kurdish” (Hassanpour, “The Creation” 49). Kheznedar relates that many of Sheikh Raza’s poems arrived spontaneously, “as an answer for a question, or an image of a reaction. That is why many are lost. Those poems that were written down as he recited them have remained” (4: 310). Occasional poems, as a genre, defied writing. Amin Faizy, a close friend of Sheikh Raza’s and a literary luminary himself, spoke freely about how “careless” Sheikh Raza was with his own text, how he did not even collect his work: “Some poems,” Faizy says, “he would write them--and that was it. [...] He also used to improvise poems in gatherings: if one of the attendees didn’t write it down, it would vanish. That’s how most of his poetry was lost” (Rasul “Sheikh Raza” 14). The poets themselves lived at the nexus of oral and written, watching at the balance shifted toward the written text, but firmly educated in the culture of oral literature and recitation.

That culture determined how these texts were heard, transmitted, distributed, received, and finally, perhaps, written down. In addition to the religious education that we examined in the context earlier, through which young men travelled between khanaqas, tekiyes, and mosques, learning and recording the texts they studied, each village had a guest room or guest house, a *mevankhane* or *diwan* or *diwankhane* (court) or “audience-chamber” (Van Bruinessen 82; Hourani, *Arabic Thought* 28). This guest room was a space prepared by the area’s agha to offer “every traveller [...] the proverbial Kurdish hospitality.” Travelers could rest, get tea and food, even a place to stay the night (Van Bruinessen 81). “It is easy to see how, in the past,” Allison writes, “the performance of various kinds of oral literature fitted into everyday rural life,” but “there were urban contexts, too, such as teahouses...” (“Kurdish Oral Literature” loc. 1533-8). Hay, a contemporary to the poets under study here and a British political officer serving in Kurdish areas, equates the sumptuousness of a man’s guest room with his reputation as a man, and a man of honor: “The more lavish [a man’s] hospitality the greater his claim to be called a ‘piao’ or ‘man’” (Hay, 47). But the function of the guest room went beyond hospitality to travelers:

In their heyday all male villagers came and sat here in the evenings, and discussed daily matters. Minor disputes were brought here before the agha, decisions regarding the village (or lineage, or tribe) were taken here, the young were taught traditions and etiquette; and entertainment was also centralized here. (Van Bruinessen 82)

Van Bruinessen goes further, establishing the guest room as a “gravitational center” that would host minstrels, with their “songs and tales and epics” as well as “wandering dervishes [who] came by, staying for a couple of days and singing” (83-84). Hassanpour agrees, stating, “Kurdish literature was born in the city and village mosque schools, and was nurtured in the guest-houses (*dīwekhan*, *dīwan*) of the landed aristocracy” (Hassanpour, “The Creation” 51). Kurdish literature thrived, mainly as an oral art form that had occasional written instantiation, between these two centers of learning and culture: the mosque school and the guest room.

When printing did begin, it began far from Kurdish centers of culture, scattered geographically, and mostly run by governments unfriendly to the Kurdish people and any literature they might create. Hassanpour says, “Printing in Kurdish did not, however, begin in Kurdistan.” He continues, “The first presses were set up in the Kurdish towns of

the Ottoman Empire in the late 1860's: Bitlis (1865-66 or 1893), Diyarbakir (1868-69) and Van (1889-90). They were all established, owned and operated by the government for printing in Turkish." Lamenting further that when Kurds were the management of these printing presses, "with the exception of the Dominican press in Mosul," they had to locate themselves in exile, where "censorship was less effective" (Hassanpour, "The Creation" 52). The first Kurdish newspaper launched in Kurdistan coincides with the close of the nineteenth century, in 1898 (Hassanpour, "The Creation" 56).

Overwhelming evidence supports that texts in the nineteenth century were primarily oral, transcribed only by traveling scholars (*faqes*) and scribes (*mirzas*), and that only a handful of texts were printed in Kurdish—and of those, most were either gospels translated by missionary societies or language resources (a dictionary, an alphabet) (Hassanpour, "The Creation" 61). This hybrid approach to text, to written text, to publishing, leads to a phenomenon of multiplicity: there is rarely, if ever, a definitive version of a text. The very word itself, "definitive," melts away into versions. Each version of a poem doing its own interesting work.

The original collection and reception of these poems, as detailed above, clearly determined what readers receive today. Kurdish poetry as we know it was in large part preserved by individuals as they traveled for personal pleasure or, more commonly, for religious education. Students and scholars would travel, listening and recording whatever they found in the mosques, tekiyes, khanaqas, and guest houses. They called a collection a "kashkul" when the notebook was bound in portrait orientation and "beyath" when in landscape orientation. The most commonly used term for all these individually curated notebooks, no matter their orientation, is kashkul.

The word itself has a fascinating history. Originally, kashkul meant "begging bowl," an object all Sufi ascetics would carry with them. Some were functional and humble: hollowed out shells. Some were ornamented, too heavy for a peripatetic to carry, but beautiful (Qaradaghi viii). As the years wore on, kashkul came to mean roughly "bundle," as in the hobo's bundle that he shoulders from city to city. It is in this sense, the gathering together of all a man needs to live, to be at home when he has no earthly home, that the word was applied metaphorically to the notebook. As religious

students and scholars traveled, they took their *kashkul* with them always, as their constant companion, their imagination's home (Qaradaghi ii).

Sheikh Ali Qaradaghi, a famous contemporary preservationist, scholar, and author of the only book on Kurdish *kashkuls*, writes, "The educated class, at that time composed of faqes and mullahs were disposed toward listening and reading works of high literature even if they could not recite poems or play with words or embroider prose. With them, the collecting and copying of works from various poets and teachers began" (Qaradaghi i). Qaradaghi terms individuals who collected and copied works from intellectuals around them "directors" of *kashkuls*, but it is useful, perhaps, to think of them more as curators, and their books exhibits. Qaradaghi describes the varying habits of directors, saying there were some "for whom his published piece, his *kashkul*, was his lifelong friend: never separated from him" (Qaradaghi, ii). There were others who "curated *kashkuls* for different periods of time, long and short, who sometimes kept it with them and sometimes gave it to their friends. Still others, in accordance with their masters' demands or for the sake of the love they bore their masters, gathered pieces into *kashkuls* as gifts for those masters" (Qaradaghi, iii). The relationship a scholar had to his *kashkul*, his reason for its creation, his timeline with it from start to finish: all could change. But the impulse remained constant.

These collections, similar to commonplace books of nineteenth century Europe or quote books of the twentieth century, recorded whatever the individual found worthy, intriguing, humorous. Subjects in *kashkuls* range from dietary plans to horoscopes to poetry, which at the time was the major way that Kurds wrote and passed down history, generation to generation (Qaradaghi 20). In this way, the Kurds of the nineteenth century decided what texts the readers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would have. Qaradaghi calls a *kashkul*'s director a "husbandman" who grafts together various stock, producing great orchards which shelter and sustain scholars (Qaradaghi, iv). This dissertation's selection of nineteenth-century poets begins in the same century. The poets we have texts for today were deemed remarkable by the scholars of the poets' own age; the poets I came across upon arrival in the KRG as of 2011 were already an inadvertent anthology selected by generations of Kurds.

In the decades between the nineteenth century and the twenty-first, Kurds have endured systematic persecution as minorities in the larger states that host them (Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey). Throughout this time, when Kurdish identity itself came under assault, Kurds had to choose which books survived, which texts they saved at risk to themselves, which manuscripts they took with them into exile, which books made it into the few suitcases they could throw together as one army or another advanced. Each Kurd in possession of these written documents has made his or her choice. Each Kurd over the decades of the twentieth century, an especially tumultuous century for Kurds with the formation of the modern nation state, influenced what we read today.

I have come to know these men, still working today, and have worked to gain their trust so that I might look across manuscripts, examining the plurality of each line with its many manifestations. Over the last eight years living and working in Iraq, I earned first one man's trust and then the next; each scholar-collector would refer me, when they saw I used their archives and scholarship well and served the poems diligently, to the next. Co-translators, as we worked together and they understood the scope of the project more fully, would work their own connections to help me meet scholar-collectors who might hold editions of the poems we had not seen. These men, who I have come to call the book men, are fierce in their loyalty to knowledge and unstinting in their sacrifices to preserve. Sheikh Ali Qaradaghi, one exceptional contemporary preservationist and scholar, curates a library of texts he has saved, and published on, over the course of four decades. In a 2015 conversation with me, when we were first meeting, he described his life's work:

I began collecting in 1970. I was married in 1971. My son was born in 1972. My first book was published in 1973. In 1976, Iraqi Security Forces confiscated what I'd collected. Anthologies of poetry were criminal evidence against me in my trial. In jail, human beings were disposable. I thought of nothing. Of course, I expected death. Many experienced worse. The sentence eventually delivered was for six month's imprisonment. I'd already served nine. They let me go. They owe me three months.

I returned immediately to collecting, warmer to the work. Now, I keep the books secret. At times, I split up the library between two or three locations. There is no income. It is hard work. I preached as a Mullah, first in Baghdad, then here in Sulaimani. I trade sermons for manuscripts. At other times, people gift me

papers asking me only to analyze and publish on them. I have written 40 books, over 70 volumes.

When Daesh pushed on Hawlêr [Erbil], we prayed, “Please, God, don’t will this.” We’ve been digitizing our archive for fifteen years. My son wrote the first Kurdish font for an IBM. There are hundreds and hundreds of manuscripts now. We could not leave them. (Qaradaghi April 21, 2015)

Though he is exceptional among men, he is representative of the book men who include, in my experience the tireless brothers of Zheen Archive, Rafiq and Sadiq Salih, the scholar and nephew, a few times removed, of Sheikh Raza himself, Sheikh Pirot, the spiritual leader at the Talabani Tekiye, Sheikh Yusuf, his wife, Sheikha Sunbul, the independent politician, former Director of the Kurdish Academy, and another relative of Sheikh Raza’s, Dr. Nouri Talabani, the scholar and “son of Kirkuk,” Mr. Amin Shwani, and so many more.

Each individual I have met in my travels to find these manuscripts has had a similar story of risk, knowingly taken, persecution, and above all dedication—all for books, for scraps, for the writing they knew would form the backbone of what it could mean to be Kurdish. Sheikh Ali burst out at one point in one of our many conversations to say, “It is easy to stand on television and say, ‘We are Kurds!’ It is difficult to find a vision of what ‘Kurd’ means” (October 15, 2015). He knows, as the other book men do, that the writing he has collected and preserved offer real visions of what “Kurd” could mean and, even more so, how that identity fits into, challenges, and changes the global identity.

One aspect of these idiosyncratically composed catalogs: the date of the utterance or recording is often omitted. Without more precise dates of writing or recording, biographical or historical readings of poetry become problematic. Was this poem a late or early poem of the poet’s? Was his father still alive when he began writing curse poetry? Or did he feel safe in that blasphemous expression because his father had died? We do not know. Some poems are possible to roughly date by the historic events or persons they describe, but that is the full extent to which we can analyze any individual poem by its place in time. “So,” Qaradaghi writes, “they say a kashkul is published without date, fruit outside of season” (Qaradaghi, iv).

Also, though an individual created each collection, we often do not know the identity of the creator. How did an individual's background or biases affect what he recorded? In some cases, we can make informed guesses, but in most cases, we can only look to the collection itself for its internal patterns—and what those patterns say about the curator behind them, we can only begin to surmise. In Qaradaghi's typically poetic prose, he writes,

Remembering these lost names is not calling to mind one or two people; the list defies memorization. More, how can one name the first person to write a Kurdish kashkul? The thought chills the body. Even if the writer can't articulate it himself, others will tell him, "You search for a wind-stolen hat!" The number of collectors and curators, the number of kashkuls, baffle understanding (Qaradaghi, v).

At times, even, several students or masters would pass around a single kashkul, collecting phrases, poems, theology, and other tidbits for each other as gifts, sharing the space of one notebook as if it were one mind. Without a precise sense of time—when a poem was recorded, when the original was written—or author—who recorded and who wrote the poem—biographical and historical analyses become more educated guesswork than anything else. For that reason perhaps, among others, Kurdish literary scholarship has tended to look at poets one at a time, rather than in expansive groupings across time. Kurdish literary scholarship has become more about interpretation of each poem than about the connections between them, or their connections to the world they came from.

Given the lack of exact data, the avoidance is understandable, but there seems too much to be gained by looking at the connections the poems themselves point to: poets write to each other, poets write to dignitaries of the time, poets address historical events, poets address the changing world around them. Lacking data external to the poems, scholars can look to the information internal to the poems to identify connections the poets themselves saw and remarked on, to understand the relationships the poets forged with their own land as it shifted beneath them.

### *The Difficulty of Definitive*

We have used contemporary editions as the basis for translation. While the KRG and Iraq legally established copyright, few abide by it. Throughout most of the world, poetry is not a market with enough demand to create bootleg editions, but in Iraq, the bazaar is filled with photocopied and hand-glued volumes. These contemporary editions can diverge significantly. A single poem will consist of ten lines in one edition, sixteen in another.

More, for many of these poets, original handwriting has become scarce if not absent. Over the two centuries since Nali began writing, Kurds have undergone systematic persecution. The last semblance of Kurdish governance disappeared with the fall of the Ardalans (Iran, 1867) and the Babans (Sulaimani, 1850). The Ottoman and Persian empires used Kurdish territories, which spanned their borderlands, as staging grounds for feuds centuries old. As modern nations emerged in the region, Kurds agitated for an independent state of their own. Over the years of WWI and its aftermath, the promise of statehood was offered and revoked, offered and revoked by Western powers. Today, the only partial manifestation of 'Kurdistan' is in Iraq's semi-autonomous region, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

Considered a constant threat to the nation-states emerging around them—Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—Kurds have suffered systematic persecution across their ancestral lands. “In Turkey, in an attempt to create a monolithic Turkish identity, the state banned manifestations of Kurdishness, including dress, language, and media. These bans, militarily enforced, lasted over a hundred years and were recently lifted only to be extra-legally enforced once more. To the south, in Iraq, Saddam Hussein, too, tried to eradicate Kurdish identity. He instituted Anfal (1986-1989), a campaign of ethnic slaughter that aimed to kill all Kurdish men of military age. Chemical weapons were deployed in the course of these operations. Halabja, the city at the center of this extensive bombing, now falls within the borders of the semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and hosts a museum commemorating the tragedy. In Syria and Iran, the government aims of eradicating Kurdish culture have been as methodical, if more undetected on the international front. Syrian and Iranian tactics are similar to those of Turkey and Iraq: forced relocations, random imprisonment, and resulting waves of immigration or exile. As Blau writes, “...we [...] have no way of knowing how many

manuscripts were destroyed in the turmoil of the endless conflict which has taken and continues to take place on Kurdish soil" (*Written* loc. 917).

As Farangis Ghaderi notes in her article, "The challenges of writing Kurdish literary history: Representation, classification, periodisation," there are "sizeable unpublished or lost manuscripts," leaving contemporary scholars with "a fragmented and episodic picture of Kurdish literary history" (3). "The first step," Ghaderi maintains, "toward writing literary history is collecting, editing, and critically evaluating literary texts as the primary sources" (*Challenges* 4). Ghaderi wonders what constitutes "reliable," (issues of "poor editing" and "questions of authorship") while I problematize the word "definitive" (*Challenges* 5, 18). We are both focused on the same issue: that with the systematic persecution of Kurds and Kurdish culture, one cannot write literary history without taking into consideration the fragmentary nature of the texts we have, the potentially faulty information we inherit, and the lack of contextual data around those same texts (i.e., when was an individual poem written, was that poem written by the poet or a scribe or a faqe who heard it recited in a hujra, was that recitation given by the poet or by another who had memorized it to perform?). Ghaderi articulates the issue succinctly:

Kurdistan has been the theatre of wars and battles resulting in the destruction of mosques, madrasas, and libraries and the subsequent loss of manuscripts. The situation worsened in the twentieth century when Kurds became the subjects of hostile nation-states with little or no tolerance towards their language and culture. (*Challenges* 6)

To stress her summation, she cites a passage from the memoir of "acclaimed Kurdish-Iranian poet Hejar Mukriyanî (1920-1991)" in which he "recalls the difficulty of retaining Kurdish books in Reza Shah Pahlavi's time in the 1920s and 1930s and notes that, for fear of being arrested for possessing Kurdish books, people were forced to set fire to their books, or to bury them, including manuscripts" (*Challenges* 6). It is precisely because of these sorts of "political and economic difficulties that a significant part of the manuscripts which have survived in private collections and libraries have remained unpublished" (Ghaderi *Challenges* 6). She remarks, quite rightly, that whatever our current understanding may be, it will "change with future discoveries" (*Challenges* 7). She goes on to give "a recent example:" "the republication in 2005 of the Diwan of

Mestûrey Erdelanî, which contained her lesser known Kurdish poems while she was generally assumed to have only written in Persian” (Ghaderi *Challenges* 7).

It is often not a foremost concern, perhaps because it seems callous, but when people are dying or burning, their manuscripts are, too. When people flee their homes seeking peace, they either abandon their books to whomever arrives or they take their books with them: either way, the books, if they survive, go into exile, piled and unknown in libraries and collections all over the world. It is possible that many manuscripts exist in Istanbul and Baghdad, for instance, the two administrative centers of the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. Were they in those two cities, they may have been purposely mislabeled, purposely miscataloged, as Turkish, Persian, or Arabic texts in order to obscure the Kurdish identity. And miscataloged is better than torched, mildewed, moldered, or disintegrated, which are far more common.

Those who do not flee, those who manage to tend their libraries, protect them fiercely through secrecy. And who can blame them? The only way they have found to keep these artifacts safe is to keep them secret, hidden. The most recent disturbance in Iraq, Daesh, only reinforces this approach to preservation of cultural heritage. If the manuscripts are secret and hidden, Daesh will not know about them to destroy them. What Daesh can find, it kills. Secrecy, however, only complicates the reader’s ability to find original or copied texts.

Contemporary editors wishing to reference older texts, texts perhaps closer chronologically to the poet’s time period, are lucky to find partial remains of an author’s handwriting. They are far more likely to find records made by others. Copied out by others, these versions of the poems may diverge depending on the transcriber’s dialect, ear, or editorial presence. Raised in Kirkuk, one copyist may have written in Arabic-influenced script, changing the connotations or meanings of certain words. Working in Sanandaj, another copyist may have written with an ear for the Persian echoes. Kurdish, a fluid language of dialect, without any standard, can make Doppler Shifts depending on where it is spoken, where it is heard, who speaks it, who hears it. A text we receive from the nineteenth century is likely a subtle blend of oral and recorded literature.

A single poem published today, let us take as our example Sheikh Raza Talabani's "Bulgarian Boy," can have significant variation between editions available today. The poem, a story in which the narrator seduces a Bulgarian male prostitute fully intending not to tender payment come morning, has four divergent versions we have found. Version one ends with the townspeople's injunction for the narrator to pay the prostitute. Version two ends six couplets later, after inexplicably praising Ahmad Pasha Baban, a regional power. Version three ends after the same praise, but with an additional couplet of critically connective tissue that links the paying of the prostitute to the praise: Ahmad Pasha Baban was the source of the payment demanded. Version four is written predominantly in Farsi and paraphrases the story told in Kurdish, but also, it could be argued, re-tells a similar incident related by Saadi, one of Sheikh Raza's literary heroes from Persian poetry. All these contemporary published versions of the same poem have equal claim to legitimacy in that much, if not all, of Sheikh Raza's own handwritten work has been lost or destroyed. The surviving manuscripts can claim authority through age or scribe, but cannot ever claim to definitively represent the poet's intent. This challenge repeats in varying degrees with all contemporary published versions of poetry from this time period.

As the versions proliferate, the translation and, more importantly, the poem changes. An "Ode to Ahmad Pasha Baban" that is not connected to "The Bulgarian Boy" would represent the praise poem typical of court poetry from that era. Though it might be a beautiful embodiment of those poetic standards, it would be nothing new unless yoked to its explicit, uproarious introduction. Together, the two sections of the poem read as the inciting incident and the incurred gratitude. That said, separated, the two poems could still stand. Even more confusing: if the title "Ode to Ahmad Pasha Baban" is applied to the narrative of the seduction without the addendum of the praise, as it is in one case, the poem could be interpreted as a veiled critique of the Baban acceptance of foreign powers. Every instantiation of the poem changes the ways in which it can be read. Given the explosive content of the poem, the range of analysis is essential to note. Yes, it could articulate same-sex desires, but it could also be a particularly biting political satire.

Additionally, social codes can interfere with the preservation and passage of poetry to the next generation: Kheznedar references a poem Sheikh Raza wrote, cursing Mahwi, but only one couplet remains to the public and Kheznedar speculates the rest of the poem has been held back by the collector, Najmadin Mullah, to preserve Mahwi's reputation (3: 355). Dr. Nouri Talabani states his suspicions of why only Sheikh Raza's curses remain to us out of the extensive curse correspondence between Sheikh Raza and Shukri Fazly (April 8, 2014). He hypothesizes that after Sheikh Raza interceded in Baghdad, during Ottoman rule, and saved Fazly's life, the family feels they owe Talabani a debt. In honor of that debt, they have held back the poems Fazly wrote, cursing the poet who would become, in quite real terms, his savior. One could argue that only airing the full correspondence does honor to the poets, who chose to live in conversation with one another, in verse, throughout most of their lives. That said, honor and reputation, defined traditionally, will ensure these texts are kept hidden from contemporary readers and scholars.

As discussed, the weakness of copyright law, the partiality of original texts, and the plurality of copied texts leave contemporary editors and editions unable to claim any publication as definitive. It is possible to see this as a real flaw in Kurdish literary scholarship. Without a definitive edition, we cannot decisively know the poet's intentions. Without knowing the poet's intentions, our analysis has great limits. That said, perhaps this uncertainty could excite scholarship. Readers cannot know a poet's intentions. Each act of reading is an act of creation. Even with texts where the poet's chosen language is perhaps clearer, the edition perhaps definitive, what poem does the reader receive? The one she reads. The scholar can live beyond definitive, accepting the fundamental principle of interpretation.

### *Poem Collection and Selection*

Gathering manuscripts, for the purposes of this thesis, must remain an on-going search. Given the hybrid nature of these texts as well as the persecution, and ensuing diaspora, they have endured, collecting them will be a lifetime's work. The book men have already spent lifetimes bringing the texts we have today to us, doing what André Lefevere

describes, with warranted skepticism, as “cultural editing” (84). Additional study could, and should, document the process and state of collection and preservation of text in Kurdistan. The driving principle behind this dissertation, however, is to understand the world these poems were written in and what these poems say about that world. This thesis strives to present not simply new poetry, but a more developed image of the people behind them—how they and their poetry can add to and revise our ideas of world literature. While collection was and is a necessary habit for scholars of Kurdish literature, this dissertation focuses on translation and analysis. Though I will discuss these theories in more detail as I discuss the process of translation that undergirds this thesis, it is important to note here the entire thesis itself is a kind of thick translation. Though Kwame Appiah and Theo Herman conceptualize thick translation as an act a translator can perform around a single poem, even a single phrase or line within a poem, I have conceived of it, more as Michaela Wolf has, as an act a translator can perform around an entire generation of literature.

The backbone of the dissertation, what enables the analysis of the poets’ influences, interactions and context, is the collection of poems the appendices contain for the first time in English. Translation studies scholar Lawrence Venuti exhorts readers to “increase their appreciation of translations by deciding not to read them as isolated texts” and I take his exhortation self-reflexively: as a translator and analyst, I have decided not to translate or analyze in isolation (*Invisibility* xvii). While I could have constructed my argument translating only the verses I required, that would have left readers of the dissertation unable to assess my argument for themselves, unable to contribute their own interpretations and thoughts, and unable to enjoy the poems as more than fragments, glimpses. I have translated these poems in their totality and in sufficient number that they can, as Venuti hopes, be read in significant context—of each other and their history, which is also why I preface my analysis of the poems with a detailed historical account of the era. As I wanted to do more than serve my own argument, translation emerged as a pre-condition, a discipline that would allow me to produce the body of work in English that I would then explore.

The Kurdish mechanisms of reception, preservation, and collection provided the essential names of nineteenth-century poets and, to a certain extent, whittled down

each poet's collected works. I do not mean to abrogate my responsibilities, hidden as they may be in this dissertation, as an anthologist; Ghaderi writes, "...order, inclusion, and exclusion are conscious acts of anthologists and, as Srivastava (2010: 162) notes, an anthologist is not simply a conserver of the canon, but an active agent in its invention" (*Challenges* 9). I will return to the complex ethics of my positionality in this work in more detail, but for now I will acknowledge that my selection of poets to include arose entirely from Kurdish systems of canonization. All such systems benefit from a critical eye, but for the purposes of this dissertation, I deferred to the Kurdish systems of canonization. The dissertation, however, required more choice: beyond which poets I would include, I needed to decide which poems from which poet would be brought into English. Examining thirteen poets, most of whose poetry does not exist in English, the dissertation required a representative sample from each poet that would help a reader understand what their contribution was to poetry, to their peers, to their era. To understand what is "representative" for a particular poet, though, demands a deep and comprehensive understanding of each poet—not to mention that the very definition of "representative" can change from one reader to the next (again, an ethical consideration I will revisit in more depth throughout the methodology section). To understand just a few poems from one poet, a reader would need Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and all dialects of Kurdish within her grasp. She would need a functional understanding of the Islamic Sciences as well as the Quran and Hadith. She would need to be versed in the poetry's technical forms and their histories, lineages. In short, she would take a lifetime preparing herself before she could read a single poem. Though that would be a lifetime well-spent, she could also turn to a great resource: Kurdish students and scholars as co-translators.

#### *Translation Approaches: Beginning, Rewriting, Context, and Thick Translation*

I began by working with student-volunteers. For hours, students would sit with me in my faculty office translating. As the evening wore on, the overhead fluorescents went into motion-sensing mode. They would flick off and, with one hand on the book or piece of paper, we would wave until they flicked back on. As I translated with these students, the

timeline and central figures of Kurdish poetry started becoming clear to me. I grew as a poet in my sensitivity to language, I understood more about translation's particular concerns, I learned Kurdish one word, one poem, one translation at a time. As I got better at both translation and Kurdish, I could communicate more clearly what the poems needed, what I needed, and how these poets were talking to each other. We put into practice Theo Hermans contention: "We need to translate in order to study translation" (384). I.A. Richards, a translator developing a "technique of multiple definition" in 1932, wrote, "we make an instrument and try it out" (Hermans 384). Translation must be "a self-reflexive moment [...], a moment of reflection, that is, on the terms and contexts in which the representation of otherness takes shape" (Hermans 384). As translators, we were, as Hermans asserts by extension, "continually [inspecting our] own tools and procedures," because, Hermans argues through Richards, it is only by experimenting and assessing that we "develop our comprehending of what it is with which we seek to explore comprehending" (384). Without the "pure language" Walter Benjamin imagines, without a "metalanguage," Hermans says, "All we can do is constantly reconsider the language that serves as our probing tool" (384).

My students graduated and became dedicated literary scholars. We talked about how to introduce each of these poets, what characterized their work, which poems a Western audience must know to know these poets. We read together and refined our ideas and selections over the course of a year. My co-translators also introduced me to the scholars they knew. They put their own reputations at stake, vouching for me to get me in the doors of archives. And, as I worked with more scholars, more archives, I received invitations to others. Meeting more literary scholars and archivists allowed me to share the selections I made with my co-translators, to ask particular translation questions we had of experts in the field.

One of the great works of this dissertation has been to gather literary scholars and translators of Sorani Kurdish and create a community of today's living minds. Constituted now within the research, translation, and arts collaborative, Kashkul ([www.kashkul.com](http://www.kashkul.com)), this community grew organically as I reached out for help reading, translating, re-reading, and revising. I realized, over and over again as this community grew in number and strength of insight, that the best thing I could do was, as the famous

scholar and preservationist Sheikh Ali Qaradaghi says, "...incline my head to those from whom I ask for help," to say to anyone, "...[N]o matter how much or how little, come help me in this work" (Qaradaghi, Preface). At this point, I have worked—am working—with some of the great minds in Kurdish literature, helping me bring these poems into English, which has been, as Ricoeur says, "...a risky operation [...] always in search of its theory" and helping me refine my ideas of how these poems can be situated in respect to each other and world literature (14).

As this dissertation examines the relationship between the content of the poems and the socio-political environment of the poets, the translation concentrates on rendering meaning. The original formal choices the poets made will be discussed critically, if briefly, but not reproduced in their artistic totality. Though in each translation, we have weighed all the "familiar dichotomies of word for word and sense for sense, literal and free, formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence, adequate and acceptable, and foreignizing and domesticating," just to name a few, we have stayed with the spirit, and not the letter of form, resisting the need to "fill out the thumpety-thump" of a rhyme and meter scheme that is uniquely Kurdish (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 67; Weinberger and Paz 23, 35). William Gass, in his book on reading (translating) Rilke, acknowledges, "It's been frequently said that translation is a form of betrayal: it is a traduction, a reconstitution made of sacrifice and revision." But Gass also notes, "When the poem asks a question, we can ask one; when it asserts or describes or avows, we can follow. The general shape [...] can be repeated too..." (51). When a translator attempts a slavish representation in English of a Kurdish rhyme or meter scheme, the result can thumpety-thump-thud; we have reached instead for a formally sensitive translation that honors the original form while still making "the right sorts of sacrifices" (52).

Paul Ricoeur adds his own language, saying of translation: "...work is advanced with some salvaging and some acceptance of loss" (3). Less gently, he continues, "I will summarize it in one line: give up the ideal of the perfect translation. This renunciation alone makes it possible to live, as agreed deficiency, the impossibility..." (8). Ricoeur's idea of beginning in impossibility resonates deeply throughout the translations that form the backbone of this dissertation. Once one dispenses with "this mourning for the absolute translation," Ricoeur states, one can get on with the happiness of translation,

the “linguistic hospitality” one can provide that “acknowledge the difference between adequacy and equivalence” (10).

Though our focus as translators has been on meaning and not form, a poem’s meaning cannot be divorced from its form. The poem is not only what is said, but how. The “how” of a poem makes it, in fact, a poem. Form relates to, supports, and reveals aspects of the poet’s relationship to his or her world. Though we have not retained exact meters, exact poetic forms, we have, where we can, looked for a form’s markers, its most important characteristics, and tried to recreate them, winking toward the original (Weinberger and Paz 47). We hope we have made translations that have “enormous poetic freshness” which “at the same time [...] allow us to glimpse another civilization...” (Weinberger and Paz 46). As Bernofsky says, we live between responsibility and obedience ([publicbooks.org/the-joys-of-multiplicity](http://publicbooks.org/the-joys-of-multiplicity)).

For each poem, we have undertaken the same process. We create a literal translation with detailed notes. Classical Kurdish poems read as symphonies rather than as solo instruments, involving as many as six different languages in one poem and referencing the religious, political, and agrarian life of their context. Without any one dictionary that contains all dialects of Kurdish, without any one dictionary that contains even all vocabulary for Sorani Kurdish, the act of knowing what each word might mean can take intensive searching. The notes we have collected on the poems range from language switches to Quranic references to idioms, botanical corollaries, and possible synonyms. In this phase, we are reading within a language, like an English reader reading within English, letting “the language [try] to understand itself.” We are beginning to read across languages, letting “one language [...] read another” (Gass 47). Fundamentally, we are reading, as “translation is reading, reading of the best, most essential kind” (Gass 50). We are bringing ourselves to the text, “bringing the reader to the author,” preparing ourselves to “[bring] the author to [a new] reader” (Ricoeur 4).

This process most closely resembles what Kwame Appiah introduces as “thick translation,” a concept Theo Hermans and Michaela Wolf adopt and explore in their own right. Appiah introduces the concept of thick translation by examining how African oral literature, specifically proverbs, can be translated into English. He begins by establishing that “...what we translate are utterances” and “the heart of utterance [is]

meaning” (418-419). Though a “precise set of parallels is likely to be impossible,” Appiah writes, “A translation aims to produce a new text that matters to one community the way another text matters to another” (426). This text, however, must be thicker, must be contextualized (Appiah 422). He acknowledges there are two definitions he could mean by “literary translation:” (1) a translation that can be read itself as a piece of literature or (2) a translation that can be useful in teaching literature--i.e., an academic, heavily footnoted translation: “thick translation” (427).

But for Appiah, all ethics of translation “derive from an ethics and politics of literary pedagogy: from a sense about why we should teach texts, *which* we should teach, what this teaching is worth to our students, and so on” (Appiah 427). Appiah, looking at the current educational climate, what he calls “an easy atmosphere of relativism,” expresses his concern: “one thing that can get entirely lost is the rich differences of human life in culture” (Appiah 427). Thick translation, a translation surrounded with as much context, dissent, and detail as possible, can “[challenge] this easy tolerance, which amounts not to a celebration of human variousness but to a refusal to attend to how various other people really are or were” (Appiah 427). As translators and readers, teachers and students, we must, Appiah says, “...undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others” (427). The “thick and situated understanding” Appiah has in mind will, he predicts, accomplish three central aims: (1) repudiate racism, (2) extend the American imagination beyond America, and (3) develop a deeper respect for the “autonomy of the Other” (Appiah 427-8). Though his article, in the spirit of his argument, only closely examines the way thick translation can affect representations of African oral literature, the approach he outlines could serve languages underrepresented in English from geographical areas that have lived under Western subjugation, formal or informal. I will revisit and expand on Appiah’s emphasis on pedagogy in translation when I turn to questions of ethics and positionality in translation, but for now continue into how Appiah’s concept of thick translation has moved into and been developed by the field of translation studies.

Theo Hermans’ “Cross-cultural translation studies as thick translation” engages Appiah’s concept of thick translation, describing it as a “revisionary enterprise [that] is an ongoing process reaching into the here and now and extending into the future,” an

inevitable “companion and instrument of cross-temporal, cross-lingual and cross-cultural interpretation” (382). Hermans takes time to explain the origins of Kwame Appiah’s term “thick translation,” “grafted on Clifford Geertz’s characterization of the ethnographer’s work as ‘thick description’” (385). Geertz, in turn, borrowed the term from Gilbert Ryle, a philosopher, who contended that only through thick description, meaning “patient engagement and interpretive, contextualizing negotiation,” could one understand if by closing one eye, a person meant to wink or twitch (Hermans 386). Thick description, Hermans argues, keeps theory tethered to “the microhistories of particular situations, [...] ‘the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions’” (386). Hermans hopes, in development of and divergence from Appiah’s concept, thick translation will “foster a more diversified and imaginative vocabulary” around translation studies (386). He sees the immense possibilities thick translation offers, containing as it does “both the acknowledgement of the impossibility of total translation and an unwillingness to appropriate the other through translation even as translation is taking place” (Hermans 387).

Wolf, like Hermans, looks toward Geertz and the history of his “thick description,” before continuing to take a feminist perspective on Appiah’s “thick translation.” Wolf places Geertz “in the wake of Max Weber,” recognizing “people as suspended in webs of significance they themselves have spun [therefore] the analysis of culture is not an experimental science in search of its laws, but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (115-6). She develops the implications of this stance, explaining that to Geertz—and to Wolf, she implies—culture is “a historically evolving product” and a “determinant of social interaction” (115). Moving through the history of how Geertz’ anthropological concept of “thick description” became Kwame Appiah’s “thick translation,” she defines the practice as “[encircling] the text with annotations and accompanying glosses thus locating it in a rich cultural and linguistic context” (Wolf 115). Thick translation can acknowledge, as Wolf writes, quoting Gérard Genette, that “‘each context creates a paratext’: to know or not to know the context creates quite different readings” (121). It is “this sort of didactic literature,” she writes, using the word “didactic” for in its positive, pedagogical meaning, that “has been largely excluded in prevailing Western standards of literature” (Wolf 118).

Thick translation, Wolf writes, playing off of Venuti's concepts of the translator's invisibility, which we will return to shortly, "reveals translation techniques practiced so far which have claimed neutrality and implied the (male or female) translator's invisibility" (Wolf 119). Beyond revealing techniques at work, thick translation can "re-inscript" the different consciousnesses, though Wolf is specifically concerned with the feminist consciousness, that inform the text (Wolf 120). Thinking about how texts and translators can participate in creating or contributing to consciousness, Wolf turns to an educational philosopher I will examine my own connection to in more detail in just a few pages: Paulo Freire. "Freire," Wolf writes, "challenges patriarchal pedagogy and calls for dialogue and 'conscientisation' as a way to overcome domination and oppression among and between human beings" (126). She contends that Freire's "conscientisation" can come about through the act of creating and reading thick translations, which "even if often located at the border of 'readability,'" "fosters the translator's visibility (an aspect dear to feminist translation)" and "promotes feminist subjectivities" (Wolf 128). Feminist thick translation, and its "richer feminist contextualization" could, Wolf argues, promote "readers' consciousness" and "foster feminist literacies in all students" (127-128).

The conception of thick translation, arising from Appiah and elaborated on by Hermans and Wolf, is a critically important solution to issues such as cultural power imbalances, a reader's ability to comprehend the text more deeply, and a translator's ability to show her framework and combat appropriation. The very aspects of thick translation that act as a solution in an educational environment, however, can also create new difficulties for translators, readers, and texts. Hermans applauds thick translation for how it can "engulf" a phrase, a line, a poem, a text in "footnotes, annotations, explications and digressions," which to Hermans only indicates the "inexhaustible fecundity" of the original text (387). Hermans would have celebrated Nabokov, a trilingual writer and translator who himself translated from English two books he wrote in Russian, and who refused, at the end of his life, to do anything resembling traditional translation; instead, he wrote only cribs, his reasoning being: a detailed crib was as close as one could get to an honest translation.

It is exciting to note that Western translators working from Kurdish, such as Joanna Bocheńska, are already adopting and exploring the practical impact of thick

translation (see “Between Honour and Dignity: Kurdish Literary and Cinema Narratives and Their Attempt to Rethink Identity and Resistance”). This dissertation, however, strives to present a thick translation of the literature of an era, not one given poem. Rather than a thick translation such as “Heidegger’s fifty-page exploration of one tiny fragment of text by the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander,” this thesis offers a thick translation of the conversation between nineteenth-century Kurdish poets, providing deep context—historically, religiously, and economically—for the era (Hermans 387). To this end, though my co-translators and I have produced detailed cribs, Appiah’s thick translations, for every poem in the appendices, we have also crafted more readable, and by Appiah’s standards more limited, translations. We dream of the power that digital technologies can have in rendering layers of meaning and context, in extending the kinds of communities possible around translations, as Tymoczko remarks (*Enlarging* 218). If this dissertation’s appendices were digital, for instance, the reader could choose when to see the overlay of thick translation and when to scale back to a cleaner, more readable page that obscured more of our choices as translators. That very exciting possibility, however, rests outside the scope of this dissertation.

After we circulate the literal, or more appropriately termed, the thick translation among scholars and fellow translators for comment, we begin the more artistic translation process. Here, we ask, “How do we get this poet to come alive in our translation? How do we show readers the poet and not his shadow?” As Bernofsky has written, “In fact, most of the translator’s work is a matter of rewriting, of transforming English into English” ([publicbooks.org/the-joys-of-multiplicity](http://publicbooks.org/the-joys-of-multiplicity)).

André Lefevere in his *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, discusses translators as “the men and women who do not write literature, but rewrite it,” who are “responsible for the general reception and survival of works of literature among non-professional readers, who constitute the majority of readers in our global culture” (1). Examining individual texts and their various translations, Lefevere discusses translation as interpretation, each translator’s interpretation of a given text emerging from the translator’s ideologies, poetics (32, 34). Maria Tymoczko, Antoine Berman, and Kwame Appiah each articulate similar ideas writing respectively that “... almost all translations are representations,” that “...the translating act inevitably

becomes a manipulation of signifiers,” and that there is no “text,” only readings, which means there is no one translation, only translations that are more or less aware of their purpose, more or less effective in their aim (*Enlarging* 111; 285; 426). Lefevere goes on to discuss the difficulty of translation as rewriting: “Translators, we are likely to be told, will be able to render the sense of the original only at the expense of the sound” and “[i]f they want to render the sound, they will find it hard to salvage the sense” (76).

Lefevere’s stance toward the various translations/interpretations he presents throughout the course of the books, which in his own words descriptive rather than prescriptive, demonstrates the range of ways translators as rewriters approach their rewriting (82).

Norman Shapiro, a professor of translation at Wesleyan University, who said, “A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it’s there when there are little imperfections – scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn’t be any. It should never call attention to itself” (Venuti *Invisibility* 1). His metaphor comes as a surprising coincidence with one from a contemporary Kurdish poet, Sherko Bekas, who famously said, “Reading in translation is like kissing your beloved through glass.” We try to make the glass as thin as possible, perhaps even an open window; these texts may diverge from the literal. We are, in Lefevere’s words, constantly attempting to “redress the balance” (109). “The point is,” Weinberger and Paz tell us, “that translation is more than a leap from dictionary to dictionary; it is a reimagining of the poem. As such, every reading of every poem, regardless of language, is an act of translation: translation into the reader’s intellectual and emotional life. As no individual reader remains the same, each reading becomes a different—not merely another—reading. The same poem cannot be read twice” (43).

Thick translation could be construed as deep description, of which almost several translation studies theorist stresses the importance (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 86, Lefevere 82). This not only allows but encourages translators and readers of translations to focus on “multiplicity, semiotic openness, and permeability rather than convergence of meaning,” to “[interrogate] the notions of ‘correct’ translations or ‘incorrect’ equivalences,” to appreciate “conflicting perspectives” (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 46-47). Traditionally, the most common praise for a translation is its fluency, its transparency, that while reading it, the reader may forget it is even a translation (Venuti *Invisibility* 4).

This very transparency, however, “conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator’s critical intervention” (Venuti *Invisibility* 1). “Thick” translation works to reveal rather than obscure the translator’s framework, it works against the idea that, “The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, [...] the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text” (Venuti *Invisibility* 1). “Thick” translation proposes the precise opposite: the more foreign, or “thick,” the translation, the more visible the translator (and his, her, or their framework), the more visible the foreign writer and text. The authors who examine what Venuti terms “the translator’s invisibility” are eager not to oversimplify what “thick” could mean in a given translation; Venuti and Tymoczko argue explicitly for the dissolution of the traditional oppositions that have defined translation theory—domesticating and foreignizing, word for word and sense for sense, formal and dynamic, semantic and communicative, adequacy and acceptability (Venuti *Invisibility* xix). Setting these concepts up as opposites, Venuti argues, leads to reductive interpretations of text and reductive readings of translations; “...to treat the distinction between domesticating and foreignizing translation as a simple ‘dichotomy’ or ‘binary opposition’ is to eliminate entirely its conceptual complexity” (*Invisibility* xix, xiii). We must think about, Tymoczko says, “the play of perspective,” avoiding the prescription of “a single textual or discursive strategy for activism in translation (such as foreignizing)” which would be “like trying to prescribe a single strategy for effective guerrilla warfare” (*Enlarging* 216). We must allow, Venuti pleads, “for different, even opposed kinds of mediation” (*Invisibility* xiii). “Foreignizing translation can change the conditions of readability only if the translator takes an approach,” Venuti explains, “that is at once writerly and scholarly, developing a broad stylistic repertoire” (*Invisibility* xv).

### *Translation and Issues of the Foreign*

Venuti takes what at first glance sounds like an extreme stance on foreignness in translation: “Any sense of foreignness in a translation is always already domesticated, even if differential” (*Invisibility* xiii). Exploring the statement more deeply, he adds, “... translation decontextualizes the source text” and “simultaneously recontextualizes the

source text" (*Invisibility* xii). The breaking and making of context is a conversation at the heart of how foreign a text remains in translation. In fact, the foreignness of these poems has a great deal to do with the Kurdishness of these poems; and the Kurdishness of these poems is what made them the backbone of the burgeoning Sorani republic of letters. Were these translations to disregard that foreignness, or Kurdishness, they would impede readers' ability to understand what these poems meant in their original context, what these poems meant to the poets, and what these poems meant to their Kurdish-language readers in the nineteenth century and even still to this day. As Antoine Berman writes in his essay, "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign," "...this trial, often an exile, can also exhibit the most singular power of the translating act: to reveal the foreign work's most original kernel, its most deeply buried, most self-same, but equally the most 'distant' from itself" (Berman 284). Berman's idea that translation itself is a form of exile is critical to understanding how delicate the translation of these poems is. These poems arose out of exile to express an exile that was both painfully surprising and, equally painfully, on-going. Kurds have undergone such prolonged exile; these translations must remain aware of and responsive to that history in any way they can. The question remains: how can translators responsibly take part in the trial of the foreign?

First, we must understand the question more fully. Berman draws the phrase "the 'trial of the foreign'" from Heidegger (284). The trial, from Berman's perspective, has two phases: (1) translation "establishes a relationship between the Self-Same (*Propre*) and the Foreign by aiming to open up the foreign work to us in its utter foreignness" and (2) "translation is a trial *for the Foreign as well*, since the foreign work is uprooted from its own *language-ground (sol-de-langue)*" (284). If we read Berman's use of the word "trial" as "challenge," we can read Berman's entire article as elucidations on how translators can confront the practical challenges of the foreign in translation.

Many of these practical challenges orbit around the idea of clarity. Berman writes, "Where the original has no problem moving in the *indefinite*, our literary language tends to impose the definite" (289). Berman accedes, "Of course, clarification is inherent in translation," but he continues, that can mean divergent things: "the explication can be the manifestation of something that is not apparent, but concealed or repressed, in the

original” or as a perversion of translation’s “power of illumination, of *manifestation*,” the explication can “render ‘clear’ what does not wish to be clear in the original” (289). Berman warns against this second mode of explication, arguing against what George Steiner calls the “inflationist” tendencies of translation, the “*unfolding* of what, in the original, is ‘folded’,” arguing that “*the addition adds nothing*” (290). Translators, when they lean into their idea of clarity, foreground their own interpretation at the expense of the original’s, even “[obscuring the original’s] *own mode of clarity*” (290). Each decision a translator faces constitutes a moment in which the translator can “decisively [efface] a good portion of [the original’s] signifying process and mode of expression—what makes a work *speak* to us” (291). As a translator, the temptation to establish clarity is palpable. In failing to honor or preserve what might feel to translators or even readers as uncomfortable vagueness, however, the translation will not “respect [the] multiplicity” and come to “contain *fewer* signifiers than the original” (Berman 292). The translator who can “[attend] to the lexical texture of the work, to its mode of lexicality—enlarges it” (Berman 292). The worst translation is one that “is at once *poorer* and *longer*” (Berman 292).

Berman makes it clear: these theoretical ideas play out in the most minute moments of translation. He invites his readers to pay attention to “movement” and “patterning,” to refrain from “arbitrary revision of the punctuation,” to work to understand and represent the vernacular, which is “by its very nature more physical, more iconic than ‘cultivated’ language,” and in representations of the vernacular, to avoid “merely ridiculing the original” (292-294). In our translations, we have spent time understanding the foreignness of individual poems, but also the trends of Kurdishness that define the use of Sorani throughout the nineteenth century (and beyond). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss several hallmarks my co-translators and I have identified and preserved in our translations.

Early on, I noticed that nineteenth-century Kurdish poets often used two similar nouns joined by the conjunction “and” as one noun. Rather than simply write “shit,” a poet would write “gen u gû” (گه‌نو گوو). Rather than say “conversation,” the poet would write “gft u go” (گفتوگو). Instead of using a single word to mean “kindling,” the poet would write “çîlke u çeuâl” (چیلکه و چه‌وأل). Initially, when I would ask my co-translators what

these words meant separately, they resisted, insisting either that the two words meant nothing on their own or that the two words meant the same thing. Pressing deeper into those phrases and inquiring more broadly, we discovered that these doubled nouns were close synonyms, presenting us with two challenges: how could we be sure we had found the most accurate meaning for each noun within the doubled noun and how could we represent those doubled nouns in English? We decided each on a case-by-case basis. In some cases, like “gen u gû” (گه‌نو گۆ), the doubled noun seemed to imply emphasis, so we attempted to recreate the emphasis, in this case translating the phrase as “foul shit.” In other cases, the literal translation while interesting seemed too cumbersome; “gft u go” (گفتوگۆ), translating literally as “promise and speech,” we reduced to its colloquial usage, “conversation,” and “çîlke u çeuâl” (چیلکه و چه‌وأل), translating literally as “twigs and sticks,” seemed easily contained within “kindling.”

Other doubled nouns offered an even more particular twist: they involve image. To say “totally,” a poet will say *řeg u řîře* (رەگ و ریشه), which translates literally as “veins and roots,” connoting the idea colloquial to English of ripping a plant out “root and stem.” To say “without trace,” a poet will say, “*bê ser u řuên* (بە سەر و شوین),” translating literally as “without head and place.” Instead of saying simply “full,” a poet would use “*lêuan lêu*” (لێوان لێو), translating literally as “lip to lip,” a phrase that becomes even more interesting when used by contemporary female poets, but that is another discussion. These doubled nouns that draw on image present a further layer of complexity: not only do we need to ascertain the meaning of both words and decide whether or not (or how) to preserve the doubled nature of the noun, but we must examine the original image and consider what bearing that image should have on the translation.

The fundamental nature of Kurdish as a language of image, in fact, arose as one of the primary issues we faced as co-translators—and not just as language of image, but as a language of embodied image. In Kurdish, the most common greeting translates literally as, “Above my eyes.” In response, if one wishes to demonstrate deeper respect, one would say, “Above my head.” A “friend” is “*hauřê*” (هاوڕێ), translating literally as “same path.” I say, “I’m waiting for you” by saying, “*çauřê*” (چاوڕێم), or “my eyes are on the path.” I do not say, “Listen,” I say, “*guê bgre*” (گۆی بگره), or “give/catch/grab ears.” I do not say I am “sad,” I say, “*lêubebar*” (لێوبه‌بار), translating literally as “a lip with a

load.” I do not say, “I leave,” I say, “serî xom heldegrm (سەری خۆم هەڵدەگرم),” or “I carry my own head.” Common endearments include “jergekem (جەرگەكەم),” “my liver,” “çaukem (چاوەكەم),” or “my eyes,” “rōh’ekem (رۆحەكەم),” or “my soul,” and “gîanekem (گیانەكەم),” or “my body/soul.” These embodied images characterize daily and literary Kurdish utterance even though they amount to dead metaphors that most native speakers of Kurdish would not readily recognize (see Lakoff; Lakoff and Johnson). Once more, as translators, we stumbled on what I began to think of as a distinctly Kurdish mode of expression and had to ask ourselves how each individual case could move into English. At times, we privileged semantic expediency and fluency, but much more often, we worked to preserve that Kurdishness, the foreignness. In poetry, this can be easier to do because poetry often pivots on image: the lyrical nature of literally translated Kurdish often plays into the lyricism of the translation. More importantly, for the purposes of this dissertation, the translations needed to show how the nineteenth-century Kurdish poets used Sorani, used poetry, to establish a republic of letters in place of a governing republic.

The foreignness of these poems reaches beyond the linguistic textures of Sorani into Islam and the Kurdish landscape. These poems rely and draw from deep readings of the Quran and Hadith as well as extensive training in the Islamic Sciences. The most accessible example, perhaps, is if a poet wishes to praise his beloved, he will often refer to her eyebrow as his *qibla*: implying that instead of facing Mecca in prayer, he faces her. The play of these poets within Islamic concepts often either translates with great difficulty or not at all into English, as a language that has much of Christianity woven into its fabric. Given the shared Islamic education of nineteenth-century Kurdish poets, the religious resonance, play, and transformation is important and perhaps the most translation-resistant foreign element. Finally, nineteenth-century poets, to manifest a tangible landscape that could be Kurdish nowhere else but in their poems, often reference specific people and places by name. I speak to this issue in great detail in my analysis, so will not labor over the point here except to say that by nineteenth-century Kurdish poets named individuals, cities, towns, and regions (for instance: “germîan (گەرمیان),” meaning “the warm place” and “kuêstan (کوێستان),” meaning “the cool place) in

order to claim, re-claim and exalt the Kurdishness of their environment—an environment that had been suddenly and forcibly occupied.

Ethically, translations that care for the foreign serve the originating language more fully, but they also serve the translating language more deeply from the standpoint of artistic consciousness. “These [literatures],” Kreyebroek writes, “deserve to be better known in the West, not least because their actions may ultimately affect our own society” (*Oral Literature* loc. 608). One of translation’s great gifts is to renew what readers and writers think possible in the translating language, to invent within it and teach it new forms. As Berman writes, “Thanks to such translation, the language of the original shakes with all its liberated might the translating language” (285). When we liberate the foreign, we liberate the domestic. As Berman writes, citing Foucault, we “use the translated language to derail the translating language” (285). Derailing languages we think we know, especially privileged languages like English, can give rise to linguistic and artistic renewal.

### *Translation and Community*

Once we have a draft translation that balances these various and complex considerations, we circulate these “reimaginings” among our community again for comment and revision. For, we believe, as Tymoczko does, that translation is “...a discipline that espouses the value of difference” and “must be viewed as an open concept” or “cluster concept” (*Enlarging* 85, 100-1). We strive to not only acknowledge but welcome “the necessity of problematizing any definition of translation...” (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 101). Just as each individual has his, her, or their idiolect, each translator what we could playfully term his, her, or their idolation.

Looking back at the traditions in translation formulated in the attempt to address power imbalances, we can see the evolution of our postpositivist world. In her *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators*, Maria Tymoczko examines both frameworks of “resistance” and “engagement.” Resistance, a term “associated with the work of Lawrence Venuti,” she considers problematic “for conceptualizing *agency* in translation: an assessment with which I agree given that the word implies that the translators must

hold a stance against a pre-existing and malignant force (210). Engagement, a strategy in translation “widely promoted in the mid-twentieth century by Jean-Paul Sartre and others in his circle, but also advocated by other Marxist writers,” Tymoczko deems insufficient and overly limited in scope; she argues for a “more proactive” approach, which she calls “empowerment” (212). A translator is at her most empowered, she posits, “when [...] conscious of the implications of the various levels of choice to be exercised in translation and [...] self-aware and deliberate about making those choices” (219). In a postpositivist, postcolonial state, “...perspective is recognized as an irreducible aspect of any intellectual work and of action in general...” (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 204). More specifically,

...translation can no longer be conceived as an objective activity, independent of interpretation. There is a responsibility to be aware of our own frameworks as we ourselves translate, of the frameworks we investigate, and, recursively, of our own frameworks as we assess the frameworks of other translators and scholars of translation. (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 204)

In an effort to decentralize even the very concept of translation from its Western definitions, Tymoczko collects and explores the words other languages use for translation and the explicit or implicit metaphors those words entail (*Enlarging* 68-75). Though that particular work is not of immediate relevance here, the spirit of that enterprise relates so closely to the project of this dissertation that it is worth mentioning. This is part of what she considers the critical effort to “[insist] on local knowledges about translation” (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 46).

In his *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti begins and ends with a similar call to action: that we give translation “the double reading” it requires, reading between the poles Paul Ricoeur termed “faith” and “suspicion” (xvii). He asks translators and readers alike to balance the “troubling questions about the geopolitical economy of culture” and all the attendant suspicions with “...faith in the power of translation to make a difference, not only at home, in the emergence of new cultural forms, but also abroad, in the emergence of new cultural relations” (Venuti *Invisibility* 276). Venuti urges “translators and their readers to reflect on the ethnocentric violence of translation” so that their texts may “recognize the linguistic and cultural differences of foreign texts” (*Invisibility* 34). As he rightly summarizes, “...translation wields enormous power

in the construction of identities for foreign cultures, and hence it potentially figures in ethnic discrimination, geopolitical confrontations, colonialism, terrorism, war” (Venuti *Invisibility* 14). I cannot help but be interested in Tymoczko’s concept of empowerment and Venuti’s argument for translation’s power given my own positionality as a translator of nineteenth-century Kurdish poems. As an American woman of Christian upbringing who is and forever will be a student of the Kurdish language, the national culture I come from has waged war on the national culture from which I translate. Despite the deep fractures and multiplicity in both of these “national” cultures, the sweeping geopolitical interactions between the two have immediate and concrete bearing on my position as a translator of Kurdish poetry. I must, as Venuti and Tymoczko argue so cogently, constantly evaluate my own stance.

But my interest in the concept of empowerment reaches beyond my own to include the empowerment of the community a translator can form around the translation. While we have been examining the community around this dissertation’s translations as the expert readers I have turned to for feedback on these translations, that community includes, more intimately, my co-translators. With them, I can, as Tymoczko writes, “[construct] cultural images and identities, fostering self-definition, and creating knowledge” (*Enlarging* 200). Treating my co-translators not as dictionaries with legs, but as fellow-strivers, we can find together a process that mirrors the theory behind our translations. For “translation is not only a text, but an act” with “public dimensions” that, especially in the case of this dissertation is part of “a heterogeneous culture or nation [defining] itself, [coming] to know itself, [coming] to terms with its own hybridity, and [constructing] a national identity” (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 198-9). By constructing the process of my translations to reflect the theory behind them, I have intentionally attempted to not only examine and address, but potentially begin to heal the “gross asymmetries of power” between the nations and peoples these translations bring into conversation (Tymoczko *Enlarging* 195).

Education, Appiah, Hermans, and Wolf all contend, has a close relationship with translation. I came to these poems as a poet, yes, but also as a teacher steeped in the pedagogical models of Paulo Freire and bell hooks. I learned to teach using texts from Nancie Atwell and Jeff Anderson, practical implementations of the pedagogy Freire and

hooks espouse. It is perhaps my background as an educator, professional training that I sought before any qualifications as a poet or translator, that led me to what I consider natural extensions of Tymoczko's empowerment Hermans praises anthropologists, historians, ethnographers, and historiographers for having "addressed these problems [of self-reflexivity] anxiously and extensively," but expresses concern that these problems "have remained largely and surprisingly absent from the study of translation" (384). While I disagree on the characterization that these questions have remained "largely absent" from translation studies, I do see a great deal more opportunity for these theories of empowerment and activism to include the reconceptualizing of co-translation. Venuti argues against "the individualistic conception of authorship that continues to prevail in British and American cultures" for its negative impact on the visibility of the translator, but I would go further: the "individualistic conception of authorship" also disincentivizes translators from taking on co-translators and from forming with those co-translators equal relationships (Venuti *Invisibility* 6). Western academia and publishing both privilege the lone author, but especially in translation, which is a discipline working consciously toward communication, understanding, and equality, the process must reflect the values of the product.

As Venuti writes, "When motivated by this ethical politics of difference, the translator seeks to build a community with foreign cultures, to share an understanding with and of them and to collaborate on projects founded on that understanding..." (*Reader* 469). The discipline of community is not self-sustaining, however, but one we tend to consciously and constantly. Misunderstanding can crop up, take root, and split community apart so quickly, especially when the existing tensions are either high, volatile, or both, as they have been between Iraq and the United States for approximately the last thirty years. Venuti reminds us of the delicate balance we must forge to keep communities together around the translating act:

Because translating traffics in the foreign, in the introduction of linguistic and cultural differences, it is equally capable of crossing or reinforcing the boundaries between," but "...a translation can also create a community that includes foreign intelligibilities and interests, an understanding in common with another culture, another tradition. (*Reader* 477)

Though translation is, as Venuti writes, a profoundly "utopian" act, "made with the very intention to communicate the foreign text, [...] filled with the anticipation that a

community will be created around that text,” it can just as easily exacerbate and contribute to cultural isolation and misconception (*Reader* 485).

When constructing community at the formative stages of translation, each co-translator must also, as Weinberger and Paz observe, treat the process almost as if “a spiritual exercise,” “dependent on the dissolution of the translator’s ego.” Venuti, concerned for practical and ethical reasons about what he calls “the translator’s invisibility,” refers to this same practice as “a weird self-annihilation,” which—despite its positive echoes of egolessness and union with the divine in the Sufi tradition this dissertation interacts with deeply—actually weakens the community around a translation (*Invisibility* 7). Though each co-translator strives for “absolute humility toward the text,” we have found that our egos, our differing perspectives and the arguments they can sometimes cause—if we handle them with awareness and kindness—actually strengthen our translating relationships and the translations themselves (Weinberger and Paz 17). Again and again, Tymoczko stresses the critical place of awareness in translation, going so far as to warn translators as well as readers and critics of translations against “...the hubris inherent in any claim to understand a culture” (*Enlarging* 47, 259, 263). I have found Tymoczko’s warning to hold true: the deeper I understand these poems and their context, the more I see how much I do not understand.

We know these poems well enough to know that we have failed. Somewhere, a poet has used a word in its most ancient meaning and we, none of us philologists or linguists, were not even aware of that possibility. We have missed a reference. We have interpreted differently than others would. Language and the understanding it strives to create between readers, people is already an impossible, certainly imperfect, task. We begin in impossibility. We end there, too. But refusing to translate is, as Ricoeur says, “the desperate refusal of the real human condition, which is that of multiplicity at all the levels of existence, multiplicity, whose most disquieting expression is the diversity of languages” (33). “Yes,” Ricoeur continues, “we must confess: from one language to another, the situation is definitely that of scattering and confounding. And yet translation is inscribed in the long litany of ‘despite everything.’ Despite fratricides, we campaign for universal fraternity. Despite the heterogeneity of idioms, there are bilinguals, polyglots,

interpreters and translators.” And, Ricoeur reminds us, “...fraternity itself [is] an ethical project and not a simple fact of nature” (18). Translation exists in the realm not of fact, but of conscious ethical projects. Translation is a tool of understanding, which we create and recreate across cultures from moment to moment. With that thought in mind, it does not surprise me that the translations we provide here do not feel finished; it is unlikely they ever can. And that is not cause for despair, but celebration.

### *Translation and the “Afterlife” of the Text*

The original poems in Kurdish are “living matter [that] functions somewhat like DNA, spinning out individual translations which are relatives, not clones, of the original” (Weinberger and Paz 9). Walter Benjamin, too, sees translations as “living matter,” writing in his “The Task of the Translator” about what he calls the “afterlife” of a text. To discuss Benjamin’s ideas of how translation participates in, even perhaps creates the afterlife of literature, I must first set aside any discussion surrounding his definitions of art, his metaphors for translation, and his arguments on “pure language,” which Tymoczko describes as “a fairly retrograde concept of both language and meaning...” (Benjamin 15-16, 20-23; Tymoczko *Enlarging* 48). While Tymoczko notes the irony, what I would call the dissonance, in Benjamin’s essay, she too sets aside these aspects of his article to focus on his ideas of the life and afterlife of literature.

Benjamin turns to the word “afterlife” to connote ideas of “transformation” and “renewal of something living” (Benjamin 17). He defends the idea that “[t]he life of the originals attains in [translations] to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering” (Benjamin 17). Tymoczko points out how well this view fits into the postpositivist and postcolonial structures given that, in her paraphrase of his argument, “...no text has a fixed meaning; meaning changes over time as culture changes and as perspectives on the text change. As a consequence translations confer (renewed) meanings on source texts and without translation texts die” (*Enlarging* 48). Venuti agrees, quoting Maurice Blanchot in his *The Translator’s Invisibility*, writing that both the translated and translating languages are “never stationary” and “living out ‘the solemn drift’” (265). In fact, Venuti goes further, “Meaning is a plural and contingent relation, not an unchanging

unified essence” (*Invisibility* 13). As Paul Ricoeur reminds us, “The untranslatable borders first on the unspeakable” and translation is an “occasion for multiple and competing interpretations (Ricoeur 29, 26). Benjamin, presupposing the same, that language and meaning itself are constantly evolving and shifting, endows translation with a unique commission: to “[watch] over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (18). Benjamin is, in effect, as Tymoczko notes, upending the traditional understanding of the relationship between the original and the translation, conferring the responsibility of the original’s survival on the continual act of translation. We look forward to the continued discussion of how these orchestral poems can be read, comprehended, and rendered; we hope our translations will become part of the extensive and varied afterlife of these poems. After all, “[t]ranslation contains multitudes” (Bernofsky, [publicbooks.org/the-joys-of-multiplicity](http://publicbooks.org/the-joys-of-multiplicity)).

Rather than translate selectively, I chose to translate entire poems so that readers who did not speak Kurdish or spoke a different dialect could read my source material. Translating the poems in totality added a great deal of work to the dissertation, but there were several important reasons to take that work on. First, there is so much study possible with these poems, most of which have not been rendered in English before. I hope the translations will open the poems up to further work. Second, I want to enable readers of the dissertations to disagree with the interpretation I derive; if few others can read the source text, then my ideas are not as open to productive argument. Third, the English-language poets who taught me the craft of poetry taught me that whatever insight a critic can offer comes second always to the primary text: the poems. I came to the analysis in this dissertation as a reader dedicated to the craft of a poem. Translating the poems in their entirety is a way of foregrounding the primary text.

That said, translation is, as Tymoczko and others defend, subjective and my translations carry my interpretations. The Sheikh Raza in our translations is the Sheikh Raza we see. Another translator or group of translators might see a different man, a different poem. Bernofsky says, “...translation is a form of writing, and there are many valid ways to practice it. Multiplicity is all around us, and that’s a good thing” ([publicbooks.org/the-joys-of-multiplicity](http://publicbooks.org/the-joys-of-multiplicity)). While we have worked to provide

readers the full text of a representative sample from each poet, I acknowledge the subjectivity both of the word “representative” and the act of translation.

### *Ethical Considerations of the Translator’s Positionality*

As Tymoczko writes, “...questions about the translator as an ethical agent of social change have gone to the heart of both the practice of translation and the theory of translation” (*Apropos* 181). Subjectivity, the translator’s positionality and ideology lives in the text selection and defines the translation in both subtle and overt ways.

Tymoczko’s essay in *Apropos of Ideology*, a volume of essays edited by María Calzada Pérez, examines the language and realities around a translator’s positionality. Positionality Tymoczko defines as “...an ideological positioning as well as a geographical or temporal one” that includes a translator’s “history, geography, material culture, or the literary system, but also [the questions] of the relation to power structures, ideology, politics, and ethics” (Tymoczko *Apropos* 183; *Enlarging* 44). Many Western metaphors for and theories of translation imply the translator’s standing between two cultures: “The locution *between* has become one of the most popular means of figuring an *elsewhere* that a translator may speak from – an elsewhere that is somehow different from either the source culture or the receptor culture that the translator mediates between...” (Tymoczko *Apropos* 185). But “...when translation is conceptualized in terms of transfer between languages as *systems*, this spatial metaphor of translation breaks down” (Tymoczko *Apropos* 195). To address this break down, but also to imagine a framework more invigorating to the contemporary politics surrounding the translator’s position as an ethical agent, Tymoczko borrows from theories of systems. She notes that while system theory may have originated with mathematicians, anthropologists and ethnographers have adopted the systems theory approach, arguing that one “can never stand in a neutral or free space between cultures, but of necessity operates within some cultural framework...” (Tymoczko *Apropos* 196).

While system theory seems to establish a binary—either the translator is in one linguistic, cultural system or the other—Tymoczko describes the place of transcendence

within the theory: “The transcendence of both linguistic codes in fact puts the translator into a formal system that encompasses both languages, rather than being restricted to either” (Tymoczko *Apropos* 196). “The translator,” she continues, does not “[operate] *between* languages, but in this “encompassing system” (Tymoczko *Apropos* 196). Tymoczko acknowledges the occasional usefulness of the natural spatial metaphors translators have traditionally relied on to describe their position, but stresses that those modes of thinking keep translation theory and the translation community tethered to outdated and problematic Western paradigms (*Apropos* 198-9). Systems theory moves the field and its practitioners forward into the understanding that “translators are engaged, actively involved, and affiliated with cultural movements” and that cultures are not “monolithic” or “homogeneous,” but rather “composed of varied and diverse – even contradictory and inconsistent – competing viewpoints, discourses, and textures” (*Apropos* 200). She stresses the systems framework because its focus on “heterogeneity and hybridity” gives translators “as ethical agents” a “model for engagement and collective action” (Tymoczko *Apropos* 201). The community she envisions developing around translators within the systems theory framework is comprised, in her words, minimally of publishers and distributors, but her vision allows for significantly more, and significantly stronger and more intimate, collaboration.

This kind of collaboration contributes to the understanding that Andrew Chesterman, putting himself into conversation with philosopher and Holocaust survivor Emmanuel Levinas, considers a pillar of the profession. “The emphasis,” Chesterman writes, “is not on representing the Other but on communicating with others. To recognize the Other as a ‘subject’, with whom one can indeed communicate, is a primary ethical act...” (141). Chesterman’s concluding concern in his essay “Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath” is the articulation of an oath for professional translators, but the element of his essay most relevant here is his emphasis on the responsibilities of the ethical translator. He quotes a figure from Hopi Indian Culture, the Spider Grandmother, who “gave two basic ethical rules.” “She said, ‘Don’t go around hurting each other,’ and she said, ‘Try to understand things’” (Chesterman 139). Throughout the essay, he lists many pertinent values of a professional translator, but the salient value is understanding. He writes, “... the ethical translator is a mediator working to achieve cross-cultural understanding.

Understanding of what? Of each other, ultimately” (Chesterman 141). “Communicative suffering,” he elaborates later in the essay,

arises from not understanding something that you want to understand, from misunderstanding or inadequate understanding, and from not being able to get your own message across. It also arises from a lack of communication at all. (Chesterman 151)

Translation’s aim, he concludes, “is at least to reduce this suffering” (Chesterman 151). Theo Hermans clearly shares in the idea of translation as understanding. In his essay on “thick” translation, Hermans references I.A. Richards’ *Mencius on the mind* (1932) to establish historical precedent and an early example of “presenting the reader with a mixture of interlinear cribs and lengthy glosses which emphatically refrained from proposing fixed English equivalents” (384). He specifically notes that Richards reflected in his scholarly work on these cribs and glosses in an essay he titled, “Toward a theory of comprehending” (384). Hermans’ ideal requires the translator’s striving toward comprehension. Venuti agrees: “Implicit in any translation is the hope for [...] communication and recognition” (Venuti *Reader* 485). Venuti goes on to give significant caveats (no translation can be “comprehensive,” “without exclusion or hierarchy,” and “asymmetry between the foreign and domestic cultures persists”), but the central message remains: one persistent hope among translation acts is to alleviate communicative suffering or, in the more plain terms of Elie Wiesel, author and Holocaust survivor, to make sure people know they are not alone.

Solidarity, however, can quickly become appropriation. Though the question of who can tell which story is not new, it has not lost its potency. It is one of the most important ethical questions behind this dissertation: am I am trespassing by writing it? Beyond the ready idea that a native English speaker who is formally trained as a poet can serve these poems well as a translator, beyond the value that a newcomer’s perspective can have, there are ethical considerations. The United States has invaded Iraq twice in as many generations. Both invasions were at best inconclusive in their outcomes for Iraqis, though the second was arguably successful as far as the Kurds in the country were concerned. American military presence and absence created conditions ripe for the rise of the Islamic State, a terrorist group so extreme in its violence that al-Qaeda distanced itself. As an American, raised Christian, a student of

Kurdish, whose fluency will always be receding with the horizon, one could maintain that I am perhaps the least appropriate person to arrive in Iraq, learn Kurdish, translate radically complex poetry, and present that poetry to the English-speaking world.

In 2014, as the Chair of the English Department at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS), I hosted seven artists for SoJust, an international festival on art and social justice funded by the US State Department. Photographers, journalists, playwrights, poets, and translators of different ages, ethnicities, social backgrounds, and sexual orientations converged to discuss this very question: are there certain stories only certain individuals can tell? Radcliffe Roye, a Jamaican photographer living in America, tore the conversation wide open when he said, “A white man can’t tell a black man’s story” (Levinson-LaBrosse 130). Every artist present had a response.

Neil Shea, a journalist, photographer, and documentary filmmaker for National Geographic, said,

“Radcliffe’s argument is a case for isolationism. [...] There is certainly something to be said for empowering people within a group to tell their own story[, but to] say that people who are not part of a group should not try to understand that group [enforces] deafness, muteness, and blindness.” (130)

Jillian Armenante, an actor, director, and playwright, called Roye’s statement a “glittering generality” (132). “As long as we can’t cross lines artistically,” she said, “we will [...] ghettoize art” (132). Heather Raffo, an Iraqi-American actor, playwright, and director, said, “Yes, we should tell other’s stories. We live in a global world. [T]he inner depths of human story being expressed fearlessly is imperative to our evolutionary development” (133). And yet, she adds, “we need to find a revealing balance of appropriation and empowerment” (133).

It is this balance that I have tried to find as an American working on Sorani Kurdish literature. In a beautiful turn, the very community that the poems require of any reader has become my way of balancing toward empowerment and bringing out my own strengths as a poet, researcher, and writer. While I develop my ideas about the poems, the translation of the poems, the generation the poems arise from, I participate in and enliven the existing and emerging community of Kurdish scholars around the poems. Kashkul, as an organization, has become a place where American, Kurdish, and Iraqi storytellers can come together and support each other in the telling. There, the

cultural stranger and the cultural insider can become sources of perspective for one another, challenging each other, adding complexity to the ideas eventually presented. My students brought me to these poems as their teacher, but these poems have made us all students.

Sheikh Ali Qaradaghi, in the preface to his *Album of Kashkuls*, speaks with a humility I find continually relevant and powerful,

I, with my weak ability, and the narrow scope I have in hand, petition the generations of today and tomorrow: let us think about those collectors and their sacred mission. They led the caravan of Kurdish scholars. They protected our forefathers' literatures and the poets' hard labor. Were it not for them, we would have heard nothing of those who came before us or their work. What can I do? It is obvious I can do nothing significant except start, break tradition, and notify the scholars: this is uncharted territory. If capable people work in it, they will make great maps. (Qaradaghi, viii)

### *Analysis*

Translation is an act of analysis and my analysis is, like my translation, an act of reading, as Kwame Appiah and others maintain. Each translation offers to the reader the translator's reading; my analysis offers up my reading, my understanding of these poems. The translation, though intensive and extensive, prepared me well: I learned each poet's patterns of language and thought and I discovered the moments when the poets speak to each other. I saw the poets respond in verse to the great changes of their century. The act of translating led me to the central questions behind this dissertation; my analysis proceeds directly from the translations.

My approach to the poems brings close reading, a method that came from New Criticism, a theoretical framework for analyzing literature that emerged in the second decade of the twentieth century and developed through the mid-century, into conversation with historical reading. The urge to bring these two methods of reading together, though close reading emerged methodologically against any kind of contextual reading, is recent. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, in their introduction to a 2009 issue of *Representation: The Way We Read Now*, describe their own "willed, sustained proximity to the text" Surface Reading, a style of description that "recalls the aims of New Criticism, which insisted that the key to understanding a text's meaning lay within

the text itself” (10). Best and Marcus see the surface as “what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*” and argue that “...simply paraphrasing a text or understanding its verbal meaning is a demanding ‘craft’” (10).

To assert the primacy of the text, New Critics argued for a vigorous distancing of close reading from other approaches. Different proponents of New Criticism—including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, William K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley, and T.S. Eliot—emphasize different aspects of the framework, but all agree on its fundamental principles: criticism should not be shackled to historical reading, which also simultaneously binds critics to look only at historically established literature, nor reduced to the critic’s emotional response to a text. Rather, criticism should consist of a reader in specific, direct conversation with text, looking not only at what the texts means (and how we understand that), but at its artistic construction and how the formal elements define the project of the text.

Of all the New Critics, scholars who were also writers and poets offer the most nuance in their articulation of their school: Robert Penn Warren and T.S. Eliot. Speaking of creation and criticism as “two directions of sensibility,” Eliot deems them “complementary” and states: “...as sensibility is rare, unpopular, and desirable, it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person”—just as Warren and Eliot were (Eliot 19). As Warren describes his relationship to a poem as a critic, one can feel his writerly background. Speaking of the poem, and in many ways about his conception of close reading, Warren writes,

“There is only one way to conquer the monster: you must eat it, bones, blood, skin, pelt, and gristle. And even then the monster is not dead, for it lives in you, and you are different, and somewhat monstrous yourself, for having eaten it.” (228)

Warren goes on to extend his chosen metaphor: “So the monster will always win, and the critic knows this. [...] All he wants to do is give the monster a chance to exhibit again its miraculous power” (228). Criticism has become, in Warren’s view, an opportunity to see the poem ever more clearly as a poem.

Tate agrees, seeking to push the critic into the particularities of a poem, what “about the whole of a work of literature which distinguishes it from its parts” (456). Tate goes on to express frustration by what he perceives as the “literary profession” losing

“confidence in literature” (457). The literary critic, he argues, should “participate as a living imagination in a great work of literature” (Tate 458). Warren agrees, citing Coleridge, that “...a good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must, as Coleridge puts it, make the reader into ‘an active creative being’” (Warren 251). And this is the true gift of close reading and New Criticism: the reader empowered to look critically at the text without any intervening sources. The disciplined reader can offer her thoughts on the poem as the poem, rather than as the poem as an historical artifact.

Beyond giving the individual reader great permission to read her text, Tate’s view of close reading collapses time: all literature is now (even great literature of the past, when read, become literature of the present) and criticism must remain contemporary (lack of historical documents should not prevent scholars from studying contemporary literature with equal sincerity as classical). T.S. Eliot puts forward his own rendition of this argument in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” The “true artist,” Eliot tells us, “is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living” (19).

This collapsed time confers urgency on close reading, the individual’s relationship to the text, but in its eagerness to emphasize the individual, it discards how context can integrate with and strengthen an individual’s reading. These two sentences summarize the leavening and deadening effects of Tate’s position: “If we wait for history to judge there will be no judgment; for if we are not history then history is nobody. He is nobody when he has become the historical method” (460). Great authors die, Tate says, when there is no one left with the courage to read them fresh. Each critic must test the greatness that previous generations establish and that we inherit. “It is all present literature,” Tate concludes (460). What Tate and his colleagues meant to underscore was the imperative of looking at literature as literature—what Best and Marcus would term “an embrace [of the surface as an affective and ethical stance that] involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects” (10). Though Best and Marcus concur with that central tenet of New Criticism, that “texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves,” they diverge meaningfully: a reader practicing surface reading can, when useful, turn to context to improve his or her understanding of “what the text says about itself” (11).

Best and Marcus's surface reading allows for the critic to use close and contextual reading side-by-side, in service of describing text. As this thesis works to understand the possible meanings of nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry, which is nearly brand new to English and less commonly studied even among established scholars within Kurdish Studies, the blend of close reading and contextual reading is critical. Surface reading encourages attention to the text itself, including whatever religious, historical, or socio-economic context may hone one's ability to understand the text. Surface reading places "literary surfaces on the same plane as 'social discourse,' defined as 'the total network of meaning,'" so poetry can become a new source in which we can see the nineteenth century—a century of massive political, social, economic, and religious change—moving (12).

One aspect of New Criticism that Tate articulates well, and an element of one main style of Surface Reading, is the mission to focus critics on the formal elements of, especially, poetry, what Stephen and Marcus, quoting Susan Sontag, argue is the "the experience of art in its 'pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy,'" what Sontag also calls "the erotics of art" (10). While I do address form in its larger, more sweeping importance to the individual poems, I do not deal with, for instance, meter substantively. There is additional work to be done on how the formal elements, the "untranslatable" elements of these poems in their original materiality indicate or do not the move from the classical to the modern, from formal to free verse, which arrives in Kurdish letters in the early decades of the twentieth century. A detailed study of this is forthcoming from Farangis Ghaderi, an adaptation of her dissertation titled, "The Emergence and the Development of Modern Kurdish Poetry." There is much more work to be done on how the materiality of these poems embodies and resists the spirit of their age.

### *Chapter Plan*

I begin with a historical outline of the time period that examines the both the daily life and overarching political movements that affected and perhaps formed the Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century. This includes awareness of what was happening inside the Persian and Ottoman empires at the time and how the priorities of those empires

affected internal Kurdish politics. As well, all Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century shared education and training in the Islamic Sciences and Sufism, the charismatic discipline of Islam. With that in mind, this chapter must also examine how, as Kurdish political structures grew more and more unstable, clergy found new opportunities for power—a factor that contributed to the rise of Qadiri and Naqshbandi Sufism. Briefly, to prepare readers for the poets' discussion of national ideas, I summarize the current scholarship on when and where Kurdish nationalism emerged.

I move from the historical background to the poet's individual biographies. As these poets are new to English, we must establish their individual identities before we can look more constructively at them as a group. What emerged over the course of translating these poems is how these poets knew each other on and off the page. With this biographical information pulled together, I was able to track their relationships, which are not documented well in the secondary literature, but can be teased out from their biographies, poems, and the few available key first-hand accounts. These poets constructed a community with each other that make the scholar's choice of who to study easy. Just reading the poems, we can see who the poets chose as their friends, masters, teachers, and heroes—mostly their own contemporaries. We can study a group that self-consciously created itself.

The chapters that follow, *Exile and Arrival*, contain my analysis of how this poetry articulates the exile of its century, but also constitutes an artistic arrival point for the poets, for Kurds. Both chapters, *Exile and Arrival*, have parallel subsections that allow the reader to compare concentric circles of concern: the self, the beloved, the family, the city and the land. These concentric circles of concern widen out from the poet as an individual to the poet as a disciple or devotee, to the poet as a family member, to the poet as a citizen: in short, from the most limited circle of concern (the self) to one of the widest (the nation). I have chosen these graduated levels of attention intentionally to echo the Sufi concerns of attachment and appearance, considering the earthly world including the self as what Nali would call "traps of attachment." I have also chosen this structure as these levels correspond to the way individuals build and articulate their social identity as well as echoing the international scholarship surrounding the Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and William Blake, as Dorothy Butler notes in the

seminal *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760-1830*, and its suspicion of all surfaces, the poets driven inward particularly in response to grave political disappointment. This comparative element emerges over the course of the dissertation and only comes to fruition in the conclusion, but it is important to acknowledge at the outset that the organization of this thesis is meant to demonstrate how characteristics of Eastern and Western Romanticism may be in conversation with one another.

In Exile, the first subsection observes the self—how striving toward the spiritual can exile you from the body, an internal conflict that, for these poets who were educated as Sufis, never resolves. Though union with the beloved, the divine, is a state much easier to understand, and certainly easier to desire, exile from the beloved is also an active state of worship. Proportionately as one effaces the self, one can touch the beloved, which leads us to the second subsection, The Beloved, that describes the difficulties of striving toward the divine beloved in a human context. The Family, takes two primary examples, Jamil al-Zahawi and Sheikh Raza Talabani, sons in exile from their families. I include a brief history of curse poetry, to explain the legacy Sheikh Raza received, but focus on how literal, familial exile gave way to a much more existential sense of exile among the larger family of men, Kurds, and the social mores they held. The City and The Land, the last subsection of the chapter, explores the political exile Kurds experienced in the nineteenth century and their responses. Many poets as the century progressed articulated, with varying degrees of anger and accusation, their exile from mainstream Islam, and still more poets felt isolated from their fellow Sufis who sacrificed spiritual commitment and devotion for material gain. Exile took economic and political stability from these Kurdish poets, but propelled them into creation, its own kind of arrival.

The next chapter, Arrival, shows that for these poets, exile is, in fact, arrival. In the first subsection, The Self, readers can sense the strength that can come when one accepts exile, especially in Sufi terms: distance as a state of presence. In more tangible terms, as the Kurdish principalities fell, the economic system of court poetry and patronage fell. Though poets were immediately impoverished, they were also suddenly free to turn poetry to their personal purposes. The strictures on what could be in a

Kurdish poem expanded rapidly. The second subsection, *The Beloved*, shows that even as the poets became princes unto themselves, they embraced their nothingness. As Sufis, as lovers, they became nothing, so they became everything. The third subsection, *The Family*, looks not at the individual families of the poets, but the larger family of Kurds and how Kurdish poets took this exile as an opportunity to construct Kurdishness through poetry. In the absence of Kurdish governance or an emerging Kurdish state, the poets consciously craft their own family of Kurdish poets.

Finally, in the fourth subsection, *The City and The Land*, we notice the strength of the poetic community and its motions toward a national idea, toward Sorani as a literary language. The poets relied on each other in these efforts, acting as each other's heroes. The love they bore each other can be characterized in several ways, but the honesty and at times eroticism with which they expressed that love is remarkable. Here, I have placed the analysis of male-male intimacy within these poems—or what we can refer to in contemporary terms as homosociality, a word that can include various and complex modes of male relationship—within the section of *The City and The Land*, not within the section on *The Beloved*. This was a careful choice because, as I will argue, these relationships cannot and should not reduce to contemporary definitions or understandings of homosexuality. This thesis studies the way male poets articulate their interactions with and experiences of other men, which in nineteenth-century Kurdistan as many other nineteenth-century geographies, formed a critical part of a man's social existence and identity. Out of the love they shared, letting the word "love" achieve definitions as large as the Platonic, they fashioned a land for themselves that they could inhabit no matter where they were or who they were subject to. Together, they began to clarify the idea of what Kurdistan was and could be and the sacrifices that a nation might require from its people. Out of their exile, they crafted a vision of the world as it could be.

## Chapter 1: The Nineteenth Century

In order to read and analyze the poems that come from nineteenth-century Kurdish poets, we need to first understand their context. The nineteenth century was a time of great change for Kurdistan. Technology, infrastructure like railways, traditional habits of agriculture and nomadism, as well as political and economic structures all underwent major transformation. The Ottoman and Safavid Empires faced off throughout Kurdish territory; the long-powerful Kurdish tribes of the Babans and Ardalans shifted between acting as allies and rivals. Charismatic religion, in this region Sufism, rose and experienced a significant revival in Kurdish regions. Powerful as these changes were, they only fed the more sweeping and critical revolutions in politics and society. Knowing this context helps us properly situate the poets, their poems, and the various vectors of pressure acting on them. After delving into the context surrounding the poets, I will examine each poet's biography in more detail, showing how the individual poets interacted with the history I have just outlined. I will finish the chapter by looking out from the individual poets to the community the poets made: how they knew one another, how they related to one another. I will suggest that through this community the poets made, the poets themselves are forging a republic of letters rather than relying on any traditional forms of political structure.

Technology arrived in Kurdistan, though more slowly than other areas of the world. Transportation improved, though again roads and trains progressed into Kurdish areas more slowly than in other areas. And with both the evolving technology and transportation, markets and their dynamics shifted: "As early as the 1830's steam transportation was opened on the Black Sea, and cheap European products began to flood the Anatolian markets. Late in the nineteenth century German companies started the construction of the Istanbul-Baghdad railroad, which greatly facilitated transportation to and from western Kurdistan (which the railway reached early this century)" (Van Bruinessen 19). On these new systems of transportation, trade could reach farther into Kurdish territories, and faster, but on the other hand, roads did not really arrive until the twentieth century and then, the network of roads served the "administrative needs of centralizing governments" (Van Bruinessen 20).

For the average Kurd, these improvements did not reach the heart of their daily life: "Villages are not connected with each other (except by footpaths) but with district capitals and through these with provincial capitals and state capitals" (Van Bruinessen 20). Though daily life was not immediately bettered by these advancements, the arriving technology and infrastructure did facilitate more oversight by the Ottoman and Persian empires whose centers of powers were, especially for the Ottomans, quite far removed from Kurdish lands. Military advancements, such as machine guns and "hydraulic-recoil field artillery," threatened the success of tribes in rebellion as they "were seldom able to achieve the discipline necessary for formal battle with such modern weapons" (McDowall 66). Between the new infrastructure and weapons, the future of Kurdish resistance to the central powers that surrounded them would morph into guerrilla warfare.

In terms of daily life, Kurds came into the nineteenth century as a nomadic population that was to slowly settle into pastoralism, the "chiefs [...] slowly transformed into landlords" (McDowall 66). The "range of lifestyles between, more rarely, settled, to semi-nomadic [...] to nomadic" that Kurdish people practiced led to corresponding range of agricultural development (Van Bruinessen 17). Nomadism and pastoralism, corresponded respectively to stockbreeding and agriculture, both of which thrived in nineteenth century Kurdistan.

McDowall tells us that nineteenth century Kurdistan "provided much of the meat for Anatolia, Syria and Mesopotamia" and that "even with the virtual disappearance of nomadism in the second half of the twentieth century, settled people still stockbreed" (6). Throughout the nineteenth century, even as cash crops of cotton and tobacco were becoming more common, flocks of significant size, made up of goat, sheep, and "moderate numbers" of cows and bulls would move between the warmer valleys in winter and the high pastures in summer (McDowall 6). These flocks, while mostly for meat production, also produced many dairy products, known still today for their floral scent.

Many Kurds throughout the nineteenth century blended pastoralist tendencies into their nomadic, herd-driven lives. Common cash crops grown in the valleys included wheat, barley, cotton, tobacco and lentils (Van Bruinessen 16; Edmonds 20), whereas in

the mountains, farming rarely exceeded subsistence levels and consisted really of a vague cultivation of what grew wild: almonds, mulberries, grapes, oak galls, honey, quince, pistachios, acorns and truffles (Edmonds 103; Hay 107). Despite all the technological innovations, all cultivation was still done by hand using either a “wooden-frame ploughs [with] iron ploughshares” or a “sickle or scythe” (Van Bruinessen 16). The donkey and the mule were equally valued for their reliability in all sorts of activities: ploughing, hauling, corn-treading and riding (Hay 57).

Until the mid-nineteenth century, emirates ruled by incorporating a number of tribes that the emirate “held in check and balanced against each other by a ruling family (dynasty) with its own military and bureaucratic apparatus” (Van Bruinessen 133). The loss of these emirates, specifically the Ardalans and the Babans, is the greatest of the changes Southern Kurdistan endured during the nineteenth century.

### *Caught Between Empires*

Kurdish tribes lived on the border shared by the Ottoman and Safavid empires. Caught between these two powers, the Kurds worked within a much larger structure to carve out their own, semi-independent, space. The battle of Chaldiran, and the ensuing 1639 Treaty of Zuhab “...effectively established a strategic point of balance between Ottoman Anatolia and Safavid Azabaijan” (McDowall 26). Both Ottoman and Safavid empires would push against this line, testing it outright or by proxy through Kurdish rivalries. The only real clarity created by the Treaty of Zuhab was which lands the two empires would remain in dispute over for the next three and a half centuries. Kurdish lands “became the front line for many of the Ottomans’ wars with their eastern neighbors, and the land where many of the battles were fought. And it was the land on which much blood was shed during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878” (Klein 4).

Even in the early twentieth century, CJ Edmonds, a British political officer working throughout Iraq and Kurdistan, commented in his travelogue: “...in spite of references to the League of Nations, two more treaties and several commissions, the centenary of the second Treaty of Erzurum would come and go with 880 of 920 miles of boundary between Iraq and Persia still undemarcated” (Edmonds, 139). The span of the line helps

to put the conflict area in perspective. More, that line stretched across an area that was roughly 1200 miles from Istanbul, the seat of Ottoman power. Despite consistent disputation and incursions, this line, formally established by the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab, persisted until 1914 (McDowall 26).

Kurdish chiefs in “the border march between the two empires” now had two “unenviable tasks”: to watch each empire attempt to expand its control within those territories and to choose “which empire it was wisest to recognize, balancing a desire for maximal freedom from government interference against the local benefit of formal state endorsement of their authority” (McDowall 26). While the empires compromised the independence of the Kurdish tribes, which populated the periphery of the two empires, their peripheral status also gave the tribes leverage toward semi-independence: the sovereign the tribes chose gained territory, power, and a buffer zone for his land (Van Bruinessen 135). More, the choice of sovereign and ensuing loyalty was not stable. As a seat of power weakened, Kurdish tribes could choose to remain loyal, but more independent, or attempt to break away or seize greater territory or privileges with a rival power. Throughout the nineteenth century, foreign influence intensified the already-complex dynamic.

Van Bruinessen articulates these “centre-periphery relationships” as a “pendulum movement correlative with the consecutive weakening and strengthening of central state authority” (136). A sovereign in a position of strength would bring together many competing factions, requiring fealty in the form of taxes or military service, but then, as a sovereign weakened, “the tribal chieftains would continue to profess their allegiance but gradually empty this allegiance of its contents. They would stop paying taxes, refrain from lending the military assistance demanded, and in the end might openly proclaim their independence” (Van Bruinessen 136). Kurdish tribes lived within this cycle: the waxing and waning of central authority. In fact, McDowall tells us, “The pattern of nominal submission to central government, be it Persian, Arab or subsequently Turkic, alongside the assertion of as much local independence as possible, became an enduring theme in Kurdish political life” (21).

As McDowall says, Kurdish tribes did more than live under the yoke of ever-shifting authority: they were able to “exploit border tensions between adjoining states to

advance their own cause” (McDowall 8). Even in times of ostensible peace, the tribes could work the empires off one another to “achieve functional independence, even if they were required to give formal recognition either to central government or to local government appointees” (McDowall 21). Both empires knew: if they could keep Kurdish loyalties, either by enforcing or bartering, they could keep additional territory, taxes, and military protection for themselves. Particularly under Ottoman suzerainty, Kurdish tribes could bargain “good order,” “troops when necessary,” and “defen[se] of the border regions” for “a measure of freedom enjoyed virtually nowhere else in the empire” (McDowall 29). Van Bruinessen reminds us that Kurdistan’s “natural constitution” contributed to the difficulty of keeping those lands “permanently under control without the consent of its inhabitants” and that only by “grant[ing] many privileges to the mirs” could the Ottoman empire retain the control it so clearly wanted across Kurdish lands (174).

Some tribes deliberately manipulated the border lands and the empires’ predictable responses to their own ends: “The Jaf tribe, for example, largely abandoned Iranian territory at the end of the eighteenth century and were allowed to settle on Baban lands in Pizhdar and Halabja, but carefully left a section behind east of the border so that they could move either way over the border to escape government punishment” (McDowall 30). As might be expected, though the power struggle between the center and the periphery had become status quo, neither the center nor the periphery were satisfied with the arrangement. The system lasted, as McDowall notes, “well into the nineteenth century,” but endurance should not be confused with satisfaction. Kurds were opportunistic, at key military moments while “[o]thers refused military obligations implicit in their status” (McDowall 31). The Ottomans and Persians consistently vied for greater control among the Kurdish tribes by tampering with lines of succession, increasing or enforcing existing taxation and pressing more men into military service (McDowall 30).

Scholars debate whether the competing factors bearing down on Kurdish tribes ultimately intensified or retarded development of Kurdish governance. Much of that question lies outside the scope of this dissertation. What we must establish here is that certainly “[t]he Kurdish tribes [...did] not exist in a vacuum that would allow them to

evolve independently” (Van Bruinessen 134). And that whatever the effect of the empires on Kurdish governance over the centuries, in the nineteenth century, the empires eroded Kurdish power until both the Baban and Ardalán emirates were weak enough that the empires could co-opt and demolish them.

### *Changing Empires*

The nineteenth century was a century of change for Kurdistan because it was a century of change for the surrounding regions. Hourani describes how broad that change was: “In the seventh century the Arabs created a new world into which other peoples were drawn. In the nineteenth and twentieth, they were themselves drawn into a new world created in western Europe” (Hourani *A History* 249). While he acknowledges this explanation as far too simple, the simplicity illuminates the fundamental shift occurring throughout the region as the nineteenth century began: “by the end of the eighteenth century the Ottoman dynasty had existed for 500 years and been ruling most of the Arab countries for almost 300” (Hourani “A History” 250). In Hourani’s estimation, an “adjustment” to both governance methods and the balance of power was due (Hourani *A History* 250).

Klein sees Hourani’s “adjustment” within the Ottoman empire as apace with the larger nineteenth century that “saw states all over the world make this transition,” “employ[ing] modern state-building technologies as they sought to delimit their borders and to define and control the people inside them” (12). Deringil determines the changes of the Ottoman empire to be “in tune with world trends where, one after the other, empires borrowed the weapons of the enemy, the nationalists” (67). The state-building which the Ottoman empire would begin experimenting with throughout the nineteenth century would end disastrously for the ethnic and religious plurality that had characterized the empire. One new and critical tactic of the empire “was not only the effort to map and demark the terrain to be governed, but to map and classify the people within” (Klein 12). Over the course of the century, Ottoman identity would narrow in definition. Any identity other than Ottoman—Kurdish and Armenian, for example—would become a threat; sources of power or legitimacy were either co-opted and managed as

Ottoman, part of the 'acquiescence' and 'legitimation ideology' that Deringil refers to, or undermined and finally destroyed (68).

Up until the nineteenth century, as Van Bruinessen notes, "The Ottoman Empire distinguished itself from other contemporary states in initially leaving the semi-independent Kurdish rulers in control of their emirate" (136). This semi-independence for Kurds bought the Ottomans "political loyalty against the Iranians" and, from the Kurdish perspective, enabled a few Kurdish dynasties [to rule] virtually uninterrupted for centuries as vassals of the Ottoman sultans" (Van Bruinessen 136; 161). Of these Kurdish dynasties, perhaps the most important was the house of Baban, "an important part in the history of what is now Iraq from c. 1550 to c. 1850" (Van Bruinessen 171). The Baban princes "received the high Turkish title of *pasha*" in the 1600s and bore the title until the fall of their house (Van Bruinessen 171). They created Sulaimani, their capital city, in 1784 (Rasul *For Language* 101-102). The city, in its newness and location, brought together, Rasul contends, both Botan and Soran princes under the 'wing' of the Babans (*For Language* 101). The Babans and their unifying city provided a gravitational center for Kurdish identity. Self-consciously, the house Baban worked to create the cultural conditions of a court, encouraging poetry specifically in the dialect of the emirate.

Baban, as others, flourished under the "weakness of imperial authority" (McDowall 40). "By the end of the eighteenth century the Ottomans faced a severe crisis, that of a highly centralized empire that had lost control of its hinterland" (McDowall 38). McDowall goes so far as to call the "Ottoman grip on Iraq" "feeble" (33), noting that "in 1807 the Sultan was obliged to recognize formally that he shared his once-absolute power with local potentates, among them the Kurdish chiefs, who derived their power from local sources" (41). Here, Kurdish geography supported Kurdish governance: road and railway could not reach through the mountains and any army faced "the risk of epidemic disease" in summer and winter's impassable snows (McDowall 40). The topography of Kurdish territory eroded direct Ottoman rule, allowing the Kurds to retard any "imperial progress" (McDowall 38). Sadly, the same century would contain both the heights and the destruction of the Baban principality.

The nineteenth century, in terms of Ottoman identity, experienced a schism embodied in the two sultans who ruled: Sultan Mahmud II (1803-1839) and Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876-1908). Both men saw the need for change throughout the empire, but their visions of what the empire needed contradicted each other. The contradiction would prove fatal to Kurdish governance within the Ottoman empire. Sultan Mahmud would crush Kurdish principalities and through the Tanzimat implement European-style reform only to have Sultan Abdulhamid stoke the fires of tribal leadership and politically side-step the Tanzimat reforms.

Sultan Mahmud had two major priorities for the empire that would intimately affect Kurdish populations: the re-centralization of Ottoman power (read: the overhaul of the military apparatus and subjugation of the tribal chiefs and lesser princes) and a series of European-style reforms, the Tanzimat, that would attempt to bring, for instance, equality between Christians and Muslims to the empire (Deringil 48). Van Bruinessen notes, “Immediately after the Russian war of 1806-1812 Sultan Mahmud had energetically started his policy of centralization. He succeeded to a large extent [...]. By 1826 the Anatolian *derebeyis* had been subjected, and he could start the pacification of Kurdistan” (176). But, after hundreds of years of practical though not complete autonomy, the Kurdish princes did not respond well to the empire’s increasing demands: “When the Ottoman government finally resolved to bring the Kurdish chiefs to heel in the 1830’s, the latter indignantly viewed their independence as of right” (McDowall 40).

Van Bruinessen notes, “The empire, which had been decaying slowly but continually during the preceding two centuries, became so weak that it appeared to be on the verge of collapse. This fanned aspirations to independence and separatism in the periphery” (175). No matter the Kurdish resistance, the “destruction of the Kurdish amirates was a logical objective, part of the wholesale removal of local hereditary rulers necessary for the overhaul of the empire” (McDowall 41). Edmonds tells us, the “last Baban ruler, Abdulla Pasha, ruled only as a Qaimmaqam—and was replaced by a Turk in 1851” (55). This falls in line with the overall policy to replace locally powerful rulers with bureaucrats appointed by Istanbul (Van Bruinessen 136). By the mid-nineteenth

century, the Kurdish princes had been deposed and direct Ottoman rule imposed. The change was to prove singularly ineffective.

The other major effort of Sultan Mahmud was the Tanzimat, a set of reforms that reflected European influence gaining ground within the empire. The reforms themselves “sought to re-organize the empire on European lines” (McDowall 57). But the strength of the empire came, in large part, from its Muslim identity. Any European influence, whether in reality or in perception, was also a Christian influence: a foundational threat to the empire for its more conservative constituents. The foreign influence was corrosive to the empire’s power over its people because it was not simply foreign, but Christian power.

Beyond religious threats, technologically and economically, Europe was undeniably on the rise. Militarily, Europe could prove its superiority (McDowall 39). Economically, “It was also clear that the Europeans, notably the Dutch, British, and French, were building highly successful merchant enterprises in the Levant” (McDowall 39). The most immediate threat though, and perhaps the biggest, “came from its increasingly ambitious northern neighbour, Russia, which inflicted a series of military and political humiliations during the second half of the eighteenth century” (McDowall 39). As far as Kurds were concerned, each new arriving power in the Ottoman borderlands was only one more “suitor for their attention, one more possible patron” (McDowall 39). The competing influences, seen as vectors, made one Gordian knot. Russia and Turkey took advantage of Afghan incursions to “seize parts of northern and western Iran” (McDowall 69). “Kurdistan and Azarbaijan were always tempting morsels in the path of ambitious Ottoman and Russian armies” (McDowall 69). Russia, determined to bolster its control in Iran after the 1913 peace agreement, looked to the shah to recognize his chosen line of succession. Britain, concerned over the growing Russian influence, sent military mission after military mission to fortify Iranian defenses against the Russians.

While the Europeans provided models for possible reform, those very reforms could “only be achieved at the price of growing discontent among the majority of Muslims in Anatolia who feared [their] implications” (McDowall 57). While the Tanzimat reforms would be received poorly by Muslim Anatolia and implemented at best half-

heartedly by Sultan Abdulhamid, they succeeded in abolishing the Kurdish emirates: “The last emirates were deliberately, by military force, destroyed by the Ottoman state, in the course of its process of administrative reform” (Van Bruinessen 133). Ottoman reorganization under Sultan Mahmud removed the Kurdish princes and the effective, intricate governance they had achieved as well as fomented tremendous insecurity about the identity of the empire and its future. The sudden removal of the Kurdish princes created a power vacuum that sheikhs and mullahs, as leaders of the more and more popular Sufi brotherhoods, stepped into, but the historical political power of Kurds had been shattered.

In 1876, Abdulhamid II came to office. For a variety of reasons, the new sultan could not simply roll back all the changes his predecessor had put in place. Still, he “was determined to defend his Islamic empire, not by a process of liberalization which had reached a short-lived climax in the Constitution of 1876, but by centralization in the person of the sultan himself and by an appeal to Muslim values and solidarity” (McDowall 57). Sultan Abdulhamid allowed the reforms to continue, but undercut their potency in several key ways. The most important of those, so far as this thesis is concerned, was the formation, in 1891, of “a tribal militia, or gendarmerie, led by tribal chieftains, to police the eastern provinces of the empire. These militias were named Hamidiye, after the sultan” (Van Bruinessen 185). Klein, as she begins *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone*, asks the key question, “...under what conditions does a state empower a group that it would ultimately prefer to suppress...” (2)? The Hamidiye, Kurdish tribal regiments, were the states attempt to take an element considered ‘hostile’ and “transform them from a local power that was a challenge to state authority into an arm of state authority itself in order to manage the others ‘threats’” (Klein 3).

Ostensibly, the Kurds were armed and organized into the Hamidiye to protect “the frontier from external aggression,” but Klein reminds us that the Hamidiye were, in fact, conceived as a “manifold mission” (4). The sultan hoped they would “suppress Armenian activities,” “bolster the ties of Islamic unity in the empire by creating a special bond between the sultan and the Kurds,” “bring the region into the Ottoman fold and [...] ensure, by almost any means necessary, that it remained there” (Klein 4). Especially as

the “wider project of modern state building” grew, the border lands “gained new importance to the center” (Klein 5). Deringil describes “the new ideological requirements of the state” that entailed “people be made to believe in, or at least acquiesce to, the legitimization ideology of the ruling power” (Deringil 68). In other words, the sultan saw his opportunity to “transform ‘nomads into Ottomans,’” neutralizing the Kurdish threat, suppressing the Armenian threat, and strengthening his borders (Deringil 69). Sultan Abdulhamid militarized and energized the tribal structure.

The Hamidiye provided immediate, tangible benefits to Kurds: those who served in regiments “received pay only when on active duty, but their families were exempted from most taxes. The number of Hamidiye regiments gradually increased: there were 40 in 1892, 56 in 1893 and 63 in 1899” (Van Bruinessen 186). As many of the tribal chiefs who led these regiments were also civil authorities when not in active service, Kurdish tribes enjoyed a limited resurgence in power and control. And, from the Ottoman perspective, the Hamidiye helped retain Kurdish loyalty on the ever-troubled border with the Persian empire, but also with the new and significant military threat from Russia (Van Bruinessen 185).

For all its short-term success, the incorporation of the Kurdish tribes into the Hamidiye Light Cavalry had unanticipated medium- and long-term consequences. Klein explains: “the on-the-ground conflict over resources that had begun unfolding just prior to the militia’s debut on the stage of eastern Anatolia was exacerbated, and violence increased in the region” (3). The regiments became “associated [with] lawlessness, violence, and land-grabbing” (Klein 2). Specifically, the conflict between Kurdish Muslims and Armenian Christians, considered a lesser internal threat to the Ottoman empire only by comparison to the Kurds themselves, found new fuel. Kurdish tribal regiments did not suppress, but antagonized and motivated Armenian revolutionaries (Klein 3). After several decades of general harassment, the Hamidiye regiments “became identified with the mass murder and deportation of Armenians that took place during [WWI] (known by Armenians as the Great Catastrophe)” (Klein 6). These tragic events, from a Kurdish nationalist outlook, had particular ramifications: the conduct of the regiments harmed worldwide opinion of Kurds, retarding the progress of the Kurdish cause in the West.

The regiments exacerbated tensions not only between Kurds and other minorities within the Ottoman empire, notably the Armenians, but between Kurds themselves. The regimental structure intensified intra-tribal Kurdish loyalties and tribal feuds, problematizing the Kurdish ability to unify against the central Ottoman government and provide a public space for Kurdish identity to flourish. The complicated and divisive legacy of the Hamidiye continues well into the twentieth century when, for instance, the regiments are “revived in 1984 to combat the PKK (the acronym for Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan, or the Workers’ Party of Kurdistan) in southeastern Anatolia” (Klein 6).

While the Hamidiye may have been a concession to Kurdish tribes, it constituted a long-term disservice to the emerging sense of a Kurdish people, a sense perhaps at its historical height before the reforms of Sultan Mahmud. Klein states it most clearly: “Kurdish leaders, whose authority the state had been on a long campaign to diminish, were empowered as their tribal structures were unwittingly strengthened through the very process sought to dismantle them” (Klein 3). Without a prince or other transcendent Kurdish power to arbitrate and keep balance between the tribes, to create a court-like environment where Kurdish governance could also create space for scholarship and the arts, the tribes ascended and fell as charisma and their rival tribes allowed. The Kurdish governance lost in the first half of the century, imperfect as it was, would not be replaced, and in fact would be damaged, by the tribal leadership that the century’s second sultan would encourage.

The regiments were similarly a failure from the Ottoman point of view. Whatever “temporary loyalty of select Kurdish chiefs” the sultan gained, “the long-term goal of binding the Kurds to the state was undermined through the very institution that sought to incorporate them” (Klein 3). The regiments constituted a contradiction to the new conceptions of Ottoman statehood, a contradiction the state itself had sanctioned, which undermined the state’s “image in both the domestic and the international spheres” (Klein 10). Deringil summarizes: “Towards the end of the nineteenth century the ‘legitimacy crisis’ of the Ottoman empire seems to be compounded by a slit in the ranks of the legitimizers...” (Deringil 63). The ‘legitimacy crisis’ had origins in ethnicity, socio-political reform, and religious affiliation. While the sultan required individuals and regions to have power and loyalty, he also could not afford competing locations of

allegiance. Throughout the nineteenth century, Ottoman policies identified, created and then struggled to manage the empire's internal threats.

Kurds, living in the borderlands, had some choice of where they put their loyalties. The Ottomans and the Safavids then Qajars presented positives and negatives as overlords. Demographically an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim population, the Kurds had natural religious alignment with the Ottoman Empire (Hourani *Arabic Thought* 25). More, the seat of power, Istanbul, was significantly farther away than any chosen by the Persians, which offered more daily freedom and political leverage. The reasons seem few for the Ardalans, the other great Kurdish emirate, to choose Safavid and then Qajar suzerainty. But the house of Ardalán had a longer, more complicated history than the Babans, who, by comparison, were recent arrivals. Religiously and politically, Ardalán grew up beside the Safavid and Qajar empires, more equal in power and intentionally more closely tied to both those empirical families.

Religiously, scholars speculate that the house of Ardalán was once Ahl-i Haqq, or Yarsani, a religion that emerged in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, “but by the 1820’s the wali and chief members of the family were professing the Shi’i faith” (McDowall 77). This conversion would have conveniently drawn the Ardalans into alignment and alliance with the neighboring Safavids. Whatever the origins of their Shi’i faith, the Ardalans did not have any natural affinity, religiously speaking, for the Sunni Ottoman empire.

Their shared religious faith “strengthened Ardalán credentials for local government” and “a wider range of marriage alliances” (McDowall 77). Looking toward the nineteenth century, as it is where this dissertation focuses, the intermarriage between Ardalán and Qajar suited the purposes of both. The Qajars perceived intermarriage as one method to “absorb tribal leaders into the state system,” “enhancing the status to [tribal] chiefs but drawing them more closely into the orbit of imperial authority” (McDowall 68). This habit did bolster the Qajar dynasty, which finally managed to establish itself in 1794, succeeding the “enfeebled Safavid dynasty” that fell in 1735 bringing in “almost 60 years of political uncertainty and turmoil” (McDowall 67). The Ardalán loyalty, according to McDowall, became one of the most consistent among the border emirates, only “[broken] under duress” and “epitomiz[ing] the de-centralized system of rule that characterized the later Safavids and the Qajars after them” (33).

This loyalty gained the Ardalans relatively consistent status in the Persian empire: “At times,” McDowall says, “they were the most powerful of the shah’s vassals” (33). McDowall continues: “[The Ardalans] were frequently made governors of all of Kurdistan lying within Iran’s sphere, and were thus charged with ensuring the loyalty and orderly behaviour of the great confederations in the border areas: the Jaf, the Mukri, the Bilbas, the Hawrami and the Kalhur Kurds” (33). With consistent status in the Persian empire came peace. Blau writes of Halo Khan (1585-1616), an Ardalan leader who, understanding the power of peace, “reached an agreement with Shah Abbâs at Isfahan”—the Ardalans would pay tribute and defend the Empire’s frontiers and Kurds in that region would have stability and “a measure of independence” (“Written” loc. 987). Blau continues the story, “Halo Khan and his successor, Khan Ahmad, rebuilt towns and patronized men of letters and poets who composed their work [...] above all in Gurâni, a language which was much more widespread than it is today” (“Written” loc. 989). In the peace created, with that measured independence, the Ardalan princes promoted Gorani literature until it “became the common literary language in southern Kurdistan” (Blau “Written” loc. 994; Ghaderi “Literary Legacy” 33).

Ardalan loyalty was also key to Qajar control given the weaknesses of the empire. Kurdish territory in the Qajar empire boasted “only two carriageable roads” throughout the nineteenth century. Kurdish tribal chiefs could exercise functionally independent control over their lands, specifically over the taxes they levied. Kurds levied Kurdish taxes that went into Kurdish coffers: “agriculture, the single most important component of the state economy, failed to raise adequate revenue for the state” (McDowall 72). What threatened the Qajar economy only strengthened the Ardalans. Their longevity, the extent of their power, and their ability to host a cultured court atmosphere are testament to how well the Ardalans dealt with the Persian empire as it changed around them. One of the great bodies of Kurdish literature emerges in Gorani, the court dialect of Ardalan.

One avenue by which the Ardalans enhanced their power, however, was also the way the Ardalans were undone as a seat of power. Intermarriage strengthened Ardalan ties with the Qajars, but the Qajars could also use marriage as a vehicle for infiltrating

the highest levels of Ardalan leadership. In what must have been a slow and complex process, McDowall provides one stunning example concurrent with the fall of Ardalan:

“...Khusrou Khan, who succeeded his father as wali, married one of Fath Ali Shah’s numerous daughters. She proved ‘of a very vigorous and determined character. She was the virtual ruler of Kurdistan, and administered affairs of the province by virtually open *darbar* [formal audience].’ And so she continued on behalf of her son, after Khusrou Khan’s death. It was but a short step to the installation of a Qajar governor and the final extinction of Ardalan in 1865.” (68)

Other tribes, like the Mukri, resisted this Qajar tactic with more success, “but by the end of the century Iranian governors, often members of the Qajar family, were replacing Kurdish chiefs as local governors” (McDowall 68).

The tribes constituted a major preoccupation for the Qajar regime given that “by the end of the eighteenth century tribes formed a significantly more substantial proportion of the population than they had done a century earlier” (McDowall 67). The Qajars, in addition to intermarriage, also worked to “foster and manage feuds and rivalries” between these tribes, ruling “through dependent chiefs rather than without them.” Though the house of Ardalan had supported “the Qajar bid for power in the 1790’s and after,” the Qajar shahs persisted in exerting “their influence and power to alter the direct line of succession.” Even among the most loyal tribe, the Qajars sowed discord, even “supporting pretensions of younger branches,” to maintain the balance of power the Qajar required. Militarily, the tribes had increased in strength from the Safavid to the Qajar periods, but Qajar interference and the tribes’ inability to unite protected Qajar rule (McDowall 68).

And, unlike Ottoman governance, which swung between eradicating and endorsing tribal organization and leadership, the Qajars embraced it almost entirely throughout the nineteenth century. Where the Ottomans welcomed foreign influence, the Qajars remained suspect, taking

periodic steps toward reform but were thwarted by internal weakness, by distrust of European help and by a fear that reform would undermine autocracy as it threatened to do in Turkey. What efforts there were, were tempered by the fear of Russian encroachment on the northern borders and of Britain’s potential appetite to swallow Iran as it had done India. By 1890 the few serious attempts at radical reform had been largely abandoned. (McDowall 70)

The result of this stutter step approach toward reform is that it never really arrived. The Qajars never created a standing army, commanding only about 12,000 regular troops throughout the nineteenth century (McDowall 70). The one “credible fighting force” was a Cossack brigade but as it was “commanded and largely officered by Russians it was questionable [...] where its loyalties lay” (McDowall 71).

Failing to modernize meant Qajar forces remained prone to the weakness of the tribal structure and its tribal regiments, which were loyal primarily to their own region, undisciplined, and not likely to engage in large-scale conflict that took them too far from home. These regiments were really only useful in “putting down rebellious rival tribes” (McDowall 72). Beyond the inherent weakness of a feudal army, the army also battled internal corruption: “In the 1890’s one of the shah’s own sons, as commander-in-chief, was selling rifles to Kurds and Lurs” (McDowall 72). The desire to progress past tribal organization simply did not manifest in the Persian empire as it did in the Ottoman. Neither empire enjoyed the competition for power that Kurdish princes and tribes constituted, but the two empires worked to depose these princes and disband the authority of these tribes in different ways.

The Ottoman empire moved from alienation and eventual disbanding of the Kurdish principalities under Sultan Mahmud and his Tanzimat to appeasement of the Kurdish tribes and the formation of the Hamidiye under Sultan Abdulhamid to obliteration as a political entity as the Young Turks rose to power and the empire became a Turkish state, by definition threatened by any identity aside from Turkish. The Safavids and Qajars preferred fragmentation through intermarriage and political co-opting of the Kurdish leadership to the direct confrontation that Sultan Mahmud forced. Their approach eroded Kurdish leadership and power. Though Kurdish tribes remained present and Kurdish governance would have its resurgences within the boundaries of the Iranian state, Persian oppression of the Kurds was, and perhaps is, far more subtle than Ottoman. In both states, however, Kurds were considered a threat and eventually silenced.

### *Allies and Rivals*

The Babans and Ardalans in some ways seem natural allies: Kurdish powers surrounded by empires with a vested interest in undermining or removing Kurdish princes from the landscape. Instead, the two were natural rivals: two principalities whose lands shrank or expanded at the expense of the other. McDowall calls the two “great rival Kurdish families” who in his words “dominated the local scene on either side of the Iraqi-Iran border until the early nineteenth century.” Ardalan, as opposed to Baban, was “an ancient principality, which by the early fourteenth century had established itself over wide tracts of land on both sides of the Zagros range” (McDowall 32). Ardalan control of the regions west of the Zagros began to waver after the Ottoman victory at Chaldiran. Though the wali of Ardalan attempted an accord with the sultan, it could not last: “Ardalan rulers had to choose between Iran and Turkey and in the final analysis, since their heartlands lay along the eastern foothills of the Zagros range, that choice had to be for Iran and they consequently found themselves fighting a losing battle to hang onto lands west of the Zagros” (McDowall 32). The Treaty of Zuhab ended the struggle, definitively putting Shahrizur under Ottoman sovereignty (McDowall 32).

Baban ascended, disrupting Suran control in those lands west of the Zagros, through “assiduous service to the Ottomans in their struggle against the Safavids during the 1670’s.” In comparison to Ardalan, Baban were “relative newcomers.” Then, as the eighteenth century began, the Babans, having “achieved paramountcy in all the hill country east of the Kifri-Altun-Kupru road, between the Diyala and Lesser Zab rivers,” “were strong enough to deal on equal terms with Ardalan.” This equality, however, only intensified the rivalry, encouraging each to take advantage of what weakness could be found in the other: “When the Afghans invaded Iran (1721), plunging the country into chaos, the Babans seized Sinna on behalf of the Ottomans. They ruled Ardalan till 1730 when they withdrew on the approach of the Iranian army” (McDowall 33).

Such incursions were common. The Ottoman and Persian empires used this rivalry to weaken the two Kurdish royal houses, but the Babans and Ardalans used their rivalry to barter with their respective suzerains. The Babans invaded Persian territory several times, specifically “at the expense of the twin emirate of Ardalan,” but then “both the *vali* of Baghdad and the Persians intrigued and interfered with family quarrels of the

mirs in order to increase their influence in Baban” (Van Bruinessen 171). As McDowall notes, “Whenever necessary, semi-nomadic tribes would simply move across the perennially disputed 1639 border. Both sides – Turkey and Iran – gave happy refuge to the other’s rebels” (67). Ardalan and Baban were both “asset and danger” to the Ottoman and Persian empires—the Kurdish princes knew and pressed their advantage when they could, just as the empires did (McDowall 34). Throughout the early nineteenth century, “Alliances [...] criss-crossed at bewildering speed” (McDowall 35).

Given their differences in loyalties, origin and dynastic histories, it is not surprising that their characters, as houses, differed as well. House Baban answered to a central government that was physically distant, which ensured the Babans a certain strength as a power peripheral to the empire of which it was a part. House Ardalan, on the other hand, faced a much closer rule: “whether the capital was at Tabriz, Qazvin, Isfahan or Tehran, imperial authority was more immediate, a few days rather than the better part of a month’s ride away” (McDowall 36). Where Baban could afford to maintain a more tribally Kurdish character, Ardalan had to maintain a closer aristocratic balance with Persians. Baban, then, “enjoyed what Ardalan notably lacked, tribal solidarity” (McDowall 35). McDowall develops this thought further: “Ardalan was essentially a quasi-feudal polity, deriving its authority almost solely from imperial investiture. It was virtually the last surviving independent tributary from Safavid days” (35). The princes of the two houses noticed the difference themselves. The wali of Ardalan himself questioned “why his own servants, though generously treated, would never follow him into exile nor show any personal loyalty, such as Baban retainers usually demonstrated” (McDowall 36). He wondered aloud to his rival Adurrahman Pasha who answered without hesitation that an Ardalan servant was only a servant while a Baban retainer was family.

These two principalities, despite their rivalry and their critical differences in characters, represented the heights of Kurdish governance and prioritized, in the peace they created, the artistic elevation of their respective dialects of Kurdish. Blau writes, “The establishment of Kurdish dynasties led to political stability that in turn permeated the founding of cities in which culture and literary creativity blossomed” (“Written” loc. 948). Blau continues, “Through poetry, Kurdish became a literary language, while

written prose texts emerged only much later” (“Written” loc. 948). The nineteenth century, which “sounded the death-knell for the Kurdish emirates, also saw two Kurdish emirates temporarily rise to unprecedented strength and power” (Van Bruinessen 175). The heights these principalities rose to in the century only make their fall stand in starker relief. The shock was great for all Kurds and Kurdish poets reflect this sudden exile widely in their work. That said, we must note that other Kurdish tribes maintained positions of muscle after the principalities vanished. McDowall gives the examples of the Sanjabi and the Kalhur chiefs, residing in Persian areas, who “exercised a multiplicity of functions as tribal chiefs, as political and economic intermediaries between town and country, and as landlords” (73). McDowall provides an even stronger example of the Luri Wali of Pusht-i Kuh, a tribal leader who resided “south-west of Kirmanshah” and

on the whole [...] avoided conflict with the central government. Ensnconced on the west-facing side of the Zagros, he enjoyed virtual independence. Unlike Ardalan, the walis of Pusht-i Kuh still had their title at the beginning of [the twentieth] century, uncompromised by the judicious marriages the family had concluded with the Qajars and neighboring tribes (78).

Chiefs such as these represent significant Kurdish leadership continuing after the Ottoman and Persian empires topple the two great Kurdish houses.

With these vestiges of Kurdish leadership continuing on throughout the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries, why do Kurds and their poets mark the fall of the houses as the last vestiges of Kurdish independent government? The tribes were a source of organization and leadership for Kurds, but not, as the Baban and Ardalan houses so self-consciously were, centers for cultural production. Both Baban and Ardalan consolidated power and intentionally established clear cultural legacies—legacies that created space for Kurds to construct and reflect on their own identity, that taught readers how to think about their own Kurdishness.

At Kurdish courts, as at Arabic and Persian courts of the time, patronage of the arts held place of privilege: “Poets were welcomed at these courts, whose princes protected and patronised them” (Allison and Kreyenbroek 21). But at the Kurdish courts, the Kurdish language, as Blau noted above, could thrive as a literary language. House Ardalan, across its seven centuries ending in the mid-nineteenth century, was the focal point for many artists of quality who “consequently wrote in Gurani,” a literary language

that receded with the fall of the house (Allison and Kreyebroek 21). Sorani, the court language of the Babans, arrived as a literary language at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

To the west of the Zagros, the Baban dynasty was reaching its peaks of power when “‘Abd al-Rahmān Pāshā Bābān succeeded Ibrāhīm Pāsha in 1789” (Allison and Kreyebroek 22). ‘Abd al-Rahmān Pāshā Bābān had traveled the Ardalān territories and brought to his own principality the lessons he had taken from his rival: he was determined to fashion “his own court of Suleymaniye a centre of cultural patronage. He urged his poets and minstrels to abandon Gurani in favor of the Suleymaniye dialect of Kurdish, which thus rose to the status of a literary language, and was later called Sorani” (Allison and Kreyebroek 22). Poets in the Baban court had, for a time, written in Gorani, as Ghaderi notes, but Hassanpour concurs, “[b]y the early nineteenth century, a literary tradition began to develop in another Kurdish dialect now known as Sorani” (“Literary Legacy” 34; “The Creation” 50). Blau adds,

To mark his independence from his overlords, whether Ottoman or Persian, and to emphasize his difference from his historic rivals, the Ardalāns, Abdal-Rahmān decided to promote the dialect of the Shahrezur region. He invited artists, men of letters and poets, and encouraged them to drop Gurāni and adopt the local dialect instead, which became known as Sorani. (“Written” loc. 1026)

The Baban principality was to fall not long after its rivals, the Ardalans, but the Baban resolve to make Sulaimani “the capital of the Baban principality” and Sorani its literary language, which would gradually supplant Gorani as the dominant Kurdish dialect, would have lasting implications for Kurdish literature, particularly in the nineteenth century (Rasul *For Language* 100; Blau “Written” loc. 1066; Ghaderi “Literary Legacy” 34).

Describing Sorani as “a new literary movement appearing,” Rasul observes, Sorani, initially a flame in Sulaimani, grow into a blaze covering much of Kurdistan. Nali, Salim, and Kurdi—the Three Pillars of the Babans—were, as their name suggests, the great early practitioners (Rasul *For Language* 105). Kheznedar concurs, “With the establishment of the modern principality in its new capital, Sulaimani, and the appearance of new classic poetry with Nalî, the Gurani dialect became less influential” (3: 47). As the nineteenth century progressed, the renaissance that had

begun in Sulaimani “had spread to other areas of southern Kurdistan, namely Koye. If, throughout history, Erbil, Rawanduz, and Harir, were the centers of Sorani politically speaking, Koye was the center and capitol of Kurdish literary movements” (Kheznedar 4: 35). Kheznedar defends his position, citing the two poets he considers representative of Sulaimani and Koye respectively: as Nali was for the first half of the nineteenth century, so Haji Qadri Koye was to the second (4: 35). Even CJ Edmonds, a British political operative at the time, noticed that, “...the lively and elastic idiom of Sulaimani [...] has established itself as the standard vehicle for literary expression” (11).

These nineteenth-century efforts across Gorani and Sorani, between the houses Ardalani and Babani constitute a struggle to assert Kurdish itself, regardless of dialect, as a language capable of artistry alongside Persian and Arabic. For centuries, Kurds had written and spoken in “the language of the conqueror,” be that Arabic, Persian, or Ottoman Turkish (Blau “Kurdish Written Literature” 21). The “Kurdish intellectual elite,” throughout the eighteenth century in Gorani and nineteenth century in Sorani sought out ways to “express itself” (Blau “Kurdish Written Literature” 21). Under the protection of Kurdish princes, until the mid-nineteenth century, “the Ottoman and Persian states were not in a position to prevent the development of a written tradition in Kurdish. The only inhibiting factor was the dominance of Arabic, both as a sacred tongue and the medium of teaching in the firmly established mosque schools” (Hassanpour “The Creation” 51).

All this would change, however, as the two principalities fell to direct Persian and Ottoman rule. While tribal authority continued past the fall of Babani and Ardalani, the heights of patronage that these royal houses provided did not. The center of gravity for Kurdish scholarship, identity, and culture dissipated. In the two centuries following the Ardalani and Babani, Kurdish lands would be “forcibly re-divided between centralist states which pursued policies that threatened both the written and oral traditions...” (Hassanpour “The Creation” 51).

### *After the Emirates*

The history of Kurdish emirates, beginning around 1500, ended in 1850 (Van Bruinessen 192). Though the empires had long desired this outcome, they were ill

prepared to actually govern in the absence of the Kurdish mirs. The princes, troublesome as they might have been to empirical aims, were critical to regional balance of power. The tribes, with no prince to mediate conflicts and manufacture unity, fell to fighting: "The absence of adequate restraint led to repeated fights between one tribe and another, to increased banditry and to a serious decline in the economic condition of the country" (McDowall 49). As Kurdish tribes become less and less governable, the Ottoman empire realized that the peace that the Kurdish princes had kept could not be militarily sustained.

Troops could enter and pacify a territory, but that occupation could only last so long. When the troops evacuated, "...they left behind them a vacuum in which the tribes were allowed free rein to jostle for position, inevitably damaging the local economy" (McDowall 83). Again, the geography of Kurdish lands became a significant factor: an army and a civil corps could establish rule over a town or city, but struggled to infiltrate mountainous areas. McDowall remarks that Ottoman attempts to increase the empire's authority in the region only highlighted their inability to govern effectively (56). While one or another tribe might have prospered from Ottoman initiatives like the Hamidiye, Kurds as a whole suffered. McDowall notes, "Continued level of insecurity had reduced agriculture to famine levels by 1897-98" (61). In dismantling the Kurdish emirates, the Ottomans had bought more control in the cities and towns, but lost control of the region as a whole.

Further, in the absence of the Kurdish princes, the tribal alliances they had built fell apart. "Without the mir," Van Bruinessen writes, "it was not possible to keep rivalries in check" (181). The civil servants and governors the Ottoman government sent "were despised and distrusted by all, and therefore could not play a conciliatory role, even had they wished to" (Van Bruinessen 181). Intertribal cooperation declined steeply and the economic and security situations reflected the resultant instability. In this uncertain atmosphere, clergy constituted the only persisting local and regional authority, an "authority [that] far transcended tribal boundaries" (Van Bruinessen 230). "Government officials did not have sufficient authority and legitimacy to negotiate the settlement of serious tribal conflicts," Van Bruinessen reminds his reader, but, he writes, "shaikhs

did...” (229). In the process of arbitrating tribal conflict, tribal leaders automatically imbued these religious leaders with political command.

Van Bruinessen takes as his example, the “last remaining emirate, Baban” (232). Van Bruinessen traces the political rise of religious families back to the 1847 fall of Ahmad Pasha Baban: “...from this period on nearly all important political leaders in Kurdistan were shaikhs or at least belonged to shaikhly families” (Van Bruinessen 231). Both the Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders increased in authority and in membership as Kurdish political structures crumbled, though the Naqshbandi more so than the Qadiri (Van Bruinessen 232). This trend continued until “[t]he shaykhs [had] wove[n] themselves into the decaying power structure of the old chiefly families by marriage, thus authenticating their growing political authority” (McDowall 52). This pact furthered the ambitions of both sheikh and chief: “the latter’s declining authority was in some measure protected by alliance to religious prestige” (McDowall 52). The fall of the Kurdish emirates led to the rise of the sheikh and new political status for religious authority figures.

### *Religion on the Rise*

Van Bruinessen himself says, “Something must have changed in the region’s social and political situation, facilitating the order’s sudden and rapid expansion in the early and mid-nineteenth century” (228). My hypothesis is that twin pressures led to the rise of religious fervor in Kurdistan. First, increasing foreign influence brought with it increased Christian missionary presence. As opposed to the Christians who had lived in Kurdish areas for centuries, these incoming missionaries had conversion as their mandate. Kurds reacted against not the practicing of a non-Muslim religion, but the new efforts to sway Muslims toward other faiths. Van Bruinessen writes, “Missionary activity and fears of Christian domination due to European influence made the Kurds especially susceptible to propaganda stressing their Muslim identity and directed against Christians” (233). Second, the intrusion of the British and Russian empires touched off various chains of events in the Ottoman and Persian empires that also led to the demise of the Kurdish emirates. In the ambient instability, the average person, looking for

authority and structure, could find it most easily in religion: “The general chaos and lack of security that followed the decay and collapse (or destruction) of the Kurdish emirates made many people turn to religion (i.e. to the shaikhs) to find the security and assurance that was so lacking in their daily lives” (Van Bruinessen 233).

Again, in the absence of the Kurdish princes, who “had been able to act as mediators, with authority if not always impartiality,” “were replaced in their role of mediators and unifying leaders by religious shaykhs” (McDowall 50). Kheznedar writes that in the nineteenth century, personages that had been distinct melded: “Shariah, Order, mullah, sheikh, mosque, *tekiye*, *khanaqa*, religious student, dervish, and Sufi could all, in practice, be found in one person. Sheikh and mullah could collapse into one person” (1: 78). The political and civic authority that had resided with the princes came to rest in the hands of religious leaders. The number of devotees grew and with them the spaces for devotion proliferated—all only adding to the mounting influence of religious leaders.

As the vast majority of Kurds, “approximately 75 per cent,” practice Sunni Islam, it makes sense that in this time of upheaval, many would turn to a highly accessible form of Islam compatible with Sunni precepts (McDowall 10). Sufism, among all “the various manifestations of Islamic mysticism,” “offered several elements with which a non-erudite population could easily identify” (Kreyenbroek “Religion and Religions” 94). Kreyenbroek here emphasizes the appeal Sufism had to a mostly non-literate population, but Sufism had several other aspects that, especially in the historical context, helped it thrive: part of the adherent’s practice is to upend the world and the human perspectives that come with it. Pain is pleasure, absence is presence, loss is gain. In a world where suddenly much of the daily existence of Kurds was pain, absence, and loss, this re-definition was salvation. Too, disciples have and cultivate a direct relationship to God: this is a fundamental and heady equality for individuals to experience as they are subjugated in their own lands.

*Enter Sufism*

Sufism is the mystical practice of Islam. Scholars attribute the “ascetic impulse in the second century of Islam” to various historical factors, but the practitioners of “ascetic piety” in Islam “came to be known as ‘Sufis,’ a name that comes, according to many, from the wool (*ṣūf*) clothes they wore” (Sells 20). Any definition of a mystical practice is by definition incomplete. Mysticism entices by resisting human structures like language. That said, we must attempt some description, if not definition. I have found two scholar-translators particularly helpful: Michael Sells, for his explication and translation of texts that form the foundation of Sufi thought, and William Chittick, for his arguments on Islam and divine love as well as for his resistance to the contemporary tendency to abstract Sufi ideas into secular universalities. Though many statements in Sufism resonate across religions, time periods, places, they originate in Islam.

That point of origin did not fade away for any of the poets of this dissertation, trained as they were in mystical asceticism, diverse as they are in their relationships to Islam. To most clearly understand the poets at hand, this introduction to Sufism will focus on defining its central characteristics as derived from the Qur’an, the book that Shams of Tabriz, the poet Rumi’s well-known companion and teacher, called, in Chittick’s translation, ‘the Book of Passion’ or, more closely translated, “The Book of Love” (*ishq-nāma*). Chittick writes, “If people do not understand that the Qur’an is a book about love, Shams said, it is because they read the book with the eyes of jurisprudence, or theology, or philosophy (or history, or sociology, or critical theory, and so on). Only a lover recognizes love” (41).

Chittick offers the most graceful presentation I have read of the Islamic foundation of Sufi precepts, which arise from “[t]he most concise expression of the Islamic worldview,” “the Shahadah (*shahāda*), the formula for bearing witness” (Chittick 5). The formula reads: ‘I bear witness that there is no god but God and I bear witness that Muḥammad is God’s messenger.’ Chittick restates the “three primary issues” of this sentence: “First, there are those who bear witness to the message, that is, human beings. Second, there is God, who sends the message. Third, there are the Messenger and the message, the intermediaries between God and man” (5). To show the evolution of Sufi thought from the most basic of Muslim precepts, Chittick restates the sentence once again: “More simply, we have human beings, Ultimate Reality, and the tie that

binds them together” (5). Finally, Chittick names the primary elements of the sentence in the most deeply mystical terms possible: “lovers, the Beloved, and love” (Chittick 5). Relying on parallel construction, Chittick demonstrates that within Sufi understanding, the witness in the formula is the lover, God, the Beloved, and Muhammad and his message, God’s act of love toward man.

Man, the Qur’an tells us, comes from God’s love or, according to the translation, God’s desire: “...God created the universe generally and human beings specifically because of love: ‘I was a Hidden Treasure, and I *loved* to be recognized.’ [...] God desired, wanted, wished, loved to create, so He did” (Chittick 23). Creation was love and, as Chittick says, “The creative command is tireless, which is to say that it is always being issued” (Chittick 149). And so, in Sufism, theology is the “discussion of the divine reality and its relationship with the universe” and the whole impulse is to drive the soul toward God, bringing seekers into union with what they seek (Chittick 3-4). More plainly stated, the key principle of Sufi belief, from which all others follow, are: “the affirmation of divine unity,” which is seen “as more than a verbal affirmation, as something to be performed throughout a person’s entire life,” (Sells 21).

Affirming divine unity requires that one first acknowledge the nothingness of self and the allness of God. As Chittick says, “...nothing is real but the Real” (153). Muhasibi (d. 243/857), Sells writes, “spent a lifetime examining the subtleties, seductions, and self-delusions of egoism” (21). This acknowledgement may seem an intellectual accomplishment, but Sufis consider it a constant act of *dhikr*, ecstatic worship, a word that translates literally as “remembrance.” Chittick quotes Abū Yazīd: “O Lord! How can I remember You when You Yourself are remembering and I am crying out from forgetfulness? You are the remembrance and the remembered. You are the help in finding Yourself” (251). As Abū Yazīd prays here, as he remembers, he implicitly references a subtle aspect of the affirmation of unity: the meaninglessness of the human concepts of effort.

You, Abū Yazīd addresses God, are this prayer (remembrance), my prayer more generally (remembering), and prayer itself (remembering). Sufism consistently emphasizes the difference between “wayfaring (*sulūk*)” and “attraction (*jadhba*),” reminding disciples that “...it is God who attracts people to the path and pulls them

toward Himself, so attraction is always in charge of wayfaring. The Sought pulls the seeker” (Chittick 184). The position of the disciple as the seeker animated entirely by the Sought stresses the nothingness of self (the seeker) and the allness of God (the Sought): “...no one travels on God’s path without His help. Effort alone cannot take the servant anywhere, least of all to the Divine Presence. If anyone is to reach God, the divine attraction must take over completely” (Chittick 185). The disciple’s work is: “to purify awareness and consciousness by emptying it of everything other than God,” the undertaking of “complete acquiescence (Chittick 198; 200). Junayd (d. 297/910) articulates this act as “the annihilation of the ego-self” (Sells 21). Ja’far as-Sadiq (d. 145/765) provided interpretations of Muhammed and Moses “as archetypes for the Sufi mystical experience of *fanā’*, the passing away of the human ego-self in union with the divine beloved” (Sells 21). Across the centuries, Sufi theologians reiterate that “[m]an’s perfection lies in seeing his own annihilation [*fanā*] and nothingness relative to God” (Chittick 63).

The practice of one’s own annihilation calls into question what relationship one can sustain with the material world. As Sells says, the Sufi comes to feel acutely the “tension between world-affirmation and world-transcendence” (20). In fact, the Sufi life could perhaps be characterized by polarities and extremes. Separation and union. Contraction and expansion. The prohibited (*ḥarām*) and the permitted (*ḥalāl*). In many ways, Sufism inverts these polarities, even creating contradictions in which one is the other: separation is union, union is separation; absence is presence, presence is absence; the forbidden is the required, as the Arabic proverb goes. Nowhere is this tension more clear, or more perfectly ambiguous, than in the poetry that Sufis write.

Sells writes, “Sufis continually play on the ambiguity of the wine song. Is this the earthly wine they are speaking of, or the allegorical wine of mystical intoxication? [...] Yet more often the Sufi writer will deliberately subvert any either-or question and answer” (68). Sufis enact the same play regarding the beloved and the body: when is the poet’s beloved corporeal? When is the beloved divine? When is touch a metaphor? The ambiguity between the sacred and the profane, even the conflation of the two, exists at such a deep level in Sufi poetry that Sells determines any “...notion of a purely secular poetry may be inappropriate within the Sufi context” (57). These tensions are at

the heart of what Sells calls “ecstatic existence (*wujūd*)” (68). And if tension is, so, too, is transgression:

“The creative command, rooted in love and mercy, brings all things into being. Once the Adamites come to exist, the religious command tells them that they should act in keeping with God’s mercy and justice, though God knows full well that they will fail in this task. None can fulfill His rightful due but He. Why then does He bother issuing instructions? So that, having failed to follow the prophets adequately, people will recognize their own incapacity, acknowledge God’s mercy, and love Him all the more.” (Chittick 101)

The Sufi does not comprehend these realities through reason, but through the state of prophecy, direct communion with the divine, imagination, the realms of love, humility, and self-effacement. Dr. Abdullah Khidir Maulud, in his “Study on Hamdi’s Poetry,” seconds this idea when he says, “To be a Sufi is to create a singular relationship with God” (110). Kheznedar adds, “It’s revealed and known that the Sufi’s sole purpose is to find The Doer” (3: 34). This knowledge of God is the disciple’s path toward knowing the world, knowing others. Sheikh Yusuf Talabani, the current spiritual leader at the Talabani Tekiye in Kirkuk and a descendent of Sheikh Raza Talabani, the infamous Kurdish poet, said in one interview, “Inside these walls, we talk about knowledge, knowledge of God. If you know God, you can know anyone. If you don’t know God, you know no one” (April 9, 2016). Some devotees work through isolation and asceticism, others through service: world-transcendence, world-affirmation. Sheikh Yusuf, referencing his heritage and his method, said, “Our grandfathers were servants of this place, servants of Kirkuk, servants. A servant can learn” (April 9, 2016).

Over time, these various methods have developed into distinct paths or orders. Kreyenbroek writes, “Sufism, which began as a movement of individuals seeking to establish some sort of personal contact with God or a direct experience of Ultimate Reality, gradually discovered ways likely to help the seeker in his quest. The “informal teaching process” of early Sufism became “a variety of institutionalised mystical Orders.” Kreyenbroek describes how an order is formed, introducing key terminology: “After the death of a Master, his ‘path’ (*tarīqa*) continued to be transmitted by his disciples from generation to generation. The resulting organisation, or Order (*tāyfiya*), was led by the official ‘successor’ (*khalīfa*) of the original Master.” (Kreyenbroek “Religion and Religions” 94). To quickly examine some terminology: Hourani translates

*tariqa*, pl. *turuq* as “brotherhoods of mystics” (*Arabic Thought* 26). Hay, a British political officer who lived and worked in Kurdish areas, calls “takias” “religious hostels” (146). I will translate *tariqa* either as “order” or “path.” *Khanaqa* and *tekiye*, both common and important institutions of the nineteenth century, performed many functions: hostels, schools, gathering places for *dhikr*. Rather than reduce them down to a single function in translation, for example “religious hostel,” I will refer to them in transliteration as *khanaqa* and *tekiye*.

No matter the differences that have arisen in custom across time, the principle remains. Sheikh Yusuf said in an interview, “What’s the difference between this Sufism and that? A mathematics teacher in one city teaches with these techniques, in another city, with those. Both teach mathematics. The text is the same” (April 9, 2016). The “text” Sheikh Yusuf refers to is, as Hourani writes, the state of ecstasy and union: “... prophecy is no longer a free gift of God, it is a natural human state; and it is a state of the imagination not of reason, giving access to no general knowledge not attainable by philosophy” (*Arabic Thought* 18). Van Bruinessen discusses this current and historical tolerance the Qadiri Order bears toward Shiism:

They explain this tolerance, so contrasting with the prevailing mutual contempt of Sunni and Shiite, by saying that the differences between the two strands of Islam exist only on the superficial, exoteric (*zahiri*) level, but that on the esoteric (*batini*) level—the only level at all which a dervish should consider matters—there is no difference at all” (218).

While much about Sufism can be learned through books, the true practice, according to Sufis, can only occur when one has a Master from whom he learns, to whom he is devoted—which is also why I sought out Sheikh Yusuf: a living teacher of the same order the poets of this dissertation practiced. Teachers and students gathered in *khanqas* and *tekiyes*, creating communities of worship and learning. Precisely because these spiritual centers maintained what Van Bruinessen calls a “democratic,” seeking stance, they “were viewed with some disquiet by authorities” (Van Bruinessen 212; McDowall 50).

These brotherhoods were “independent of the formalized Muslim institutions of state, eccentric in their practices, if not beliefs, and thus prone to sedition” (McDowall 50). Kheznedar takes this idea even further, saying, “the secret, the hidden idea: Sufism was a revolution against the bureaucratic and totalitarian rule of Baghdad’s caliphs,

against the concept that Islamic judges have handed down God’s decisions from the first moment into infinity” (3: 34). The very fact that Sufism, as Kheznedar says, “believed in renewal and creation” could be threatening to the status quo—whatever it was. Kreyenbroek states, “ ‘Orthodox’ Islam tends to frown upon most forms of Sufism, but the mystical approach to religion is not incompatible with adherence to the Sunna, and most Sufi Orders indeed regard themselves as Sunni” (“Religion and Religions” 94). To this day, the relationship between Sufism and other practices of Islam remains contentious. Sheikh Yusuf said, “We have invited the scholars of *Sharia* here. They won’t come. They call us different names. We don’t care. We serve them. We feed them. Good food. Even as they eat, they call us names. Sufism is more than sentences” (April 25, 2015).

The history between Sufi orders and other disciplines of Islam is long and outside the scope of this study, but is important to note given that in this time of upheaval in politics, during this time of the failure of Kurdish governance, as Ottomans and Persians imposed their own political structures, Kurds took to Sufism. McDowall even goes so far as to say, “Kurdish religious distinctiveness has also been expressed in the strength of Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*, pl. *turuq*)” (11).

### *Revival*

Sufism appeared in Kurdistan, according to Kreyenbroek, “in the early twelfth century CE, and is reported to have had an overwhelming following among the local population” (“Religion and Religions” 95). Sheikhs of Sufi orders, many of which date back “to the rise of the Sufi brotherhoods in twelfth and thirteenth centuries,” as McDowall notes, had long “been influential in Kurdish society” (50). Across the centuries, two orders had emerged dominant in the Kurdish landscape: the Qadiri and Naqshbandi (Van Bruinessen 210).

The Qadiri Order, to this day the oldest Sunni Sufi order among Kurds, was by most accounts named for its founder: Abdul-Qadir Gailani. Though the Qadiriya was the most “prominent *tariqa* in Kurdistan by the beginning of the nineteenth century,” Gailani lived in Baghdad during the twelfth century as a mystic (McDowall 51). The brotherhood

spread from Baghdad through India where, “towards the end of the eighteenth century,” Mullah Mahmud, “the founder of the [Talabani] dynasty,” received *ijaza*, the permission “to teach and transmit” the principles of the Qadiri brotherhood (Van Bruinessen 222). The Talabani tribe, which would later found the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a modern-day political party in the KRG, expanded the Qadiri influence and following throughout Kurdish regions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sheikh Raza Talabani, a poet who will feature prominently in this thesis, was born into this family at the height of its spiritual authority.

The order expanding most quickly in nineteenth-century Kurdistan was the Naqshbandi, a Sunni Sufi order like the Qadiri, but with some critical differences we will revisit below. Though there were “traces of a Naqshbandiya presence in Kurdistan from the seventeenth century onwards,” the brotherhood experienced remarkable expansion during the nineteenth century (Kreyenbroek “Religion and Religions” 96). One man can be credited with the rapid movement of the Naqshbandi Order through Kurdish areas: “Ziyaeddin Khalid—usually called Mawlana or Shaikh Khalid” (Van Bruinessen 223). Born as a commoner to the Jaf tribe, Mawlana Khalid sought out a traditional religious education in Sanandaj, Sulaimani, and Baghdad; a mullah, he received his *ijaza* in India only to return to Iraq in 1811, living “alternately in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah until in 1820 he had to flee” (Van Bruinessen 224). He died in 1826, with his disciple-shaikhs poised for the political power vacuum that would arise mid-century (Van Bruinessen 230).

Sufism as a whole experienced a significant revival throughout the century, but it was the Naqshbandi Order, not the more established Qadiri Order, that spread most quickly (Kreyenbroek, “Religion and Religions” 95). Mawlana Khalid, on his return to Sulaimani in the first decades of the nineteenth century, introduced the Naqshbandi Order to Kurdistan and prepared the ground for its rapid spread in the region (Van Bruinessen 222). Though the Qadiriya had existed longer in the region, the Naqshbandiya had a structure that encouraged growth. Among the Naqshbandiya, a disciple, regardless of his origins, could rise through the hierarchy of the order and receive permission not only to teach, but to give others permission to teach. Much more commonly than in the Qadiriya, an individual could become a “*tariqa*-transmitting

shaikh” (Van Bruinessen 226). With more people capable of transmitting, the order could grow more rapidly, each branch enjoying more independence from each other (Van Bruinessen 215). The Naqshbandi system presented an efficient alternative to the Qadiri: “For any ambitious cleric, the revivalist Naqshbandiya was clearly more attractive, since it offered the opportunity of establishing one’s own network and sphere of influence” (McDowall 51). Between the well-established Qadiri brotherhood and the swiftly spreading Naqshbandi brotherhood, nineteenth-century Kurdistan underwent a Sufi revival.

The orders became so powerful, the clergy at many junctures interweaving with the tribal leadership, that they could be weaponized. Deringil notes that over the course of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), “one of the sultan’s major propaganda weapons were the Sufi sheikhs” (63). He specifies that “several notable sheikhs from the Nakshbandi order organized ‘irregular forces’ and took an active role in the fighting” (63). Perhaps because the poets quoted in this dissertation were raised in madrasas, as devotees within tekiyes and khanaqas, the transition of Sufi power from other-worldly to worldly concerned them. Though they write poems as theological meditations, poems as praise for the great spiritual men of their orders, they shift into modes of searing criticism when they see their discipline used for political, economic, or military gain.

### *Poetry, Sufism, and the Madrasa*

The connection between Sufism and poetry is long-standing. Great mystics often wrote verse as a form of devotion and prayerful meditation. Hafiz and Rumi, two Persian poets, are the most well-known examples in the West. Kurdish poets, though less known throughout the West, participated in this tradition: “The man known as the ‘father of Kurdish literature’, Melayē Jezīrī (sixteenth century), wrote Sufi poetry, and classical Kurdish literature was deeply influence by Sufi thought and imagery” (Kreyenbroek “Religion and Religions” 94). In the tekiye, the khanaqa, and the diwankhane, poetry was commonly recited in gatherings of mystics (Van Bruinessen 233). Bush as well takes time to establish and describe the same intimate connection between “poetry and

knowledge” (3). Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century, the poets this thesis examines, were educated in these khanaqas and tekiyes; they themselves had a religious foundation.

Kurdish poets of this era all shared the same traditional, religious background.

In a society that was “largely illiterate until the twentieth century,” mullahs and the village schools they ran were the era’s main source of education (Allison “Oral and New Traditions” 31). Van Bruinessen writes,

Before the establishment of modern schools [the mulla (in Kurdish: *mela*)] was generally the village’s best educated man, in religious as well as secular matters; he was also better travelled than most villagers, since the average mulla had studied at traditional Koran schools, in at least one or two other places. (209)

In fact, Hassanpour argues, “Literacy was limited to the clergy and members of the feudal class. According to one study, 68.5 per cent of the poets who lived until 1917 came from the clerical group” (“The Creation” 50). Kheznedar agrees, “The primary center for scholarship in Muslim nations, in the Middle East, was the mosque. [...] In Kurdistan and the Islamic countries, a mosque was a place, a center built for worship, but also to raise scholars...” (3: 29). Elsewhere Kheznedar specifies further, “...great value was placed on mosques not only as places to pray and remember God, but as places to learn the Quran and the Islamic sciences” (1: 76). The room within the mosque that the mullah dedicated to teaching, the *hujra*, Kheznedar defends as “synonymous with today’s public-school classroom” in terms of its social importance and function (1: 76).

Kheznedar remarks that in his seven-volume history many of the poets were also known as great mullahs, the two not being perceived as contradictory (1: 77). He makes a long list in which he includes several nineteenth-century poets: Nali, Haji Qadir Koye, Sheikh Raza and Mahwi (1: 77). Bois, who read the first editions of these books of poetry and familiarized himself with Kheznedar’s catalogues of poets, noted in his own reflections, “...although [the poet’s] religious affiliation is not always indicated in this long list, one can pick out from it, however, the names of 50 mullahs, 31 sheikhs, 5 mewlana, and 4 feki” (121-122).

The education these men shared included poetry as a sacred text. At the time, poetry was not a lesser or marginalized genre. Hassanpour writes, “Early Kurdish

literature was primarily poetic. Although a few examples of prose can be documented for the nineteenth century, Kurdish prose is largely the creation of journalism” (“The Creation” 59). Prose, as a genre, would gain strength and influence in the twentieth century, demarcating and delimiting the territory of poetry, but in the nineteenth century, literature was primarily poetry. As one of the main inclusive genres, people turned to poetry not just to express their internal lives, but to correspond with each other, to contemplate religious ideas, write out theological treatises, and record history. Verse became a vehicle of devotion; many mullahs taught poets like Hafiz and Rumi as practitioners of the sacred, their poems one avenue by which one could find the path. Kheznedar outlines the material covered in a mosque’s classroom: the Arabic alphabet, the Quran, the Islamic sciences, Arabic grammar, and literature—“Saadi and Hafiz were primary and viewed as sacred as were the literary works of Nizami Ganjavi, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Attar, and Jami...” (1: 79).

Between Islam’s holy book and its sacred verses, Kurds conducted their education largely in Arabic and Persian—languages other than Kurdish. As Hassanpour notes, “Literacy among the Kurds probably began in a foreign language, Arabic, introduced in the wake of the Islamic conquest of the seventh century. [...] Like Medieval Europe, where Latin was the language of religion and the state, Arabic assumed a sacred character as the language of Allah” (“The Creation” 48). Kheznedar corroborates this view, that “Middle Eastern Muslims began learning Arabic in order to read the Quran” (1: 75). This, Kheznedar says, “significantly affected the existing languages across the region. For a long time to come, Arabic would be the language of writing, science and knowledge while the rest of the era’s languages would remain only in the spoken and folkloric forms” (1: 75). The poets’ catalogs—and these statistics are likely incomplete—reflect their fluency.

Table 1  
Kurdish Poets of the Nineteenth Century and Their Fluencies

Poet	Sorani Poems	Gorani Poems	Persian Poems	Arabic Poems	Turkish Poems
Kurdi	118	1	12		

Nali	134				
Salim	380		19		
Haji Qadir Koye	96		9		
Mahwi	135		77	1	
Sheikh Raza	231		152	4	99
Wafai	131		87		
Piramerd	292				
Jamil al-Zahawi	1			404	
Nari	89		6		
Hamdi	97				
Bekhod	67				
Qani'	354		11		

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, “with the rise of Kurdish political power in the form of the independent and autonomous principalities which ruled over much of Kurdistan until the mid-nineteenth century” and “a number of mullahs [who] tried to introduce Kurdish as a teaching language into the curriculum of the mosque schools,” Kurdish gained standing as a language of high discourse (Hassanpour “The Creation” 49). As Kurdish political power rose and Kurdish mullahs began encouraging students in their own language, “...Kurdish poets [became] quite explicit in stating the need for literate expression in their native tongue” (Hassanpour “The Creation” 49). Kheznedar celebrates the individuals who worked on behalf of the Kurdish language, saying, “Through their love of their language, they got creative, finding a door they could open, new ways they could develop their nation’s status, which correlates strongly to language” (1: 77). Even with the great strides in linguistic development and the introduction of Kurdish as a language of the madrasa, Arabic and Persian retained their places of privilege because of the Quran and the Persian poets.

Although the prioritization of Arabic and Persian impeded the formation of Kurdish as a literary and written language, this multi-lingual, peripatetic education

brought a cosmopolitan character to Kurdish poetry of the nineteenth century. Kheznedar states that a religious student, a feqê or faqe, would rarely complete his studies in one mosque. He would instead travel from one master, one teacher, one mullah to the next, traversing Kurdistan, often journeying as far as Istanbul, Tehran, Cairo, and Baghdad (1: 79). Blau, commenting on “[t]he best known of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century poets,” “Melayê Jezîrî, a native of Jezîre Botan,” writes, “Like many writers of the period he had good command of Arabic, Persian and Turkish, and was steeped in Arabo-Persian culture” (“Kurdish Written Literature” 21). Rasul explains, “To Nali, and most of poets, a true poet writes not only in his native language, but in others as well” (*New Kurdish Literature* 20).

Piramerd, a poet of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even as he laments the mutual unintelligibility between Kurdish dialects, celebrates the fluencies of the Kurdish intellectuals: “Sulaimani’s children, until my lifetime, knew four languages fluently. Our education from the ancient Baban judges: in Persian. Our government: Ottoman. We were Kurd. Our daily lives and trade were conducted with Baghdad. So, fluency in Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic was normal” (Hamzaghā 20). The educational emphasis on Arabic, Persian, and Turkish had and would continue to disrupt and challenge Kurdish language instruction and use, but it would also add linguistic richness to the poems and give Kurdish poets the ability to read across some of the most meaningful and sophisticated poetic traditions in the world—all of which emerged from the religious background they shared: Islam.

Nineteenth-century Kurdish poets emerged from, not in antithesis to, Islam and the poetry it had given rise to over the centuries. The poets studied Persian and Arabic poems partly because the poems were masterful and worth learning from, but partly because they were sacred texts and part of their sacred education. Even when the poet positioned himself critically against the clergy or in interpretation of certain texts, he remained in discussion with the religion in which he grew up. Sheikh Raza, known for his sensational verses, was son to one of the most powerful leaders among the Qadiriya who considered poetry part of his spiritual life and was well-known as a talented poet. Jamil al-Zahawi, a self-identified doubter accused constantly of atheism, was son to the

Mufti of Baghdad. Even later in the century, as poets grew up in madrasas but perhaps did not consider themselves Sufis, Sufi poetic influence remained clear.

Familiarity with, let alone training in, the discipline of Sufism, inculcated a boundlessness of thought. Disciples worked to erase the self as a method of discovering and reflecting on the infinite qualities. The individual, shepherded by his teacher, related to the infinite directly. This predisposed an individual to a life outside convention, a stance that was often perceived as disregard for community values or, worse and more dangerous, blasphemy. Artistically, the ramifications are clear: Sufism trained a mind to strive and seek, to remain curious, to be tolerant of and interested in contradiction, and to press, without even meaning to, against the limits of what was known and accepted. Kheznedar says, “The ideology of Islamic Sufism—the Cosmic Sufism—was one reason behind the high level of creativity in the literature of Middle Eastern communities” (1: 78). In volume three, as he prepares to discuss the nineteenth century Kurdish poets, he says once more that Sufism “ushered in an elevated universal literature...” (3: 34). As the nineteenth-century Kurdish poets were cut loose from the safety—and limitations—of the prince and his court, they were launched into the spiritual freedom, the sojourn, and the discipline of Sufism.

### *Male-Male Relationships in Middle Eastern Poetry*

One aspect of these poems that can, particularly to contemporary sensibilities, challenge or, at the very least, complicate, their close relationship to Islam is the spectrum of male-male relationships they describe, contain, and hint toward. Before offering specific analysis of these poems, which are the heart of this dissertation, it is necessary to outline the most current scholarship on male-male relationships in Middle Eastern poetry, focusing on the work of Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli, Khaled El-Rouayheb, as well as Afsaneh Najmabadi, Kathryn Babayan and the work they collected in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (2008). I will argue, as these scholars do, that one cannot apply the term “homosexual” to the relationships in these poems—even the term “homoerotic,” given its sensational edges, could be considered problematic—and that the male-male

intimacy readers witness within the lines of these poems co-existed closely with Islam and the Sufi practice and education of the poets who wrote them.

Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli co-authored a book that examines what they call “the long sixteenth century,” a period that spans the last half of the fifteenth century to the early decades of the seventeenth, a period they call the “*Age of Beloveds*” (18). They intend to study this age, “in which a host of young men became focal points, not only for the desire of powerful officeholders and talented artists, but also for lavish entertainments and a rich literature of love,” in order to draw attention to what they call “*undocumented emotional histories*,” to describe through its literature how sixteenth-century Ottoman society “understands love, enacts love, and parses love” (18, 8). Though the work of Andrews and Kalpakli is situated significantly earlier than the time period of the poems with which this dissertation concerns itself, it offers critical context to this dissertation’s consideration of male-male intimacy in nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry.

When speaking of love, Andrews and Kalpakli write, it is “...such an apparently universal human emotion [that it] can be the source of profound misunderstanding” (Andrews and Kalpakli 8). And, indeed, it is. Across geography, cultures, religions, and the shifting values of societies across time, concepts of love, particularly same-sex love, can be the most confounding to read. *The Age of Beloveds*, the authors contend, attempts to “introduce [the male] beloved” to readers “not as a stranger representing the deviant lusts of some past or distant Oriental ‘others,’ but as a beloved of his age,” a beloved who was deeply “familiar [to his age] in his androgynous” or “multiply gendered” charm (Andrews and Kalpakli 27, 30).

The authors situate their discussion of Ottoman literary portrayals of love and the beloved within what they call the “natural history of desire,” which includes an abbreviated history of sexuality beginning in the ancient world about which “a large body of research indicates [...] sex was [...] a (penetrative) thing that men did to others—women, boys, slaves/servants—who were (or ought to be) socially inferior” (Andrews and Kalpakli 13). From Greco-Roman norms, they move on to characterize “the history of love, sex, and sexuality in Islam leading up to the Ottomans,” a topic they acknowledge as “vast,” but “reduce to two pivotal points” (Andrews and Kalpakli 16).

The two points, interrelated, establish the conditions for how in the Islamic world the sexes came to occupy separate spheres and how that separation promoted male-male intimacy and the generally male public face of the beloved.

First, they turn their attention to “the striking innovation of Islam in its practical concern for the status and welfare of women” (Andrews and Kalpakli 16). “Both Islamic law and local custom,” Andrews and Kalpakli maintain, “protected women by reducing their exposure to public life and dangerous contact with non-family members” (Andrews and Kalpakli 16). One consequence of these, as the authors frame them, protective measures is that “in general, by the time we get to the Ottomans, wellborn Muslim women were not supposed to be visibly part of the public scene or public conversation,” even though there were notable exceptions (Andrews and Kalpakli 16). Beginning here, Andrews and Kalpakli describe in terms generous to Islam the pre-conditions for the segregation of the sexes that is part of the world of sixteenth-century Ottoman literature and nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry. “If a society is primarily phallogocratic,” they continue, borrowing Eva Keuls’ term, “if public space is male space, [...] then men and women [...] usually remain foreign to one another in many respects” (Andrews and Kalpakli 14). Speaking of the Ottoman world of the sixteenth century while reaching for the familiar metaphor of Shakespearian theater, Andrews and Kalpakli write, “When all the world’s a stage and women are not allowed on it, the beloved is always a boy, however dressed” (22). This distance between the sexes, the foreignness of the male and female worlds, Andrews and Kalpakli hypothesize, led to the fulfilling nature of “same-sex (male-male) attractions and loving relationships” (20). These relationships were not necessarily grounded “in the mechanics of sexual satisfaction, but in the possibility of [...] mutual understanding and something closer to a balance of power” with a partner “similarly educated,” “who shared experiences and expectations” (Andrews and Kalpakli 20). The closeness of men (and the implied closeness of women, which demands further observation, but resides outside the scope of this dissertation) was also permissibly public.

As Andrews and Kalpakli discuss in their second “pivotal point,” which is that “for most manifestations of Islam,” the distinction between public and private is “unusually clear” (16). These boundaries, intended to protect “the welfare of the community,” also

defined “relations with free, Muslim women” as strictly private (Andrews and Kalpakli 16, 18). A poet in what Najmabadi calls “the Islamicate” would have been transgressing social norms and religious law to write amorously, even appreciatively, of a woman who was not his wife; even married, almost especially married, a poet’s wife would “*never*,” Andrews and Kalpakli emphasize, be “fit subject for public conversation” (18). With the realm of women circumscribed to the private, “the love that could most properly be expressed as a *public* (poetic) love was that between males” and this love “expressed itself in part as homoeroticism” (Andrews and Kalpakli 18). The authors argue that Islamic social conventions and law, concerned as they were with community welfare, left men to love any variety of beloved keeping in mind “the prohibition of excess and of anything that would threaten the stability of the family or undermine the welfare of the community” (Andrews and Kalpakli 17).

As the authors’ “primary interest is in sexual/love behavior and its relation to literary products and literature production” in sixteenth-century Ottoman society, Andrews and Kalpakli conscientiously address that though they are aware, and supportive, of contemporary theories of sexuality, they did not write this book to study these theories (8, 14). Aware as they are that their “scholarly genetics will be hazy,” they borrow the concept of “under erasure” from Derrida, meaning that when they need certain words (‘Renaissance’ or ‘sexuality’) that are “inaccurate, misleading, anachronistic,” they will “used them in their crossed-out form [...] in order to communicate economically” (Andrews and Kalpakli 24). This practice provides an interesting non-solution to the problems of nomenclature that haunt any description of the poetry at hand in their book, but also a provocative answer to the problem of translating from a language without gendered pronouns into a language reliant on gendered pronouns, especially to imply singularity.

Though Andrews and Kalpakli do not connect their own strategy to their translations, they do note that they face the disquieting difference between Turkish and English: “The Turkish language (like Persian) does not reveal gender and, thus, allows lover and beloved to break free from a host of gendered rules and expectations” (21). They even acknowledge that in a recent book of translations they “ducked the issue” of pronouns, “allowing the poet who worked with us to translate the gender of the beloved

as *she* when every indication is that the beloved of this poetry was most often a *he*" (Andrews and Kalpakli 19). This book, they wrote, arose partially from their need to explore these poems past universal presumptions and "noncontingent norms," past the reduction, distortion, and demonizing of "minority values, the values of foreign others, and the values of distant historical periods" (Andrews and Kalpakli 19).

Taking the poems of this dissertation from Sorani Kurdish, into English, we confronted the same conundrum Andrews and Kalpakli did moving from Ottoman Turkish to English: the translating language forces gender into what was for the translated language a naturally genderless space. Pronouns, perhaps surprisingly, constitute perhaps the most consistently difficult and uncertain decisions my co-translators and I made in the translations this thesis presents. The genderlessness of pronouns in Sorani Kurdish allows devotional poetry to play with the metaphor of "corporeal beloved as the divine" to transcend any gendered articulation of what corporeal form that divine beloved takes. At times, context clues make it clear that the poet envisions a woman or a young man, but most descriptions of or conversations with the divine beloved resist easy assignments of a male or female God.

In English, each of the three gender-neutral pronouns we currently have raises its own issue. "It" carries highly objective connotations for such a nominative idea as God. "They," while slowly becoming accepted as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun in English, is immediately offensive to the vast majority of Muslim readers who would reject any implication, however vague, of God as anything but singular. "Zhe/zhim" is such new nomenclature that it would produce fascinating translations that would also be entirely anachronistic and unreadable to those unfamiliar with contemporary queer theory. Though my co-translators and I have not yet tried, we could co-opt Andrews and Kalpakli's adaptation of Derrida's representation through erasure to experiment with pronouns in our translations.

Similar in time period to Andrews and Kalpakli, Khaled El-Rouayheb, in his *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, studies the literature of "urban, literate Muslim men in the Arabic-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire between 1500 and 1800" (10). He acknowledges the inevitable "bias toward the attitudes and values of the learned male elite, by whom and for whom such works were

written” (10). As he describes the literature at hand as “replete with casual and sometimes sympathetic references to homosexual love,” El-Rouayheb contends that “Arab-Islamic culture on the eve of modernity lacked the concept of ‘homosexuality’” (1). Taking these themes in literature as tolerance toward homosexuality in the wider culture, he maintains, would be a misinterpretation (El-Rouayheb 3, 7). His study, he hopes, can explain what could appear in the literature as “a chasm between a ‘practice’ that tolerated homosexuality and a [religious] ‘theory’ that condemned it” (155). The impulse of modern scholars to “gloss over the distinction” between the illicit act of sodomy, which Islamic law clearly prohibits, and expressing aesthetic appreciation, even passion, for a young man only demonstrates, in El-Rouayheb’s mind, how “unhelpful” the term “homosexual” is in the context of this literature (3). The term lacks the precision necessary to identify what is “condemned” according to Islamic law, which is *liwāṭ*, “anal intercourse between men,” and what are permissible expressions of love between men (5). Frédéric Lagrange, whose work we will revisit in more detail below, agrees with El-Rouayheb: this strand from literature has no “place in the discourse of *‘ilm* (science), which on the contrary limits natural desire’s field of action to the religiously licit” (176). The modern mind, perhaps especially Western, though El-Rouayheb does not say that, is “inclined to conflate” phenomena that are clearly delineated by Islamic law (7). El-Rouayheb, in some ways, falls victim to the very vocabulary he critiques. With no more precise language than “homosexual,” he can only conclude his study still looking for English language that can describe the “multiplicity of ideals that coexisted in the Arabi-Islamic world in the early Ottoman period” (155).

Afsaneh Najmabadi, Kathryn Babayan and their fellow participants in the 2003 Radcliffe seminar “Crossing Paths of Middle Eastern and Sexuality Studies: Challenges of Theory, History, and Comparative Methods” begin to formulate the interdisciplinary approach and new language for which El-Rouayheb calls in his 2005 *Before Homosexuality* (8). Their edited volume, published in 2008, *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* means to “press against the incommensurate frameworks” and explore, “with translational emphasis,” “an alternative route by enacting a cross-cultural, cross-ethnic, cross-linguistic conversation among scholars who work within Arab, English, French, Persian, and Spanish cultural traditions

variously located in North Africa, Egypt, Syria, and Iran, as well as Spain, France, and England” (Traub 11, 28). Each scholar of this seminar must “negotiate, without perforce eliminating or codifying doubts, gaps, silences, opacities, differences, inconsistencies and uncertainties,” they must resist “the imperative of assimilation” (Traub 22, 30). Interestingly, Valerie Traub, in the book’s opening essay titled, “The Past is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies,” mentions translation as a field populated with the same concerns to balance, a field whose practitioners are positioned to understand the distinct “pleasures and perils involved in the production and reception of this new field of knowledge” (Traub 30). What is lost in translation, the “textual remainders,” Traub argues, “signify not the end of the project of translation, however, but the necessity of a recursive attempt toward new acts of approximation and meaning-making” (30). Her implication here is that the framework and terminology of sexuality studies in the Islamicate require the same “recursive attempt” on which translation relies.

The contributors to *Islamicate Sexualities* recognize that, “as with any historical project, the initial step is the construction of an archive,” which Traub clarifies constitutes “the identification of a corpus of relevant texts” (15). Traub, echoing Andrews and Kalpakli and citing Alan Bray, an early modernist “who did more than anyone to create a history of premodern male homosexuality in the West,” writes that to begin with sexuality is to begin with the wrong question. The goal was to always view sexuality in a wider social and interpretive frame” (Traub 21). This corpus must construe “sexuality” in the broadest terms; it cannot contain sexuality to the explicit or even obviously and subtly metaphorical but should include intimacies of all kinds. I hope that the poetry I provide in the appendices in translation can add to this corpus and, beyond the dissertation, I hope to bring more voices of women from this time period into translation. There are far fewer female Kurdish poets of the time, none writing in the dialect that is the focus of this thesis, but each scholar working on Islamicate sexualities should do her part, as Sahar Amer and Kathryn Babayan are, to address the undeniability that “gender asymmetries” permeate “discourses of Islamicate sexuality” (Traub 24).

This is a book that has thought carefully about its terms, because terms indicate framework, so they are worth close examination. First, all scholars contributing to the

book have chosen Marshall G. S. Hodgson's *Islamicate*, a term "intended to highlight a complex of attitudes and practices that pertain to cultures and societies that live by various versions of the religion Islam" over the geographically and politically limited *Middle East* (Babayan and Najmabadi ix). Locating their readers in the *Islamicate*, the scholars then discuss the available language to describe "the multitude of practices and attitudes around desire" and "the variety of homoerotic acts that defy tidy categorization," language that would "interrogate erotic sociabilities and sexual sensibilities" (Babayan and Najmabadi x). "The problem of nomenclature," editors Babayan and Najmabadi write, stem from the requisite "breaking" of "classifications based on acts and types" and from the necessary building of language that can "[name and understand] same-sex desire" (Babayan and Najmabadi xi). This language proves much more difficult to find than "*Islamicate*" precisely because language and the frameworks it implies constitute a central project of the book, a central project which, as the very "recursive attempt" to which Traub refers, can never be resolved, but must always be in motion.

Babayan and Najmabadi acknowledge that "the phrase *same-sex practices and desires* has attempted to undo some of the cultural burdens of homosexuality" (xi). But not one page later acknowledge, too, that "traditional Islamicate ontologies [...] specified one same essence for both man and woman, though the latter had admittedly been an imperfect version of the former" (Babayan and Najmabadi xii). Given these traditional religious ontologies, one could argue "all sexual practices were same-sex practices, some just more perfect than others" (Babayan and Najmabadi xii). One could additionally argue that binary gender itself is an anachronism when applied historically (Babayan and Najmabadi xii). The editors find themselves asking at the outset:

Did [men] even see themselves in a relationship defined by "sex" and "same sex"? And how does our same-sex assignation distract us from adequately appreciating the asymmetry in power and the intricacy of cultural and social webs that endow desire with meaning? (Babayan and Najmabadi xii)

These opening questions only set the stage for every contributing scholar to propose and examine his or her own language and framework. We will discuss two chapters from *Islamicate Sexualities*—Frédéric Lagrange's "The Obscenity of the Vizier" and Afsaneh Najmabadi's "Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth-

Century Iran”—more closely given their relevance to this thesis and in each, we will come across more proposed terminology, more awareness of how language can scaffold a framework. The scholars in this book strive to neither “disavow the applicability of Western concepts or methods nor uncritically endorse them” (Traub 10). They agree, as Traub articulates, “...it is a matter not so much of bringing to visibility Islamicate texts (interesting as they are in their own right) or of providing a broader context for the West (important as that is) but of confounding the very terms by which our understandings of East and West are derived” (Traub 12).

As these terms travel, as scholars work to confound their terms, scholars must pay attention to what weight the terms lose or take on: “...as sexual categories and epistemologies travel across borders, all efforts at cross-cultural translation and comparison are imbued with politically loaded significations of tradition and modernity” (Traub 9). Without that consciousness, the scholars in this collection “...risk [...] obliterating a legible but not quite translatable desire...” (Al-Kassim 317). Dina Al-Kassim, in her epilogue, summarizes the issue well:

Questioning the epistemologies within queer historiography while simultaneously urging us to theorize the subjectivities and identities in the historical record, this collection breaks with the confining methodological habits of queer studies and area studies, which risk flattening the archive or cutting sexual practice out of the discursive web of its production.  
(298-9)

The risk Al-Kassim articulates resides in the same place as the possibility and newness of understanding this collection reaches toward.

Frédéric Lagrange begins his chapter of *Islamic Sexualities* by formulating a hypothesis: “could insult, as a mode of speech, reveal conceptions about same-gender sexuality that are left unexplored or unthought of in other types of discourse” (162)? The invective is a mode of expression that we have already visited in historical detail, but it is a mode that comes up again here, as we begin to think about the way invective in nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry brings men together, creates relationships between men that encompass a range of charged, libelous, and playful. The form is unique, as Lagrange remarks, because the author can “express feigned outrage, this being essentially a way of expressing within their discourse illicit lust under the pretext of condemning it” (Lagrange 163). Here we may think of Nali’s poem to Mestura,

referenced in this dissertation on pages 35 and 156, most meaningfully examined on pages 162 and 238-241, and available in full translation in the Appendix, pages 341-344. While that poem could be read entirely politically, it could also be read as a perfect example of an articulation of illicit lust written under the pretext of condemning that lust.

Nali couches his lustful, sheer metaphors describing Mestura's vagina in layer on layer of negation: a dream-Mesutra come to Nali in his dream and tempts him to solve a riddle no one else can. Then, *she* goes on to list metaphor after metaphor, Nali putting the lust in her mouth though it comes from his pen. Nali protects himself in his construction of the illicit articulation, which all comes not even from Mestura herself, but a dream (unreal) version of the woman. And he protects himself not only with the narrative of the poem, but the conclusion as well, a conclusion in which Nali sharply commands himself, after over ninety lines, to stop being the flag that flaps in desire's wind. Had Nali truly meant or felt the rebuke, the poem would either have been significantly shorter or would never have been written. The curse is, as Lagrange succinctly states, "...a denunciation [that] always remains an enunciation" (163). The reader is allowed to take the invective at face-value, but could also listen in to the "the interstices of discourse" (Lagrange 165). Al-Kassim, observing Lagrange's argument, agrees that "the insult" is "the rhetorical form that is equipped to reveal this paradox of simultaneous inscription and erasure" (316). In other words, the insult can, at the same time, posit and negate. As we examine the poems below, we will be looking at the possible levels of interpretation from the most literal to the most interstitial.

Al-Kassim pushes Lagrange's ideas just a little further, saying not only that obscenity can inscribe and erase simultaneously, but that "...obscenity creatively implies or generates the ideal..." (326). Moreover, she claims, "...insult, invective, and obscenity are never far from the scene of idealization" (Al-Kassim 326). We are left to wonder, as we read the poems below, what these insults actually are—and the answer can be varied. An invective poem could be many things, among them: the poet's only way to praise what he cannot, the poet's serious indictment of his fellow man, the poet's implying the ideal through relief. Though the invective is a pre-Islamic genre, a fact I have explored at length when I provided a brief history of the invective earlier in this

thesis, a fact Lagrange briefly acknowledges, Lagrange traces the origins of the “central role” of the “satire, insult, libel, and epigram, in which sexuality plays a central role” to the Abbasid period (167, 165). The literature with which Lagrange is familiar leads him to discuss invective as employing a “strategy of discredit,” as, essentially, libel (165). What constitutes the majority of Lagrange’s literature remains present, but the minority of the nineteenth-century Kurdish invective with which I am familiar. The invective we have already seen in this dissertation and the invective we will shortly analyze falls more broadly across the spectrum that Lagrange and Al-Kassim sketch out together. Certainly, though, any reader needs to watch her tendency toward the narrative fallacy—a tendency El-Rouayheb warns against. As Lagrange states,

Given the ritual nature of this transgression, it is not entirely possible to determine whether this literary acceptability of same-sex attraction refers to a true social acceptability (about which the limits remain to be defined) or whether it refers to simple poetic posturing or even provocation. (163)

While we cannot ignore the possibility that the poets are the narrators of their poems and that their poems may arise from personal experience, by the same token, we must not rely on that. It remains one possible reading among so many.

One final and relevant aspect of Lagrange’s article to discuss is a topic we have visited before: that the critical aspect of sexual categories in what El-Rouayheb refers to as “premodern Arab-Islamic culture” was not gender, but role: whether one was the active, penetrative, insertive or passive, receiving, receptive participant in the sexual relationship (7; Lagrange 188). These poems move in what Al-Kassim terms “anal economies,” privileging not the object of penetration, but the privilege itself—and power—of penetration (313). As Lagrange articulates, “The insult, in its colloquial usage, stigmatizes the passive partner by its very vocabulary” (166).

Lagrange goes further, writing, “The association of virility and the values that it disseminates (*muru’a*) with the penetrator’s sexual role, no matter what the object of his penetration, is probably a universal image in patriarchal cultures” (176). Najmabadi, in the essay she contributes to *Islamicate Sexualities*, will pick up this strand, relating back to Paul Sprachman’s “hierarchy of orifices,” but the essential idea for Lagrange is that sexual categories of the literature he examines, and of nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry, divide not by gender, but by role; virility is defined as penetrative while

effeteness or femininity (very much not the same concepts) are defined as receptive. We can also, from these invectives, glean some information about how “the aesthetic formulas of homosexuality in the modern sense and the adulation of the beautiful adolescent boy in classic Arabic literature diverge” (Lagrange 170). Meaning, what becomes “an object of desire” in these poems is “not extreme virility but rather its timid blossoming under an androgynous surface” (Lagrange 170). In fact, the synecdoche by which Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century refer to these beautiful young men is “simple” (*sade* or ساده), implying both innocence and the absence of facial hair. Lagrange summarizes, writing that

mere appreciation of *young and fresh out of androgynity* male beauty is commonplace, that occasional and discrete affairs with young men fit into or indeed reinforce masculinity, but that the affirmation of a right to this kind of relationship of even of its repeated evocation (implying a suspicious interest, a preference, or possibly even an exclusive preference) takes the author dangerously close to the limit. (188)

Still, Lagrange says, “...what is not articulated is not necessarily what is inconceivable, if only in the case where the unarticulated finds its expression in the realm of insult” (189). And, returning to the centerpiece of his argument, he concludes, “The crucial thing is that insult may accidentally construct what it denounces, building this field of ‘homosexuality,’ which in theory remains unthought” (Lagrange 189).

Afsaneh Najmabadi begins her chapter of *Islamicate Sexualities* with an epigraph, a narration: “A slave girl was shown to the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861). He asked her, ‘Are you a virgin or what?’ She replied, ‘Or what, O Emir of the Believers.’ He laughed and bought her” (275). The girl’s response to the caliph so captivates Najmabadi because it is a refusal of “definite description” that she has found “useful for studying genders and sexualities in Qajar Iran (1785-1925), where genders do not respond” to ‘man’ or ‘woman’ and “sexual subjectivities cannot be named homosexual or heterosexual” (275). In nineteenth-century Qajar Iran, a physically and literarily close influence on nineteenth-century Kurdish regions, Najmabadi maintains, sexual inclination does not correspond to “some innate homo- or heterosexuality, as all men are assumed to be sexually inclined to both women and *amrads*” (276). What the records do mark, however, are three-fold: (1) “exclusivity or excess” as “socially unacceptable (failure of one’s reproductive obligation),” (2) individual destruction (men

who die of excess of love for young males),” (3) a clear preference for anal intercourse (Najmabadi 276-7). Pointing again toward Sprachman’s “hierarchy of orifices” and Lagrange’s idea of role over gender, Najmabadi coins her own term: the “hierarchicalization of pleasurable body parts” (278). This a concept which, Najmabadi continues, “has a genealogy in the wider Islamicate culture, noted by scholars of *adab* (belle lettres) and medicine. It is as well echoed in theological and juridical literature and in classical satirical sexual literature” (278). One Qajar writer, Najmabadi tells us, emphasizes “his preference for anal intercourse with men and women alike, a point on which he further elaborates by concluding his essay with an elaboration of superiority of anus over vagina as an object of penile penetration” (277). Perhaps the most famous practitioner of the genre, Nizam al-Din ‘Ubyd Zakani (d. 1370) dedicated “many of his anecdotes and quatrains” to “dialogues between anus and vagina, including debates over which one is superior” (Najmabadi 278). To clarify any ambiguity, Najmabadi concludes, “Again, the debate is not about male versus female objects of desire but about pleasures of anal versus vaginal penetration” (278). The focus of sexuality resides not in the gender of one’s partner, but in the role one has with one’s partner and, male or female, the anus is for this time period and this geography, the most pleasurable of available orifices.

Najmabadi takes her study of nineteenth-century Qajar Iran further to examine what El-Rouyaheb calls the “profound effects” of “European Victorian morality” on “local attitudes” about male-male intimacy, what came to be known as “sexual perversion” (*shudhūdh jinsi*), a term not even coined in Arabic until 1999 (El-Rouyaheb 9, 156, 160). Najmabadi broadens her gaze to connect the expansive nineteenth-century Western pressures on Eastern systems, pressures I discussed in the historical context of this dissertation, to the nineteenth-century Qajar sensibilities of gender and sexuality and how they change. She writes, “While Iranians’ self-perception of backwardness and the shame of it have been given historical credit (at least in part) for all kinds of transformations [...] the materiality of shame for transformations of gender and sexual sensibilities has been largely neglected” (286). While the transformation of perceptions around gender and sexuality do not fall within the boundaries of this dissertation, it is interesting to note that the close of the nineteenth century, a century as

I have noted that was one of great change, largely concludes the “compulsory homosociality combined with procreative heterosexuality that left the structure of sexual desire indeterminate” (Najmabadi 289).

The movement of the nineteenth century, away from the indeterminate toward the determinate, toward as El-Rouyaheb notes the rise of concepts of “the perverse,” is a movement Najmabadi hopes to arrest—at least concerning the study of these historical literary texts. She proposes that scholars leave “the search for a singular logic” and instead approach the “nodal complexities that have produced the meaning of gender and sexual differences” (279). These complexities, she maintains, will help her and other scholars in the field explore with fresh minds questions such as, “Where does this body order come from? [...] What other webs of meaning intersect to produce this hierarchicalization of body parts” (279)? Najmabadi ends her chapter by repeating the opening anecdote that she used to introduce the resistant and resilient “or what.” She stresses, “We cannot make the kind of neat break that is often made between sexual practices and erotic desire or the sharp delineating line that is often drawn between homoerotics and same-sex practices” (Najmabadi 282). More importantly, she draws her reader back to the literature under discussion, remembering that all these discourses are, in some way, the discourse of love; love, which, in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman, and Kurdish poetry of this time period can be considered slavery, illness, the state of total submission, and self-annihilation (Najmabadi 282). Returning the conversation of the erotic to the larger conversation of love, we hear resonances once more with Andrews and Kalpakli, and see other integral layers of power coming into play: if a man is in love with the Almighty, for instance, what is the power dynamic there? And how are masculine constructs built, torn down, upheld? Love, as Andrews and Kalpakli highlight time and again, may give us a term through which contemporary readers can explore the themes of male intimacy in these poems more comfortably and, so, more broadly, even looking, as this dissertation will, to how this community of men came to act, for each other and their readership, as a republic of letters—an emergent sense of Kurdish polity when all traditional forms were failing.

*Ethnic and National Consciousness*

There is a general sense that only “with the exception of the seventeenth-century poet, Ahmad-i Khani” is there “evidence that any Kurd thought in terms of a whole Kurdish people until the later years of the nineteenth century” (McDowall 1). After the fall of the emirates, individuals, certain tribes, organized in rebellion against Ottoman rule, but contemporary historians regard these as isolated cases in which individuals saw advantage for personal gain under the banner of Kurdish independence. Most historians believe that a “sense of national community” formed in antithesis to the clarifying of the Turkish and Arab ethnic and national identities (McDowall 2). But if, as McDowall says, “...nations are built in the imagination before they are built on the ground,” then the Kurdish nation had taken form in the minds of the Kurdish poets and their people long before the early 1900s (3).

Kheznedar, as McDowall, places the emergence of Kurdish consciousness in the writings of Ahmadi Khani: “When Kurdistan was divided in the Battle of Chaldiran (1514), the thought of liberty began to sprout [...]. From that time on, there were efforts to implement Kurdish language in education and make it a tool for recording information...” (1: 81). Though efforts were sporadic through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the concentrated will of the Ardalans created a literature that was in character, if not in political aim, distinctly Kurdish. Bocheńska, despite her location of the rise of nationalism in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, which most other Kurdish studies scholars agree is a little late, states that literature “was undoubtedly one of the most important ways of seeking identity by the nation without a country” (*Continuity and Change* 13). Ghaderi steps even further back to remark that the attempt to form literary history, which arguably began with Piramerd in the nineteenth century, becoming a clear enterprise in the twentieth, is also “...reviving and celebrating the past as a way of constructing one’s identity and a step toward nation formation...” (*Challenges* 8). Much more work could be done tracing the development of Kurdish consciousness through those centuries; For more on this question, which is outside the scope of this thesis, see Abbas Vali’s 2003 collection of *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*. This dissertation will remain focused on the nineteenth century in which Kurdish independence falls, which only strengthens the yearning

among Kurds for Kurdish governance, the understanding among Kurds that they are a people apart, and the drive among Kurdish authors to write in Kurdish—“to confirm their own national identity” (Bocheńska *Kurdish Contemporary Literature* 36).

Kheznedar looks to Nali, whose “aim in poetry was to write all he knew and felt in Kurdish” as “the first poet in southern Kurdistan who could use Kurdish beautifully, as high poetic language” (3: 74-75). Blau, too, looks to the nineteenth century, “following the general growth of national movements in the area,” including a Kurdish national movement, and to Nali, writing, “The early part of the century saw the blossoming of the ‘Nâli school’ of poetry, or the ‘Bâbâni school’ in Suleimâni” (“Written” loc. 1033-6). CJ Edmonds admits: “It is not easy to fix upon any particular date or circumstance as marking the beginning, or even a turning point in the development, of Kurdish nationalism in the modern sense.” He points toward 1892 as a potentially significant year, the year “when the first Kurdish newspaper was published in Cairo.” But in that same year, “Hajji Qadir of Koi (*circa* 1817-94), whose patriotic poems in Kurdish are still recited with approval in Kurdistan, was already seventy-five years old” (59). Many contemporary scholars of Kurdish history point to 1880 and Sheikh Obeydullah’s rebellion.

These poems, to Edmonds, demonstrate a far earlier national awareness than 1892. Koye, known for his nationalistic verse, would have been writing since approximately 1837. Koye’s roughly fifty-year career, to Edmonds, marks an “unbroken literary link with the days when the Babans principality was, in the words of Shaikh Riza, ‘neither subject to the Persians nor slave-driven by the House of Usman’.” This “unbroken literary link” includes and references Koye’s fellow poet, Sheikh Raza who, in Edmonds’ mind, also articulated early Kurdish national sentiment. Kurdish national consciousness, while easy to see in

the publication of *Kurdistan* in 1892, the revival of Kurdish literary activity during the brief honeymoon that followed the Young-Turk revolution of 1909, the fresh fillip given to Kurdish aspirations, especially among the officer-intellectual elements, by the doctrine of self-determination enunciated by President Wilson towards the end of the war of 1914-1918. But all these signs were, to Edmonds way of thinking, “merely stages in a continuing tradition of thought.” While he does not quote from these poems of Koye, the fact that

he references them in this manner indicates an understanding of both the poems and their significance to Kurdish culture (Edmonds 59).

Hassanpour sees Koye as 'debuting' "ethnic nationalism of the European kind" (*Nationalism and Language* 55). Koye articulates a distinct view of what the Kurdish state should be: "fully independent," incorporating all traditional territories, able to "implement secular education in the Kurdish language," and able to "adopt [Kurdish] as the state language" (*Nationalism and Language* 55). While Hassanpour is absolutely right that Koye's poems detail a kind of national consciousness that the West can recognize, there is distinct ethnic identity, the awareness of a people whose needs are not met by Turkish, Persian, and Arabic governance, throughout the poems this dissertation will study.

Tied closely to the rhythms of the rural and nomadic lives, Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century witnessed the changes technology brought to the landscape. Crushed between two of the greatest empires in the world, empires in the throes of incursions of foreign powers, Kurds created two functionally independent principalities for themselves: the Ardalans and the Babans. As the first fell to Persian intrigue, the Babans entered the nineteenth century and what were arguably their most powerful decades, intentionally pouring resources into Sorani, their court language, as a literary language (as the Ardalans had modeled before).

The Babans began a period of literary energy that did not dissipate at the dissolution of their political power, but rather burned brighter. Nali, Salim, and Kurdi, known as the Three Pillars of the Babans, gave rise to an era of poets whose exile actually wrought in them an artistic arrival as will be shown in the second and third chapters. Though the Baban court had been ripped away from them, their yearning for those days of Kurdish self-governance became the first stirrings of Kurdish national consciousness. Since they had no patron, they had only their own desires dictating the direction of their artistic projects. These poets transformed their physical exile, and the exile of their people, into a moment of artistic arrival.

### *The Poets*

With the context of these poets outlined, we can move into how these poets, individually and as a community, fit into their context. This dissertation focuses on thirteen of the most circulated and preserved poets of the nineteenth century (in chronological order): Kurdi, Nali, Salim, Haji Qadir Koye, Mahwi, Sheikh Raza Talabani, Wafai, Piramerd, Jamil al-Zahawi, Nari, Hamdi, Bekhod, and Qani'. This list is a collection of poets who, directly and indirectly encouraged by the Baban princes, wrote in Sorani Kurdish and orbit, some more loosely than others, Sulaimani, the seat of Baban authority. Through their own poems, these poets identify each other as their contemporaries. Whether writing direct letters to each other or playfully cursing each other or referring to each other as exemplars of verse, these poets name each other. Reading the poems themselves, one cannot ignore that these poets informed each other as a generation, that they chose each other as contemporaries.

As Kheznedar says, "Nali, Salim, and Kurdi: the work of these three poets laid the foundation of Kurdish poetry in the first half of the nineteenth century in Sulaimani. These three teachers founded the schools and movements that followed" (3: 55). Koye, though not geographically based in Sulaimani, shared the gravity of these "Three Pillars of the Babans." Mahwi, Sheikh Raza, Wafai, and al-Zahawi all lived as children, even young men, when Babans still ruled. Piramerd, though born after the fall of the principality, took on the role of his era's literary editor, publisher, and preservationist. Though he belongs to the end of the century chronologically, he took on a greater responsibility, one that set him apart from his contemporaries.

Nari, Bekhod, Hamdi, and Qani', the latter four poets on the list, were all born at least a decade after the last Kurdish principality fell. They write in many ways as descendants to the poets who came before them and give preface to the changes that would arrive in twentieth century Kurdish poetry. Chronologically, they fit well among the early Modernists of Kurdish poetry such as Goran, Hazhar, Hemin, Faiq Bekas, and others. I include them here because they are so clearly inheritors to the legacy of the Babans, so clearly looking back to those early poets of the nineteenth century. From Kurdi, Nali, Salim, and Koye to Nari, Hamdi, Bekhod, and Qani', we get the full sweep of the century.

Gorani poets, a poetic powerhouse in their own right centered around the Ardalan court, wrote in a dialect that diverges from Sorani. That geographic and linguistic distinction makes a natural dividing line for this dissertation. There are more dissertations to write putting all Kurdish poets, regardless of dialect, into the single context of the nineteenth century, but one can only do so much at one time. As well, al-Zahawi may stand out on the list: he is Kurdish by birth, but wrote in Arabic. Given the correspondences he maintained with Kurdish poets and the education he shared with them, I thought it best to include him in this group. The most notable absences on this list are Mestura (writing in Gorani/Hawrami and Persian) and Mawlawi (writing in Gorani/Hawrami). Both are critical influences on these thirteen poets but require linguistic specialty that will have to come at a later date.

For the thirteen poets this dissertation will treat in-depth, as they are overwhelmingly new to an English readership, I will provide biographies here. These biographies were written in collaboration with the tireless and talented Shene Mohammed; Piramerd's memoirs, I co-translated with Savan Abdulrahman; Jamil al-Zahawi's autobiography, I co-translated with Bryar Bahha Alddin. For some poets, the biographical information we have received from history is scant; for others, it abounds. Where possible, we have provided rich accounts of the poets' lives to facilitate an understanding of how each person fit into his context and how their poems may be read in sympathy with their biographies. Kurdish literary scholars do not always agree on birth and death dates; in our biographies, we have provided the range of lifespans suggested by current Kurdish literary scholarship. Even with dedicated research, these lifespans may prove difficult to establish. Often, information on the poets' marriages and the families they made or did not is unavailable; where possible, we have included these details. As well, for each poet, we use his pen name, the name he took for himself, the name that remains in common usage today (Kheznedar 1: 192). After I establish who the individuals were, I will explain further how these poets connected throughout their lives and their poetry, creating a community for themselves in exile.

*Kurdi*

Born Mustafa Beg Sahebqran (1782/1812-1849/59), Kurdi came from Qalachwalan, near Sulaimani. Much debate surrounds his birth and death dates. Mohammed Mustafa maintains that Kurdi was born in 1782 and died in 1849 from, Sajadi says, psychological illness (Rasul *New Kurdish Literature* 19-23; Sajadi 325). Sajadi asserts that Kurdi was born in 1809 and died in 1859; he dates Kurdi's death from an elegy written for Kurdi by a fellow poet of the age, Haji Qadir Koey. Kheznedar and Mohammed Amin Zaki Beg concur that Kurdi lived from 1812-1850 while Dr. Kamal Fu'ad, in his *Kurdish Manuscripts* (that we read by way of Sajadi's volumes), extends that lifetime by a year, placing Kurdi's death in 1851 (Sajadi 325).

Kurdi began his education at age four or five, learning the Islamic Sciences in the mosque his grandfather built and became a *faqh* when he was only twelve, by some records as young as ten. At only fifteen, he attained the position of *musta'id* (prepared). His education took a turn when his father, the Baban Defense Minister, disagreed with Mahmood Pasha on certain strategies. Tensions rose and the family relocated to Kirkuk. Though Kurdi continued his education as a *musta'id* in Kirkuk's Sari Kahyea Mosque, the distance from his friends and teachers distressed him. He could not adjust to life in Kirkuk. Finally, he left his formal religious education to simply read (Rasul *New Kurdish Literature* 20).

When Sulaimani came under direct Ottoman rule, political instability caused Kurdi to travel to Iran frequently. There, he worked as a private tutor to the Qajar princes. He joined Tehran's Council of Scholars. How he spent his later years is unknown. Sheikh Raza was heard to say, "If all the Kurdish poets came back to life, I would visit each of them once a day, but Kurdi, five times a day" (Sajadi 324).

### *Nali*

Born Khidr Ahmed Shawaisi Mikayali (1797/1800-1855/6), Nali grew up in Khaku Khol village, on the Sharazur plain of Sulaimani. As a *faqh*, he travelled across villages and cities—primarily Sanandaj, Mahabad, Qaradagh, Halabja, and Sulaimani—seeking religious education until he received his *ijaza*. In Mawlana Khalid's *khanaqa*, he joined the ranks of the *musta'id* (Mudaris and Abdul-Karim 24; Sajadi 244).

In 1830, he left Sulaimani to perform the pilgrimage. Returning from Mecca, he traveled through Shaam, a province that at the time included modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel/Palestine, and parts of southern Turkey. Here, in 1834, he wrote his letter to Salim, a poem that would become famous, asking his dear friend whether he should continue home to Sulaimani since the city had fallen to the Ottomans. Salim warned Nali away. Nali, heeding his warning, traveled instead to Istanbul in 1835 to join Ahmed Pasha, the exiled and final prince of the Babans. Eventually, Nali returned to Mecca, accompanying Sultan Abdul-Majid Khan. Nali died in Istanbul and was buried in the Abu Ayyub Ansari graveyard (Sajadi 246).

Nali's life span, like many other Kurdish poets of his era, is a source of controversy among Kurdish Scholars. Beg, Kheznedar, and Fu'ad all agree that Nali lived from 1800-1856. Only Aladin Sajadi claims Nali lived between 1797-1855. Other scholars refer to Sajadi's estimate as a mismatch of the *Hijri* and Christian calendars. Outside of Nali's own poems, there are no historical documents we know of that can confirm anyone's dates on Nali's life. As his poems refer to specific historical events, we know he lived for the first half of the nineteenth century. Beyond that, without further documents surfacing, we would only be guessing.

### *Salim*

Born Abdurrahman Beg Mohammed Beg Qarajahanam Ahmed Beg Sahebqran (1800/5-1856/69), his first pen name was *Bîmar*, or Wounded. A man who likely battled with depression and other illnesses, he took on a physician who recommended that he change his name to *Salim*, or Healthful (Sajadi 25). He started his education in the mosque, but did not wish to reach certification. Instead, he devoted himself to poetry. According to Aladin Sajadi, the poetry of Nali, Hafiz, and Kalim (Kashani, a famous Persian poet of the seventeenth century) were profound influences on him. The fall of the Baban principality scarred him. After Ottomans occupied the city, he would often escape to Sanandaj and Tehran; in his own verse, he states he could not find peace in his city when subjugated (Sajadi 263). Salim and Kurdi, two of the three "Pillars of the

Babans,” were cousins; their fathers were brothers. Though both lived out their lives in Sulaimani, their village of origin, Sahebqran, is in Iran (Sajadi 25).

As with most of the classical poets, scholars dispute Salim’s life span. Mohammed Mullah Karim states Salim was born in 1805 and died in 1869. Sajadi believes Salim to have been born in 1800 in Sulaimani, and have died in 1866 in Tehran (Sajadi 263). Mohammed Amin Zaki Beg agrees with Mohammed Mullah Karim, in his *The Stars Among Kurds and From Kurdistan*, that Salim was born in 1805, but does not mention his death. Kheznedar and Fu’ad both second Sajadi’s idea that Salim was born in 1800, but died not in 1866, but in 1856 (Sajadi 264). Salim is buried in Sulaimani, beside Kurdi, his cousin and fellow poet (Sajadi 26).

### *Haji Qadir Koye*

Born Qadir Ahmed (1815/7-1892/7) in Gorqaraj, a village near Koye, Haji Qadir lost his father when he was still a child. After his father’s death, he and his mother moved into the city of Koye. Many remember him as a bright child who started his education at age seven. He became a *faqeh* in the Mufti Mosque, taught by Mullah Ahmed Omer-Gunbati (Sajadi 335). His mother died after two years into his study with Mullah Ahmed who went on to support his remaining years of education. Through all his extensive travels, he did not make it to Mecca. The title *Haji* refers not to his having performed the pilgrimage, but to his having been born in the Hajian month, the month in which, according to the *hijri* calendar, one should perform the *hajj* (Sajadi 338).

After finishing his education as a *faqeh*, he returned home to Koye, but left soon after. He could not resolve his disagreements with the sheikhs and aghas from Koye. According to Ahmad Qadir, Koye wrote most of his political poems in Istanbul, when he lived closely with the Bedirxhans, a strong Kurdish tribe (Ahmed 23). Sajadi states that Koye died in 1892 and was buried in Uskudar, in Istanbul’s Qaraja Ahmed graveyard. Beg in his *The Stars Among Kurds and From Kurdistan* claims Koye died in 1896. Dr. Kamal Fu’ad in his *Kurdish Manuscripts* says that Koye lived from 1817-1897. Sajadi asserts that the poet lived between 1816-1897) (337).

## *Mahwi*

Born Mullah Mahmood Mullah Osman Balkhi (1830/6-1904/9), Mahwi's birthdate and birthplace are a subject of debate. According to Sajadi, Mahwi was born in 1830 in Mawat, near Sulaimani. Ali Kamal Bapir defends 1834 as the birthdate and assigns Sulaimani proper as the birthplace. Kakai Falah maintains 1832 and Beg says 1836 (Balkhi 9) and neither say anything about location.

In any case, Mahwi began his studies at age seven. His first subjects were the Islamic Sciences; his first teacher, his father. He journeyed to Baghdad as a *faqh* to be taught by Mufti Zahawi, Jamil al-Zahawi's father, who gave Mahwi his *ijaza*. In 1859, fully credentialed, he started serving as a mullah in the Gaylani Mosque. In 1862, he left Baghdad for Sulaimani and a position in Sulaimani's court. When his father died, in 1868, he abandoned all governmental work and returned to teaching. Mahwi's father was a *khalifa* of the Great Sheikh Sirajuddin. Mahwi was a *khalifa* of his grandson, the Small Sheikh Sirajuddin (Bahauddin). Father and son succeeded grandfather and grandson, both prominent Islamic scholars of the Naqshbandi Order. Sheikh Mohammed Khal, in his book *Mufti Zahawi*, says Mahwi was exiled from Sulaimani to Baghdad along with some other mullahs between 1874-1875 for unknown reasons (Balkhi 8).

According to Sajadi, Mahwi performed the *hajj* in 1883 and returned to Istanbul to visit Sultan Abdul-Hamid. Sultan Abdul-Hamid held Mahwi in high regard, receiving a salary of 20 gold lira for his service to the poor and both permission and funds to build a *khanaqa* in Sulaimani. When Mahwi came back to Sulaimani, he built his *khanaqa* and taught there until his death. Sajadi insists the date of Mahwi's death was 1904, while in Mahwi's collected works, Balkhi maintains it is 1906 and in Bapir's text he states Mahwi died at age 73 in 1909 and was buried in his *khanaqa* (Sajadi 354; Balkhi 8; Bapir 31).

## *Sheikh Raza Talabani*

Sheikh Raza Talabani (1835/42-1898/1910) was born in Qirkh, Chamchamal, son to Sheikh Abdurrahman Sheikh Ahmed Sheikh Mahmood of Zangana (Abdurrahman

*Sheikh Raza* 29). CJ Edmonds, a British political officer traveling in the area throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries observed that in Kirkuk, “perhaps the most important family was the Talabani,” Kurds who “furnish an excellent example of a house which in quite modern times rose to a position of wealth and worldly power by virtue of the religious influence of its dervish founder.” Sheikh Raza was a “great-grandson of Mulla Mahmud, the founder of the family...” and as his father’s son, Sheikh Raza received a strong, religious education (Edmonds 290).

Journeying to Sulaimani first and then Koye to continue his education, he studied with Jalizada, a famous scholar, Mullah As’ad, then leader of Koye’s Great Mosque, and the famous poet, Kaifi Jwanroey. As would happen too often in his life, Sheikh Raza’s apprenticeship with Kaifi ended in argument. Nevertheless, by the time he was in his mid-twenties, he had a thorough knowledge of the Islamic sciences as well as Persian literature and the Turkish language.

In 1860, he traveled to Istanbul through Aleppo. After two years, he returned to Kirkuk. On his way, in Erbil, he was informed of his father’s death. Only six months later, having barely come home, a dispute arose between Sheikh Ali, his older brother, and Sheikh Raza. He left for Koye, for his uncle’s house. Sheikh Ghafur promised him work and his daughter in marriage. After six months, when his uncle held had not honored these promises, the poet returned to Kirkuk. In 1866, he again traveled to Istanbul this time through Erzurum. There, he spent time writing poetry. He visited Ahmed Pasha, the exiled last ruler of the Baban principality, often in Istanbul. His talent with verse allowed him entry to many *diwankhanes*, or guest halls. He became close to the Grand Vizier who supported his making the *hajj* via Egypt (Sajadi 368). He stayed for a time in Cairo, teaching Persian only to return to Kirkuk once again in 1884 (Abdurrahman *Divan* 30). Here, Sajadi claims his return occurred in 1874 (368). With his small salary from the Ottomans, Sheikh Raza began to cultivate land around Kirkuk. He left Kirkuk for good in 1898, some say in 1900, for Baghdad and there he stayed in the Talabani *tekiye* where he met Salim Beg, fifth prince of the Babans, and Saeed Abdul-Rahman Naqibi, famous in Baghdad (Abdurrahman *Divan* 30; Sajadi 368).

Edmonds' account of the poet's education and life, which he maintains "was not untypical of the kind of thing that used to happen to Kurds, especially the younger sons of prominent clerical families," is slightly more vague. Edmonds tells us:

...the poet travelled extensively within the Ottoman dominions: he spent eight years in Constantinople under the patronage of the great Kamil Pasha; was for two years Persian tutor to the sons of the Khedive of Egypt; returned to Constantinople for a time; performed the pilgrimage to Mecca; lived again in Kirkuk; and finally settled down in Baghdad.

Sheikh Raza himself spoke to his exile from his family, in part self-imposed. The poet, painfully aware of his own provocations, estimated himself unworthy to participate in his own lineage. In his poem "Speaking of Lineage," Sheikh Raza describes his family's roots, elevating each member in turn, and closes with this couplet, provided here in Edmonds' translation, "Riza too is of that stock; forgive him, Lord, for there cannot be / A rose without a thorn, or a sea without vapour, or a fire without smoke" (Edmonds 295). Sheikh Raza may be a born black sheep, but he is also, apparently, a born apologist. Beyond addressing Sheikh Raza's own station, the poems, according to Edmonds, uniquely encapsulate "certain aspects of the Kurdish society in which he lived" (Edmonds 290).

The common anecdote of how Sheikh Raza began to write poetry has the ring of prophecy. Hawkar Mohammed, in his "Comparative Analysis Between Sheikh Raza Talabani and Ibn Rumi," tells the story:

His brother, Sheikh Ali, details that once their father Sheikh Abdulrahman took them to visit Sheikh Abdul-Qadir Gailani's shrine. Before entering, their father told the two boys, 'Whatever is in your hearts, wish for it here. We will test ourselves, whether he accepts our wishes.' Sheikh Ali says, 'When we finished our devotions and left the shrine, Sheikh Raza began to speak in poetry... (19)

According to Sajadi, with whom Edmonds agrees, Sheikh Raza died in 1909 and was buried alongside Sheikh Abdul-Qadir in the Mosque's graveyard. But, again, dates for Sheikh Raza's lifetime vary. Sajadi, disagreeing with Shukur Mostafa, puts Sheikh Raza's birth in 1835 (367). Beg in *The Stars Among Kurds and From Kurdistan* puts his death in 1898. The 1935 edition of Sheikh Raza's collected works declares his life span as from 1838-1909, but the 1946 edition states that he lived between 1837-1909. Fu'ad in *Kurdish Manuscripts* agrees with the 1946 edition, claiming he lived between 1837-1909. Finally, Kheznedar believes that the poet lived between 1842-1910 (Sajadi

368). Al-Raqib, a Baghdad newspaper, announced Sheikh Raza's death on January 20<sup>th</sup> 1910 (Abdurrahman *Divan* 27). The words on his tomb are of his own composition and argue his case to enter heaven (Edmonds 295).

For several poets and scholars, we have Piramerd's own account of having met them, even known them well. Piramerd, though it is not clear whether he met Sheikh Raza, relates stories of Sheikh Raza's fame in the greater region, meditates on the origin of curse poetry, and mourns the state of the most recent edition of the poet's collected works:

I received a copy of Sheikh Raza's collected poems and I couldn't believe they had twisted Sheikh Raza so! The Sheikh Raza who... once, when I traveled from Mount Qaf to Istanbul, I boarded a ship in Batum with sages and kings and the Poet of Shiraz. We asked questions of each other. I said, "I'm from Sulaimani." He said, "The land that gave us Salim's 'Longest Night' and Sheikh Raza's 'King Shking'?" But these days, those beautiful poems have been flushed down the toilet.

Curse poems, the strange convention, came from Iran, which is intent on affecting literary education. Sheikh Raza, the gifted and spontaneous poet, took that path and remained on it and so his house, artistic and valuable, has fallen to dust. Sheikh Raza was a gem, an essence, and I can fearlessly say not even shades of him exist in Kurdish lands, in the whole wide world.

Anything he has said is his own, not stolen. Even in Persian, he has made his own forms for himself, forms no one can touch. [...] Manners have evolved, created social forms, written a few rules, so that even if a person carries shame or insult, even if these accusations be true, you can't tell him without risking heavy consequence.

Literary gatherings of this age, come, look at these collected works. From page four, such riches in all their honor have been trampled. [...] I don't know how his relatives—what thoughts and desires drove them?—promised to publish this.

[...] ...poetry's falcon can't bend. He must bear every curse, one like this. But what about this edition that has broken open all the heads, shattered all the faces of these beautiful poems, what should we say? It's ok. God keeps the count. We will get along. (37)

### *Wafai*

Wafai (1838/44-1902/51) was born in Mahabad as Mirza Abdul-Rahim Mullah Ghafuri Mullah Nasr-Allah. He lived most of his life in Sulaimani where he was close friends with

scholars and poets. He died in Shaam as he was returning from Mecca with Piramerd, another famous poet of his age (Qaradaghi 59). As many of his contemporaries, he wrote in both Kurdish and Persian. In one of his Persian poems, he describes his 14 years of education as a student of Sheikh Ubeydullah Nahri, by many accounts the leader of the first modern Kurdish nationalist struggle (Qaradaghi 65).

There is some discussion of when exactly Wafai lived. Two different scholars, Giw Mukriani and Saidian, in their editions of Wafai's collected poems, both state that the poet died in 1914 (Qaradaghi 67). Aladin Sajadi in his *History of Kurdish Literature* offers an entirely different lifespan, defending that the poet lived from 1838-1899 (Qaradaghi 61). *Zheen*, a Kurdish magazine of the early twentieth century, puts Wafai's death in 1902 (Qaradaghi 58). Among all the opinions, Wafai's own poems help us somewhat: he wrote an elegy for Sheikh Nahri who died in 1900, which suggests the poet was alive that year (Qaradaghi 67).

### *Jamil al-Zahawi*

We are lucky to have a brief autobiography from Zahawi himself, written just four years before he died in 1936. Here are critical excerpts:

I was born in Baghdad to two Kurdish parents on Wednesday, June 18, 1863. My father was the Grand Mufti of Iraq, the great Mohammed Faiḍi al-Zahawi. He was a descendant of the Baban princes, who were descendants of Khālīd ibn al-Walīd. My father had renown as "al-Zahawi" because his father, my grandfather, Ahmad Bek migrated to Zahaw, a city Iran has annexed now. And he lived there for years and married a Zahawian woman and she gave birth to my father. So, when my grandfather returned to al-Sulaymāniyyah with his son, my father, that man was known as "al-Zahawi." As for my mother, her name is Pērōz and she is a woman with an angry temperament from a well-known Kurdish family (maybe I inherited my anger from her).

In my childhood, they called me crazy for my unfamiliar motions. In my youth, reckless for the exaggerated pleasure I took in leisure and sleight of hand. And indiscreet for my resistance against tyranny. In my old age, heretical for publicizing my philosophically free beliefs that were at odds with the public's.

I learned much from the sciences of the ancients, though my mind wasn't satisfied, and much from the sciences of the West, which were

translated for me by private teachers. Western sciences intrigued me, so I continued reading and expanding my knowledge of them.

My first rhymed poetry was in Persian, then Arabic. Many newspapers and magazines published my articles and revolutionary poetry throughout Egypt, Beirut, Sham, and Baghdad. I was the first to defend women in Iraq, the first to resist the tyrannical reign of the Sultan, the first to construct epic poems, the first to rebel against the ancients, the first to care about renewal and confront intolerance.

Unfortunately, I didn't learn any Western languages. I married, at age thirty, Miss Zakyyah Hanim, who was 16 years old at the time. She was from an honorable Turkish family. We never had a child. And she served me in old age with sincerity and honesty. (51-52)

The poet goes on to list various professions he had in various locations: a member of Baghdad's Majlis al- Ma'rif, Director at the Wilayah press, then Arabic Section Editor at its newspaper, a clerk of the appellate court. He traveled to Egypt, sailed to "Islambul," was sent to Yemen as a counselor and member of [The Reform Society], and called to Islambul once more (52). He worked there, for the constitutional government and the university it ran, as a Professor of Islamic Philosophy and Arabic Literature, but when his "illness intensified," he was compelled to return to Baghdad and serve as a member of the Faculty of Law there (53). Many times, his writing caused him trouble:

During Nazım Pasha's rule, Al-Mu'ayyad , an Egyptian newspaper, published an article of mine in which I defend women rights. A great furor rose around this article. And fanatics started foaming and howling; they hurled curses and insults at me.

The well-mannered among writers in Egypt and Syria supported me, but intolerance in Baghdad at that time was more influential, so the governor couldn't do anything other than dismiss me to appease public opinion. When Djemal Pasha became Wali in Nazım Pasha's place, he returned me to my position.

Then I was elected to represent al-Muntafiq in the Ottoman parliament, so I attended its meetings in Islambul. Then this council dissolved and I returned to Baghdad. Then it was reconstituted and I was elected as Baghdad's representative, so I returned there. I gave speeches defending the rights of Iraq and the truth and this caused a furor around me, but I didn't care.

And after two or three years, that event happened, and they announced The Great War. English soldiers invaded Baghdad and wanted to take me to India captive, but I highlighted a piece of paper that clearly declared me to be a writer for Mokattam Newspaper, an Egyptian newspaper loyal to the English, so they released me.

During the invasion, I was appointed as a member of a committee to manage the things of knowledge and then a chairman of a committee to

Arabize Turkish law. I Arabized 17 statutes, insignificant and significant. Then these committees were disbanded, and Faisal I arrived and was crowned King of Iraq....

Then, I migrated to Syria and then Egypt and they organized many readings for me in Sham, Beirut, and Egypt. In Sham and Beirut, six of my poems were published, and more than thirty poems in Egypt.

After the declaration of the constitution in Iraq, I returned and was appointed to the Senate Council by the King. And after four years, I stepped down from the council according to the terms of the election, as stated in the Iraqi constitution.

Then, the treaty between the Iraqi government and Great Britain was passed. At that time, "*Al Siyasa al-Isbū'yah*" [The Weekly Politics], a magazine published in Egypt, published a poem of mine each week. So, the Egyptian government stopped its publication. And I reached seventy years of age. And I started to show my age. The toes of my left foot had been paralyzed for more than twenty years and still neuralgia attacks and causes me continuous hardship and pain.

As for my writing: the first was a message on philosophy entitled *al-Māda* [Objects] in which I showed my liberated opinions about place, time, force, material, life, and gravity. It was printed by an Egyptian printing house, al-Mūqtataf. All copies sold out.

And the second was a message on horse racing. I ran my own experiments on horse racing, and my findings were published by an Egyptian printing house, al-Hilal. And the third message was *al-Khaṭ al-Jadyd* [The New Script], published by an Egyptian printing house, al-Mūqtataf, in letter form. And all copies sold out. [...] And the fifth is my divan *al-Kūlm al-Manḍwm* [The Organized Words], published in Beirut during the first year of the Ottoman constitution. And all copies sold out. The sixth is *al-Fajr al-Sadiq* [The Honest Dawn], a response to the Wahhabis published in Egypt before the Ottoman constitution. And all the copies sold out. [...] And the ninth *al-Mujmal Mmā Ará* [The Collection of What I See] contains a philosophical message. I recorded my opinions that contradicted those of scientists contemporary to me. I simplified the Universal Law and explained Universal Gravity by the universal thrust of the flowing ether on the solid object that demands balance. And it was published in Egypt eight years ago. [...]

And the fourteenth, "Layla and Samyr," a novel published in Baghdad two years ago, of which all copies sold out. [...] And the seventeenth is *Nazaghāt al-Shayṭān* [Temptation of the Devil]. The poetry in this collection hasn't been published yet in magazines or newspapers, and this book I will publish posthumously because it contradicts the stand of the intolerant. This book will energize the intolerant against me, and I don't feel comfortable with the possible consequences. And the eighteenth is my poem *al-Thawūrah Feh-al-Jahym* [Revolution in Hell]. This book has 433 verses and I published it in al-Dhūr magazine last year. At the time of publication, the magazine was published in Beirut. A great furor rose

around it. Because of this poem, some of the intolerant cursed me from the pulpits during the Friday sermons, and, after a while, all copies sold out. (53-58)

### *Piramerd*

Piramerd was born Tofiq Beg Mahmood Agha Hamz-agma in Goizha, Sulaimani, 1867. He began his education at age seven, as a student at his grandfather's mosque, the Hamz-agma Mosque, where he later became a *faqh* (Hamzagma 48). The mosque itself was named for a prime minister of the Baban principality, Hamz-agma (Hamzagma 48). After study in several Baneh mosques, in what is present-day Iran, he returned to Sulaimani.

Piramerd worked as a scribe in Sulaimani's regulatory court (1882) and an employee of Governmental Property in Halabja (1883). He became head scribe in the Sharbazher Court (1886). In 1895, he was called to serve as the Associate Administrator of Karbala City but did not accept the position (Hamzagma 49). In 1898, invited by Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, he traveled to Turkey, visiting Mecca and performing the *hajj* the following year. During this period, the Sultan conferred on Piramerd the title *Beg*. He journeyed back from Mecca with Sa'id Ahmed Khanaqa, considered a wise man among many and a famous sheikh within the Naqshbandi Order, and his fellow poet, Wafai, who died en route. Upon his return to Istanbul, he was assigned to write a response to a letter that Naser al-Din Shah had sent to Sultan Abdul-Hamid. Piramerd's smooth penmanship and rich knowledge impressed these men who then, in 1899, supported his becoming a member of Istanbul's High Council and his joining Istanbul's Law School.

In 1905, at the advent of constitutionalism, the Council was canceled and Piramerd began to publish and edit newspapers and magazines. He became the Editor-in-Chief of *Rasmlî Kitab Magazine*. In 1907, Piramerd joined the Kurdish Group formed and led by Sheikh Abdul-Qadir Shaikh Ubeydullah. He was one of the ten co-founders. He became the Editor-in-Chief of their magazine, *Kurd*. Additionally, he helped run *Msawr al-Muhit*, a newspaper, and wrote articles published in many newspapers

including Istanbul's *Iqdam (Pioneer)* and *Serbestî (Liberty)* and Tehran's *Farhang (Dictionary)* and *Shafaq Srkh (Red Twilight)*.

Continuing his civil service, Piramerd worked as the head of many municipalities throughout Turkey, including Hakkâri (Colemêrg) (1909), Karamürsel (1912), Balawa (1915), Bayt Shabab<sup>1</sup> (Beytüşşebap) (1916), Gumuskoy and Adapazari (1917). He was appointed Governor of Amasya in 1918. In 1920, he returned to Sulaimani. Of his time away from Sulaimani, he says, "I left for years, but still I was near. Near and far are equal to the soul" (Piramerd 12). There, in 1926, the municipality made him supervisor of *Zhyan*, a magazine managed by Hussein Nazim (1870-1932) a Kurdish scholar and journalist and advisor to Sheikh Mahmood. Piramerd served as his successor in 1934. After 553 issues, the municipality, for unknown reasons, chose to close the magazine. Piramerd then opened his own printing house, Sulaimani's first, and started *Zheen*, a magazine meant to continue the work of *Zhyan*. As *Zheen's* Editor-in-Chief, Piramerd published 1015 issues. Shortly before his death in Sulaimani, in 1950, he writes, "Today it is Thursday, January 26, 1950 (Gregorian)—exactly 25 years after we established our newspaper. A quarter-century, by God, that's too much. In Iraq, who has walked the road of even one decade of newspaper work? Only this 85-year-old man. I who am 60 years older than the newspaper" (Hamzagha 17).

Beyond his own writing and his work as an editor and publisher, Piramerd was also a translator, bringing poetry and narrative epics from Gorani and Kurmanji to Sorani, including Mawlavi's poems, Khani's *Mem u Zîn*, *The Twelve Knights of Meriwan* and *Mahmood Agha Shiwaka*. He also collected Kurdish proverbs, publishing them for the first time as *Galte u Gep* (Bapir 16). As a prolific writer, editor, publisher, and preservationist, Piramerd also wrote his memoirs. While this document primarily focuses on the writers around him, the cultural life he tried to gather around himself, it also gives us a glimpse into his own perceptions of his life story. Of his origins as a writer and preservationist, he says:

I don't know what affliction clings to me, but ever since childhood, my heart beats for song and verse. As a child, only in verse did I love my voice. I didn't yet know of Mawlavi, so Nali was my prophet of Kurdish poetry. Before I left for Istanbul, I made a kashkul with colorful paper dyed

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<sup>1</sup> A small town in Turkey, north of the Iraqi Border.

yellow, blue, red and purple, including any poet I had known. I recorded a few of their fabulous ghazals. Everyone, even God, wanted to borrow it to copy verses from it, but they didn't have discipline: if they saw a page that contained a beautiful poem, they would simply rip it out for themselves. Finally, I swore not to lend it to anyone. Still, people wouldn't leave me alone. I had no choice. We had a room downstairs to store wheat ahead of expensive years that might come. I stashed the kashkul there and left for Istanbul on that note. By God, I used that hollow same as Mawlana Rumi used his flutes: to hide his masnavi. How that paper must have suffered, hidden away, until the day it finally dissolved.

As I collected the poets, I memorized many poems—their footprints became familiar, etched across my chest. [...] I remember Mr. Najy, who supervised a division of real translators. [...] Once, he told me, 'So long as you work, you will become a good poet.' This was a source of comfort and energy for me. Though I did not become a poet, that energy and self-acceptance taught me how to write. (Hamzagha 12)

Bemoaning the state of literary life in Kurdistan, Iraq, and Turkey as his life came to a close, he both deplores his age and touts his own accomplishments, comparing himself with one of Europe's heroes at the time:

Nowadays, imagination has been repealed. Materials come first, and these cannot come together: the true laws of the materialist and the poet. Poetry turns imagination into thought, and thought into work and action. These days, every newspaper in the world talks about Bernard Shaw, his age and mind. They count it extraordinary that a mind of his years can write as he did in his youth. Yes, it is true that almost every man past the age seventy, anything God gave him slows down; at first, sight and memory, then his facility and power. Whether he likes it or not, his stem will bend. Those who see and hear as before, but can write in a new age seem even more miraculous.

I searched for a few of Shaw's characteristics in myself because I am only one step behind him, but he is in a place, a city where the whole world knows him. I'm in a village—only a few Europeans have ever heard its name. I won't brag. I won't say I am the Bernard Shaw of the Kurds, but some of my parts are more extraordinary than his. We share uncommon and paradoxical natures, but what he writes now, I can best. I don't mean to say that I'm wiser or more of a scientist than he, but unlike him, I grew up in a blind village and still I can write. I publish a newspaper about to finish its thousandth week with only broken pencils. This newspaper contains information in seven colors: science, jurisprudence, literature, history, philosophy, humor, entertainment, and society. The newspaper contains almost a thousand poems and proverbs. I have no books or libraries to draw on; all I write, I draw out from the grain sacks of old, wounded Uncle Attar, and by grain sacks I mean the stores of my brain. What did I study in childhood with the crippled Mullah Hussein? I started

with Ismail's letter and ended with the couplet of the mouse and the cat, which I read all by myself same as I read [everything else].

Anything commonplace in our country—I have memorized it. My hand, my eye, my existence are bent on work. I pick up the heaviest things by hand. I read the smallest writing. But my back is straight. I don't see any of this in my peers, in other older people.

When it comes to food, I best him. I have more fun: I eat Kebab every day, but he eats grass. [...] This is me and that is Bernard Shaw. [...] Let's see when Bernard Shaw will breakdown in his writing, his sight, and which one of us will die first. (Hamzagha 15)

### *Nari*

Born Mullah Kaka Hama Mullah Ahmed Mullah Mahmood (1873-1944), Nari began his life, according to Bapîr, in Badelan, a village near Halabja. Bapîr continues: the poet lived in Bêlu, a village in Merîwan and worked as a teacher (49). Sajadi disagrees about Nari's trajectory, claiming that the poet was born in Kikn, a village near Merîwan and lived on in Sawje Kon, another village in Merîwan (479).

Nari began his education at six, learning the Islamic sciences first from his father and then from his fathers' *faqes*, or disciples. As a *faqe* himself, he traveled throughout Merîwan, Sanandaj, and Penjwen. In each place, he found another master who could help him understand a different subject; he continued his education. Mullah Abdurrahman Penjweni taught him how to analyze Shams Tabrizi. In Sulaimani, he studied at the Sheikh Abdurrahman Sheikh Abu-Bakr Mosque, now known as the Baba Ali Mosque. He spent a year and a half in Sanandaj, studying in the Dar al-Ihsan and Shariat Madar Mosques. He traveled to Baneh to be taught by Qazi Abdurrahman, to Mahabad, Wan and Bashqala and Erbil. He went to Rawandiz to be taught by As'ad Afandi Khailani. In 1897, As'ad Afandi gave him his *ijaza* and he returned to Merîwan.

During his travels, his father died. He married in Kikn and in 1904 moved his family to Bêlu to teach as requested by Hussein Beg Bêlu. He taught there until his death in 1944 (Sajadi 480).

### *Hamdi*

Hamdi was born Ahmed Fatah Beg Haji Ibrahim Beg Mahmood Beg of Sahebqran (1876/8-1936) in Sulaimani. As a poet, he was born into a lineage of poets: Kurdi was his father's uncle and Salim was his father's cousin. Hamdi began his education at age eight in the *hujras* of Mullah Aziz Zalzalae and Mullah Sa'id in the Azizawa Mosque. He went on to primary school (Sajadi 461). In service of his religious and linguistic education, he travelled and studied in many mosques, visiting Mahwi's *khanaqa* most often (Maulud 13). Of all Sulaimani's luminaries, Hamdi was one of the most recognized figures throughout his lifetime (Maulud 14).

He participated in Sheikh Mahmood Sheikh Sa'id's movement when the British held Iraq as a protectorate (Sajadi 461). Sheikh Mahmood's capture and subsequent exile to India deeply saddened Hamdi (Maulud 14). Sheikh Mahmood returned to form the Kurdish Government of 1922-1923, appointing Hamdi the Minister of Customs in Malik Mahmood's first cabinet. Due to certain disputes that arose between the poet and Sheikh Mahmood, Hamdi resigned his post (Sajadi 15). After Sheikh Mahmood's revolution failed, Hamdi went into exile. When the Ottomans occupied Sulaimani, Hamdi's house was commandeered and all his belongings confiscated, his library burned along with his house. As Maulud says, "The creation of Kurdish patriotism and the growing awareness of the Kurds needed sponsors and whatever those sponsors gained during this time was with by force of blood and scars" (68). In fact, Maulud goes further, saying "Left with nothing to defend himself against the enemy, [Hamdi's] only effective weapons were his consciousness and his poetry" (70). After the 1924-26 formation of the Iraqi Government, he became Director of the Sulaimani municipality, and after a short while took a position overseeing the Surdash District. He withdrew from all governmental positions in 1926 and died in 1936 of a heart attack (Sajadi 462; Maulud 15). As Maulud points out, this means Hamdi witnessed, as many other poets of his generation, the division of Kurdistan into four parts, the "cruelty, the catastrophe" of WWI (76).

Piramerd writes of Hamdi with the highest praise:

Ahmad Beg Fatah, called 'Hamdi' in poets' copybooks, has disappeared from our world. For his brothers, his family, his kin, his death might be painful, but not nearly so heavy as it is for *Life!* No one can surpass the high peaks of his poetry. The old statues of the famous show a man's

form, but sadly, a poet's silent statue reveals nothing of that poet's soul. The poet's collected works must appear and be counted.

[...]

Myself, I am not a poet, but God has given me a taste, the ability to recognize poetry, to know poets by their souls, and Ahmad Beg and I, we shared many secret connections—he was a knight and I know my horses, the real tough horses. He was a poet and I know how to celebrate a poem. So, his loss is that much heavier for me. (Hamzagha 29)

### *Bekhod*

Born Mullah Mahmood Mullah Amin Mufti (1878-1955/6) in Sulaimani, Bekhod began his education under Sulaimani's most famous scholars (Bapir 14). As a young man in his early twenties (1900), the city appointed him a judge in Halabja's civic court. He also taught, as a volunteer, alongside Kurdish intellectuals Rafiq Hilmi and Zewar. Though his collected works claim he died in 1955 (Mufti 13), Bapîr believes that he died a year after that in Sulaimani (Bapir 15). To commemorate his death, Kurdish poets and scholars held a ceremony during which they read verse and essays in his honor (Mufti 14).

### *Qani'*

Mohammed Sheikh Abdul-Qadir Sheikh Sa'id Dolash (1900/1904-1975), known as Qani', lost his father the year he was born (Bapir 5). He lost his mother soon after, around age three or four. A poet, he came from a family of poets in which his mother and grandfather wrote verse. An orphan by the age of five, Agha Saeed Hussein Chori, a sayyid from the region, raised Qani'.

During his education as a *faqeh*, he traveled to Sulaimani, Kirkuk, Koye, Baneh, Saqiz, and Sanandaj seeking out teachers in basic Quranic studies as well as the Persian and Arabic languages. At age 12, he began learning the Islamic Sciences, in Sulaimani and became a student at the Sarshaqam Mosque, now known as the Abdulrahman Mosque. There, he studied Jami, an Islamic scholar and Sufi poet. With some fellow *faqes*, he went to Sanandaj to increase his education in Persian, studying at the Reşîd Qelabegî Mosque. He traveled from there to Saqiz to learn logic at the

Mullah Salih Mosque. He went on to Koy Sanjaq to learn *The Sharh al-'Aqid*, a book famous in Islamic theology as part of the Ash'arism, from Mullah Tofiq and *Risala Hisaab*, a book famous within the Islamic Sciences for teaching topics like algebra and engineering—the last course *hujra* students take, from Mullah Mohammed in the Palk Mosque. Two years later, he ended up in Kirkuk where he learned yet another Islamic Science from Mullah Zahir. In Krcpchna, still more with Mullah Mustafa. He returned to Sulaimani finally to study with Mullah Sheikh Omer in Mawlana Khalid's khanaqa (Sheikh Sa'id 192-193).

When his brother-in-law died, he returned to take care of his sister and her family, teaching as a mullah in a few villages. Throughout his lifetime, Qani' worked as a mullah, farmer, tea server, miller, manual laborer, teacher, supervisor, scribe, and guard (Sheikh Sa'id 193).

### *The Poets and Their Community*

Given their common religious upbringing and the travel it entailed, many of these poets would have met along the road as peripatetic *faqes*. The poets sought out the same scholars, the same cities, the same mosques, *khanaqas* and *tekiyes*. Beyond these connections we can only imagine, we have specific data from the poets themselves that they knew one another well and in their lifetimes chose each other as fellow-strivers in Kurdish verse and language.

Nali and Salim wrote famous letters to one another, Nali asking Salim if he should return to Sulaimani after the conquest of the Ottomans and the vanquishing of the Babans. Salim writes back to say, essentially, no. Keep your memories, Salim says, I cannot bear to have your heart broken the way mine is, still living in this city under occupation. Salim wrote extensively with Kurdi, a cousin of his: letters that spanned even Kurdi's imprisonment in Tehran. Beyond his correspondence, Salim wrote poems praising his fellow poets—Nali, Mahwi, Salim, and Kurdi—as warriors. Together, Nali, Salim, and Kurdi were known as the Three Pillars of the Babans.

While Haji Qadir Koye lived his life outside that immediate circle, in the city of Koye, he knew well the world around him. In his poetry, he three separate poems he

praises Nali. In another poem, Kurdi. In one poem, he draws in Mahwi, Sheikh Raza and Wafai. He was close friends with the well-known poet Kaifi Jwanroey, who was, in turn, close friends with Sheikh Raza until their quarrel. Sheikh Raza himself spent a good portion of his young adult life in Koye, close friends with Kaifi for a time, until he left once more to try his fortunes in Kirkuk.

While Sheikh Raza's sharp tongue may have ended his friendship with Jwanroey and taken him away from Koye, it sustained him in correspondence with other poets of his age, including Jamil al-Zahawi, the Zahawi family, and the poet's own uncle Sheikh Ghafoor (whom Haji Qadir Koye must have at least known). Jamil al-Zahawi, a flyer and a devotee of the scientific method, was the son of the Mufti of Baghdad, Mufti Zahawi. Mahwi, a poet who could not have less in common with Zahawi, theologically or poetically speaking, ends up seeking out Zahawi's father, from whom, after long study, Mahwi received his *ijaza*.

Wafai, unlike many of his contemporaries, lived most of his life in Sulaimani, likely a friend and colleague to the city's poets and intellectuals. He died at Piramerd's side, as the two of them returned from *hajj*. Piramerd made it his business to know the poets and intellectuals of his day: he was a publisher of both newspaper and magazines. He considered himself a poor poet, despite the urgings of Faiq Bekas, and so focused his energies on gathering and raising up the work of other Kurdish poets. In his memoirs, Piramerd writes anecdotes and reflections about the many Kurdish luminaries he had the privilege to meet. Sheikh Raza, Hamdi and a scholar quoted often in this dissertation, Aladin Sajadi, feature prominently.

Hamdi was born into a lineage of poets: Kurdi was his father's uncle and Salim was his father's cousin. He visited and studied in Mahwi's *khanaqa* often. Bekhod, born in Sulaimani, began his religious education there, becoming friends with and volunteering as a teacher beside Rafiq Hilmi, a literary critic as famous as his contemporary Aladin Sajadi.

In addition to the direct letters they wrote each other and the daily connections they may have stumbled into or pursued, the poets also wrote poems for one another. Nali's "Mestura" is, by title, written for the second wife of the last prince of the Ardalans, though also indirectly, and perhaps more importantly, it targets the Ardalan prince. Nali's

“Cross-eyed” he wrote, allegedly, for the Zahawi family who, in his mind, did not understand Sufism and its core principles.

Sheikh Raza writes to Sheikh Star, Sheikh Nuri and Kak Ahmadi Sheikh—three educators who would have entered the lives of most of these poets. He curses the Mufti of Baghdad. He praises, in many poems, Amin Faizy, a Kurdish literary luminary in the Istanbul circles. Hamdi writes a taghmis on Mahwi and in his “Moan for Piramerd,” he mentioned Faiq Bekas, Haji Qadir Koye, Amin Zaki Beg, Nali, Nari, Kurdi and Mawlawi, among others. Qani’ writes a taghmis on Hamdi and Faiq Bekas.

These poets knew each other, studied together, wrote to one another, wrote to celebrate or provoke each other. When their world collapsed around them and they had to forge their own, they turned to poetry and poets. Though they could have written in ignorance of each other, they wrote in awareness, with one another, fashioning a world together that was and could be Kurdish. Even before I chose these poets, they chose each other. Exile sent them into diaspora; exile brought them together.

## Chapter 2: Exile

The concept of exile pervades nineteenth century Kurdish poetry. The language Kurdish poets use to describe their differing interpretations of the polysemic idea of exile originates in Arabic, with Islam, specifically from within the Sufi discourse. The most direct translation of the verb, *nefi*, most commonly used by poets to indicate exile translates most directly as “negate” and is most commonly used with the passive voice, as in “I have been negated.” The noun meaning “exile,” derived from the verb, is *menfa*, which describes the atmosphere or environment of having been negated—the state of living in negation. The roots and connotations of our English word “exile” are nowhere near as direct; in Arabic, for instance, when one begins the profession of faith, “There is no god but God,” one would refer to that first grammatical segment, “There is no,” as a negation, *nefi*. The Kurdish definition of exile, universal throughout Kurdish poetry of the nineteenth century, is more than loss; it is a fundamental denial. The poets do use other words such as *ḫurbet*, also of Arabic descent, and indicating one’s exile through one’s strangeness or foreignness. There are also more modern Kurdish options such as *tarauge*, but the poets of the nineteenth century rely most closely on *nefi* and words derived from it.

Inheriting their language from their education in Islamic theology and poetry, it cannot be surprising that these poets, different as they are, all turn to more spiritually tinged articulations of exile—including the grammatical, intellectual, and spiritual structure of opposites and contradictions—in which often the words used reference a believer’s state relative to the divine, a lover’s state relative to his beloved. These words center around a pair of opposites and describe the states the lover is, respectively, trying to move toward (*wṣl*, an Arabic verb meaning to arrive or connect) and trying to move away from (*faq*, an Arabic noun meaning “separation, parting, or departure”). Though the poets define these states in antithesis toward the other, linking them irrevocably, we will look in this chapter at how the poets experienced negation, exile, or separation, on every level. We will begin at the innermost place where home can be built and expand from there to examine expanding concentric circles of concern: the self, the beloved, the family, the city and the land.

## *The Self*

Jamil al-Zahawi's verses trumpet the value of doubt, critical thinking, and atheism. Sheikh Raza Talabani's verse tests sexual boundaries in every way. Mahwi writes traditional Sufi poetry that conflates the divine and the beloved. The poets of the nineteenth century could not be more different from one another, but they all grew up with the same religious education. Most were Sheikhs and Mullahs, spiritual leaders in their communities: the Sufi orders that raised them. As practicing Muslims and dedicated Sufis, the poets trained to exile themselves from themselves. Sheikh Abdul-Qadir Gaylani, the spiritual center and foundation of the Qadiri order, writes extensively, as many Sufi theologians do, on the practice of self-exile. The "intimate of Allah," Gaylani says, has abandoned the meat of the body, "left his being," and "is in the realm of annihilation" (al-Jilani 70-71). Only when "the powers of both the body and the mind are undermined," and man is not "under the influence of the senses," can the devoted fully realize the ecstatic state (al-Jilani 90). In even darker terms, Gaylani writes of practicing exile not just from the false self, the self that would lead one away from divine unity, but of killing the false self. "Be like an ocean," Gaylani tells his followers, "whose appearance does not change, but in which the dark soldiers of your ego are drown" (al-Jilani 96).

The disciple cannot attain union without separating from himself, even killing himself. As Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli write, "The Ottomans (also like the Europeans) inherit a long tradition of the spiritualization of love" (17). Meaning that "sexual desires or attractions are the physical manifestation of the soul's yearning for return to a divine unity from which it was separated by birth into this material world" (Andrews and Kalpakli 17). Chittick takes this concept of "yearning for return to a divine unity" to its natural, theological conclusion: "Much of the discussion of life and death in Sufi literature focuses on voluntary death, which is to surrender the soul to God" (245). In one hadith, the Prophet Mohammed responds to a question from his followers, who have all recently returned from battle in the name of Islam. One man asks, "Have we not just returned from the great *jihad*?" The Prophet responds, "We have come back from the lesser *jihad* to the greater one." While this hadith is

considered *da'if*, or weak, its message is clear: there are obvious battles in the world, outside the self, but the insidious and most dangerous battle to lose is within the self, against the self. The consistent erasure of self or ego takes dedicated and re-dedication. In another hadith that “Rūmī and others frequently cite,” the Prophet says, “Die before you die” (Chittick 245). One draws closer to unity as one moves away from the material world’s systems of rewards and affirmation: money, fame, respect. One can only find the divine home, for instance, when one detaches from a human concept of home. Gaylani describes the true lover: “His poverty of this world which he has left behind and his total need for Allah is great” (al-Jilani 70). This sustained suspicion of one’s own physical desires constitutes an earthly exile that runs even deeper into the human soul than the political exile of the time (though the turn to Sufism, Islam’s most charismatic manifestation, is likely a by-product of the political and economic upheaval and uncertainty).

For Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century, poetry and its aesthetic acuity functioned as one discipline within which to study, achieve, and practice spiritual clarity. These men were poets, yes, but also devotees; across their verses, in varying tones and from various stances, all agree: divine wisdom relates inversely to worldly acclaim, even comfort. All comes from and goes to God; all ability is refined as one draws nearer to God. Given their ambitions, many poets live suspect of their own desires. Though Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century at times lament or rebel against these rigors, for the most part, they routinely examine themselves as their own worst enemy, begging God to let them live more humbly, more in service of the Almighty.

Nali, one of the three pillars of the Babans and a father of innovation in nineteenth century Kurdish poetry, writes “[In this world]”,

In this world, the drifter is best: immaterial, detached.  
During the day: among people. At night: quiet, detached.

Image: a performance, sunk in attachment, like anyone.  
Reality: drunk with divine petitions—hidden, detached.

So what if the world awards him head to toe?  
His existence is non-existence: content, detached. (Lines 1-6)

Nali reminds himself and his reader to look away from the “world’s awards,” to cling to the idea that “existence is non-existence.” This ghazal repeats the word “detached,” as

a mantra, as a concept, it is the poem's and the poet's central concern: to remain detached, to remain clear-minded. The poem, at its conclusion, damns even the trappings of a pious life: "Tekiye, sheikh: all are traps of attachment. / Nali will go on, drunk on ruins and detachment" (lines 9-10). Nali maintains suspicion for even the outward appearance of piety, determined, as he says, to be "drunk with divine petitions," "drunk on ruins and detachment" (lines 4 and 10). Nothingness is the disciple's only intoxicant.

When Nali fails to uphold his commitment to nothingness, he vacillates between berating and bargaining with himself. In "[Even Armed]," he castigates himself, "You collect this world and the other, so / You die, possessing neither" (lines 2-4). He recalls,

Just yesterday, the world was your dear wife.  
She has turned traitor now, sick of you.

Yesterday, you spent your tongue bragging of your dignity.  
Today you regret it. You have no mouth, no breath. (Lines 5-8)

Saddened by his own vanity, he tells himself, "Your life was a single breath worth the whole world" (line 9). Again, he rebukes himself, "Your stomach is a tarp of manure that empties and fills, / Your fasts and your hopes both driven by desire and the belly" (lines 11-12). Finally, addressing himself outright, he asks, "Nali, why are you sunk like a cockroach in dung? / You always said you were a moth with his own flame" (lines 13-14). Subverting the language of how a lover speaks of himself, as a moth drawn to a flame, Nali compares himself instead to a cockroach, happy rooting in shit. Though Nali does condemn himself here, in other poems he takes a gentler approach with himself.

He bargains with himself, wheedling with his lesser parts to gain the salvation still possible. In "[Hold your breath]," he commands himself, "Hold your breath. Stop its coming and going, this / Wind that has aged you with each breeze" (lines 1-2). To incur a productive amount of shame, he says, "Your life is cash to buy renown and God's Satisfaction / But you spend it on profit and luxury and infamy" (lines 3-4). Striking a more conciliatory tone with himself, he speaks to his body, in conflict with itself, "I am amazed by you, liver. My slack heart has held / You over this fire for a while and you've yet to roast" (lines 5-6). Then comes the poem's hopeful turn. In the fourth and fifth couplets, Nali takes the wider, cosmic view of his state, at first rebuking himself for

coming unraveled and then inviting himself into the possibilities that simple survival allows. "The universe is a woman," the poet imagines,

...the planet a distaff, each orbit: grief's spindle.  
She spins the dark roots of your existence. Still you are unraveled.

The heavens meet, time spins, and the sky's hook catches  
The thread of your existence, spinning and spinning. Still, you survive.  
(Lines 7-10)

Nali survives: a chance to act differently, more as a true disciple and lover of God. He jabs at himself, "Is the world a bar? You are woozy in its cups, / Singed by its song, stunned and tipsy in its glass" (lines 11-12). He dedicates two couplets to mortify himself:

Desire to see land and ocean has set your life on fire  
You are only one link in soil's chain, one drop of frozen water.

If you are soil, soil a hem. If not, you are dust in the wind.  
If you are water, refract. If not, you are foam on the sea. (Lines 15-18)

Ambition has addled his understanding. He has forgotten how to be dust, not blown by the wind, but gripping the hem of the beloved as it brushes the ground. He has forgotten how to be one drop of water in the great oceans, breaking light open. Properly shamed, he begins to encourage himself toward redemption:

The scraps of the universe have not become the coffin's camphor. Stand.  
Tonight gives its chance: the universe is still cobalt, you still live.

Serve the supper of contrition, so your body won't be the tablecloth.  
Break the glass teacup, so you do not break. (Lines 19-22)

There are commands here—"Stand," "Serve," "Break"—but there is a greater sense of pleading with himself. He must serve or he will become a fleeting object rather than the man he is. He must break the fragile vessel of material ambitions or they will break him. Nali's relationship to his own transgressions is erratic. He is most likely to wade into what he has decided is wrong, only to reproach himself at a later date, or even later in the same poem. When he writes his barely euphemistic, highly sexualized insult to fellow-poet Mestura, he allows himself a mountain of couplets before cutting himself off painfully, instructing himself not to be the 'flag that flaps in the desire's winds.' He waits so long to interrupt the reverie that one can only imagine he finds satisfactions in both

the offense and the censure. It is almost as if he does one so that he may do the other, playing with human boundaries, with what is permitted and required.

The superficial heir to Nali's play between the forbidden and required, his implicit questioning of the distinction itself, is Sheikh Raza Talabani. Certainly, where Nali edges up and looks over the cliffs, Sheikh Raza joyfully throws himself off. Nali's experiments provide a modicum of cultural shelter for Sheikh Raza to run his own. That said, the two poets conceive of indiscretion, specifically their indiscretions, differently. Nali, a celebrated poet embraced by his age, bears his more lightly, almost as a necessary element of his practice. An old idea: one must sin to beg forgiveness. And a most practical stance for a man attempting a life of the spirit in a world that tempts and rewards flesh. Sheikh Raza, the disappointing second son, the great Talabani family's 'Mad Sheikh,' is at times crushed by his indiscretions. He should be able to resist, to govern himself. Any curse, however pleasurable, is a slip. But, by nature, he slips and delights in slippage; he swings like a pendulum between heralding himself the greatest poet and apologizing to his family for sharing their revered lineage.

Sheikh Raza is not the sole inheritor when it comes to the question of self-suspicion. In fact, Nali's concerns, those of a true devotee, span the entire century and are shared across generations of poets trained as students in the Islamic sciences and the Sufi discipline. Even poets as disparate as Mahwi and Jamil al-Zahawi, one a devout Muslim and the other a self-proclaimed atheist, make self-doubt and doubt of the visible world their habit.

Mahwi practiced erasure. In fact, his penname means "erased" or "deleted." He found identity not just in the surrendering, but the annihilation of himself. Accepting, even pursuing this kind of human exile, to Mahwi, ushered in the only real arrival, the lasting homecoming. In "[Love's Hermitage]," Mahwi establishes his residence, "Love's hermitage is my republic. I won't leave / Even if it burns. I'm just a handful of kindling" (lines 1-2). He establishes he lives in love; even if that republic burns down, who is he? Just a handful of kindling, a little fuel for the fire. He gives up every earthly 'order,' the word most would use for delineating spiritual practices, choosing the 'path,' the word most would use for the idea of Sufism or seeking itself: "Prayer didn't touch her, so I became the dirt under her feet. / I reject the Order of Isolation. I choose the

road" (lines 3-4). He sees his own short-comings. He sees that he has abandoned honor, pride: high values of his immediate world, "I abandoned prayer's red face. I live in shame's yellow face" (line 7). He mourns that though "The Gardener named [him] "apple," [he] fruit[s] quince" (line 8). He sees what a poor servant he is to love, though he maintains his desire to serve: "Lose the self, become bound, measure mud, burn: / Love has so much work to do. I stand in line" (lines 9-10). The criticism of the world cannot touch him: "In return for cold words, I sigh blazing breath. / He who throws a stone at me, I throw a storm at him" (lines 15-16). He knows, and gives gratitude, that he sees the world for what it is: a chance to transcend. "Thank God, Mahwi is aware," the poet writes, "the world is a cesspool. / When people get drunk, why should I seize on the trespass" (lines 17-18)? Effacing himself, he appears. Mahwi, by language and by desire, exists only by erasure.

And this is the most common manifestation of how Mahwi sees himself. He prefers exile from himself, suspicion of his impulses. In one notable exception, "[I went after the moon]," he exhibits disobedience to the Beloved. The transgression, though, rises from love:

I went after the moon—in my head.  
An angel! No, not her. Just night and me, in my head.

A single daffodil, I fill the garden of wonder  
Yet wilt early, a heavy bloom in my head.

My feet grumble at my head—another burden to bear—  
That when my beloved comes, I go to her in my head.

I knew the badlands of love were dangerous.  
Still I went, to survive or get gone.

In the time of soul-stripping, the lover's soul  
Said, "Finally, I can get gone from this house of suffering."

Her leaving transformed me into a phoenix.  
She went off to travel and I am gone to the inferno.

She said, "Don't come this way. You're on my way."

She never came this way and I am always gone that way. (Lines 1-14)  
Love deceives the lover. Love blossoms into an infection, bringing the lover to his knees. Whenever the beloved calls, the lover runs to her until his feet and his head

complain. Knowing the dangers, the lover embarks. The lover welcomes the end of all this contradiction, death's simplicity. The lover burns in his beloved's absence. What commands and promises she gives him, the lover disregards. Perhaps, Mahwi, the most amenable of the nineteenth century Kurdish poets tells us, love makes us all revolutionaries. Love commands and corrupts obedience. Mahwi is both the most spiritual and, from some perspectives, the most dangerous, of the nineteenth-century poets. Though his sentences always sound sweet, his sentiments here foment fundamental insurrection, driven by love.

The Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century move along the spectrum between approbation and condemnation, acceptance and doubt. Though Mahwi and Sheikh Raza could not look more different on the surface, they share the same central question: what does Love do to us? And more: when we give ourselves over to Love, what becomes of us? How can the world make sense of us, transfigured as Love makes us? How can we make sense of the world, altered as Love leaves us? And who is Love as a beloved?

Wafai considers these questions, with all their attendant ecstasy and doubt.

“[Tonight, in my dreams]” begins,

Tonight, in my dreams, I was a lantern, the heart was a lantern, being was  
a lantern.

Ah, in last night's life, the body was a lantern, her body was a lantern.

Once an angel, once a fairy, once a virgin's eye, and once an angel,  
Once a moon, once Jupiter, once the sun, and once a lustrous lantern.

Color by color, her hair shone. My mouth by her mouth, her face  
appeared.

Is she forty lanterns or a full-moon lantern or a hundred-colored lantern?

(Lines 1-6)

As if in a painting, the light in these lines comes impossibly from more than one direction. Is the poet the source? The heart? Being itself? The body of the beloved? What is the beloved? At the very least, the beloved is light. When the lover's mouth finds the mouth of the beloved, the beloved appears. As in creation myths across monotheism, man is a mirror for his creator, the lover is proof of the beloved—the beloved who is so much light that perhaps she is a chandelier, a full moon or a hundred stained-glass panels throwing off hundred-colored light. Wafai continues,

She gave me light: she turned her face to me. I saw my nights become  
days.

I burned. I was amazed. I was a lantern. Or was I a lantern?

The heart on one side, the body on the other, were canebreaks that  
caught fire.

Mosque, temple, and church remain, shining as full lanterns.

Trees and stones burned, like me. The entry is gone. The porch is gone.  
The surface and the substance were lanterns. The entry, the porch: each  
a lantern. (Lines 17-22)

The beloved, turning her face to the lover, makes his nights days. The lover burns, amazed, feeling himself lit up from within, then immediately doubting. Man exists to catch fire where houses of worship remain, burning from within as full lanterns. All this ecstasy, though, for a man who lives through it, must fade. The lover lives ecstasy to ecstasy. The trees and stones burn. The entry and porch disappear. All that was light darkens. Wafai writes of this moment, "Chaos filled the bar. The bar came to ruin. The lantern cried, [...] / The lily became deaf and dumb / Wafai became hushed and low like a lantern in the early morning hours" (lines 28-30). Union with the beloved exiles the lover from his corporeal understanding, his earthly place in his own body, let alone among the family of men. Separation from the beloved brings the poet back to his body, back to the earthly world in which lilies do not hear or speak, in which people, like lanterns in the early morning hours, are "hushed and low." But this return to what men understand as "the self" is no end to exile, only the beginning of another.

Piramerd, much like Nali, sees his own failures and turns to prayer, begging the Almighty to form him as God's perfect servant. In "God, I see," Piramerd writes,

God, I see.  
I deny my own actions.  
You gave me a heart and tongue  
That desire and lust have made my enemy.  
I want to empty my heart of all but You,  
To remember only You, forget all others.  
Then, my tongue would chant Your name.  
I could become the servant of Your places.  
If I remain as I am,  
I will sow evil names like seeds. (Lines 1-10)

Piramerd uses the final line of this poem to petition that God let him, like the great Sufi poets he admired, "also burn for beauty" (line 20).

In “God Without Need,” Piramerd reinforces the concept that exile from the world opens the lover to knowledge of the beloved: “Free me from greed,” the poet writes,

Your gift, whatever it is, delights me.  
When I need nothing from the world’s people,  
I will know You, You and You alone,  
I will weave for no one,  
I will leech from no house,  
I’m so deaf, God, to knowledge of You.  
Give me a ready mind so I may know you. (Lines 9-16)

Piramerd, speaking to God, simultaneously owns his own moral inabilities, but also asks God to see the bind man lives within:

You lead into good work  
If I don’t sin on my own, no one forces me to it.  
If my sin is at Your order,  
How can my punishment be as well?  
I don’t deny Your justice.  
My inner self puts me in the path of sin.  
God, accept me. (Line 17-23)

The poet, subtly making excuses, tells God: “You plead, ‘Do it,’ yet withhold. / You plead, ‘Don’t do it,’ and put the Devil in it” (lines 29-30). Man lives between temptation and temptation, given free will, but not perfect judgment. Piramerd cleverly makes his case. Piramerd’s imperfections, however he detests them, are God’s doing and so, the poet positions his prayer:

God, this heart you gave me,  
I don’t want it ever empty of Your remembrance.  
I want a flower to rise from my mud,  
Colored and scented in remembrance of Your judgment. (Lines 25-28)

Though Piramerd comes from a slant angle, these verses echo the self-annihilation that Mahwi and others of the century embrace. In “The Universe,” Piramerd accepts, “The universe doesn’t allow happiness forever. / He who is a man must live door to door” (lines 1-2). He states plainly, “Sleep is death. Even if the wolf of destiny arrives / And sinks his teeth into our legs, no one wakes” (lines 13-14). He expresses his desire for the death that will bring him all life: “When I fell into the pond, I swam to survive, / But I desired the depth, not the river’s swift current” (lines 19-20). Piramerd, Nali, Mahwi, Wafai—they all agree, their Islamic and Sufi training shining through: alone, they can do nothing; as nothing, they can be all. God, as the only power, is the only help, the only capacity, toward obliteration.

Doubt and insignificance for Zahawi are critical not as religious or spiritual concepts, but as scientific realities. Zahawi, a student of both the Islamic and Western sciences, prizes doubt as the driver of progress and the source of exploration. Zahawi, as a proponent of scientific ideas and methods, experiences self-doubt and a sense of his own insignificance much as a Sufi would—as growth, energy, and ultimately an exiling force in his life. In the “The Visible and The Veiled,” Zahawi structures his suppositions as possibilities. “Maybe,” he says, over and over: “...maybe, annihilated, life / Is only cells to join the ether” (lines 7-8). And “maybe the ether sees,” and “maybe the ether hears,” and “maybe the ether knows...” (lines 11-15). Maybe all the natural forces at work are conscious, maybe the natural world is animated by a living and monotheistic God—and, by implication, maybe not. Obeying scientific precepts, Zahawi can never know. In fact, he must always hold only hypotheses that he only tests, never proving.

This doubt, while intellectually consistent for Zahawi, performs a practical function: it allows the poet to publicly express explosive ideas. His “maybe” offers his readers distance from the ideas they precede. His “maybe” de-escalates the threat in those lines. As it is, the poet ends this particular poem with a linguistic shrug: “This is me,” Zahawi concedes, “So, what if / The crowd agrees I’m a sinner” (lines 27-28). Indifference becomes plain lament just one line later: “I wish I had come centuries later” (line 30). The poet who embraces the principles of the scientific method must live in exile, in constant doubt of himself and his world, for different reasons, but in sympathy with the Sufis he lived and wrote among. Zahawi quickly recovers from the lament; only a line later, he voices his own insignificance, in-step with the Sufi poets of his time:

Though	But this existence is a sprawling sea:	Beachless, boundless.	their
	I am just a bubble on its surface.	So, I appear. So, I vanish.	
		(Lines 31-34)	

approaches and reasons vary, the poets all agree, as Bekhod, one of the century’s last poets, writes, “Brother, until you become the dust and ash under your own feet, / You won’t be able to grasp even the hem of goodness” (lines 19-20). Nothingness, and all its inherent exiles, are where the lover, the great poet, lives.



## *The Beloved*

When a Sufi poet describes or longs for or even touches his beloved, we see the poet fashioning a metaphor from the physical world for the metaphysical. This metaphor's longevity and power comes from the double life it can lead as metaphor—and reality. This metaphor read as reality immediately confers an atmosphere of transgression: the poem invites the reader to wonder if the poet or speaker is actually touching his beloved, actually waiting at her doorstep like a faithful dog, actually ripping his shirt open and moaning through city streets, in pain from his beloved's absence. The worldly transgression these poems can reference with this metaphor increase the drama of the poems by increasing the risk for the lover. These acts, construed humanly, put the lover far outside the circle of socially accepted human acts. Just by employing the metaphor, the poet has set himself outside the values of his family and society.

This metaphor has historical significance among the interpretations and writing of Sufi mystics over time. Hallaj (d. 304/922) recasts the Qur'anic story of Iblis, the angel who falls and becomes the devil. Hallaj's Iblis

defends himself by saying that he was an absolute monotheist and that he could never bow before any other being than the one deity, even at the divine command. Drawing on the poetic tradition, Iblis presents himself as the loyal lover who will not abandon loyalty to the beloved (in his case his monotheism) even at the cost of annihilation, or worse, eternal separation from the beloved. (Sells 22)

By reinventing this story, Hallaj offers an alternative conception of transgression and consequence. Here, disobedience is an act of love and exile a mode of remembrance. More importantly, Hallaj's story shows the complete surrender of the lover to the Beloved. Hallaj's Iblis, what the West would recognize as a tragic hero, shows that the lover's "soul dwells in separation (*firāq*)" and "longs for union (*wiṣāl*)" (Chittick 340). This longing for the lover, Kheznedar writes, obliterates any other longing: "A Sufi's heart doesn't contain anything except the affliction of adoring the beloved. His heart has no room for anything else" (4: 236). Rabi'a, an eighth century Sufi figure, "When asked if she hated Satan or loved Muhammad, [...] answered neither, that she had room only for one concern, love of the divine beloved" (Sells 21). Ache, longing, and exile are

“understood as an essential component of love” (Chittick xv). “Moreover,” Chittick maintains, “God in His mercy wants people to suffer” (340).

As with any metaphor, the beloved-as-God highlights and hides certain elements of the divine nature, foregrounding elements of the corporeal. God, by monotheistic definition, is all the omni’s: omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, etc. By definition, God defies human definitions of space and time. By mapping the physical nature of the beloved onto this monotheistic God, the lover, the poet, articulates intimacy and confers tangibility onto a remarkably present, but intangible entity. Though the beloved, divine or corporeal, transcends physical form, the having of physical form allows the lover to find home. The home that is the beloved’s body is both a metaphor—Divine Love is home to all lovers—and a reality: the body has skin—borders, the lover can find personal and political home between those borders. This theme, begun here in the nineteenth century, will continue on into the twentieth and twenty-first century as Kurds, a stateless nation, struggle to come home. Abdulla Pashew, perhaps the most famous Kurdish poet living today, will say, in his poem “Union,”

I don’t know how to become one with you.  
If you’re an occupied territory, tell me.  
I will make my skin your flag.  
If you are, as I am, a gypsy,  
draw a border around me:  
make me your country. (Lines 6-11)

Sherko Bekas, one of the most famous and beloved Kurdish poets of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, will write a book-length poem titled, *Now a Girl is My Homeland*, reassigning the power of the homeland to his beloved, sitting not by the headwaters of Sarchinar, but under the waterfalls of his beloved’s hair, by the banks of her body. In the nineteenth century, though, these overt declarations were rather more subtle inklings. In “[I didn’t die],” Nali tell his reader,

I see all peoples of all genders, yet  
There is no one in this city without you.

Until I knew you, I knew others.  
Now, each hair of my body is stranger to the next. (Lines 9-12)

One can see the world, but unless one sees the beloved, one sees nothing. The beloved’s body is home; all else is exile. The world is empty without the beloved, though one can recognize its apparent fullness. And yet, once one knows the beloved, one is a

stranger to one's self. The beloved becomes the only knowledge, the only home. The lover can never be at home within himself. The beloved can be trusted where the self is always suspect. The beloved is pure, cruel perhaps, but always pure.

Salim echoes Nali in his "[The wide knot]:"

The wide knot, after some untangling, passed.  
The riot and joy the beloved caused in my heart also passed.

I sank onto the beloved's doorstep. The doorman beat me.  
In the eye of my enemy, I had dignity. That also passed.

The lantern flickers out across the night's distances.  
The days of the beloved arriving, these have also passed.

I wish I weren't stripped, though it is the lunatic's practice.  
When palms tore my collar, I felt it a credit. That has also passed.

(Lines 1-8)

Here, Salim elaborates on what will emerge as another common theme across these poems: the sense that union is only preface to separation, joy only a harbinger of sorrow. Riot, joy, arriving at the beloved's doorstep—these are temporary where the dream of arrival is eternal. Salim concludes this poem by admitting that, "Waking or sleeping, I dream of arrival," only to, in the same line, admonish himself, "Enough sorrow, Salim, / The kiss, the embrace, all was a dream that passed" (lines 11-12). Arrival is a dream one cannot sustain. One can only live, longing, within the dream of arrival.

In "[The tongue's speech]," Salim reinforces these ideas, "Her kiss gave me the happiness of happiness, but / The universe found its revenge. Before me is hell after hell" (lines 5-6). As in the previous poem, union here acts only as preface to departure. The cosmos—in Arabic and Kurdish, this word is often used as a synonym for the divine presence—intends union only as the foil to separation. The kiss, that moment of touch and connection, only teaches the poet how to savor distance.

In fact, counter-intuitively, arrival for a lover of the Sufi practice is death. What the lover most seeks, union with his beloved, would for a Sufi mean the annihilation of his self in his God. Life, by extension, is the constant striving toward annihilation and, on the road to arrival, the constant survival of separation. Wafai, in "[I'm waiting for the breeze]," uses five different metaphors across five different stanzas to express this

central idea. In the poem's second couplet, he takes the natural world as his metaphor, making separation deep winter, his heart the mountain, and the beloved's arrival, a warm wind: "The threatening winter snows and separation weigh on my heart / Without your promised arrival, a wind, the mountain of my heart blackens" (lines 3-4). In the fourth couplet, he applies the metaphor of the beloved as a candle, the lover as the moth, and arrival as the flame: "Your hair is at fault: my heart, a moth, turned to your face. / Arrival is a flame, lit at night, between candle and moth" (lines 7-8). Later in the poem, Wafai again relies on the natural world for metaphor, transforming separation into the raging ocean and the beloved as a clever fisherman: "A hundred times you tossed me into the ocean's whirlpool: separation. / Each time, the hook of your eyelashes fished me out" (lines 15-16). In the following stanza, arrival becomes a seed and the poet a farmer: "Arrival's seed doesn't take root in fields of kindness and love. / I plant happiness to flower—sorrow spreads into thorn" (lines 17-18). Arrival does not come from kindness or love, but from sorrow, difficulty. Wafai concludes: "I sacrifice for you. The heart falls into sorrow's deep well. / Send just one strand of hair that I might haul it out" (lines 21-22). The poet begs of the beloved just the smallest of mercies, a single hair, that his poor heart might survive to long for the beloved another day. Each of these five metaphors serve to reinforce the idea that the lover's life is precious tribulation.

Hamdi agrees—and bluntly—in "[The lover and the Sufi]." He writes, "Arrival and separation are poverty and fortune. / Arrival is trouble. Separation is simple" (lines 19-20). By parallel construction, Hamdi has told us arrival is poverty where separation is fortune. In the next line, he is even clearer: beware arrival. Trust in separation, a crucible that can only purify the lover. Nari begins "[She sends me, without fault]," by recounting his relationship with the beloved:

She sends me, without fault, before the archers of her eyelashes.  
I don't prevent her. I cry out. The shout makes a good meal.

I am forced, sentenced to serve at her gate.

Love of her face, a riot, compels me to keep her door. (Lines 1-4)

His degradation, his wailing, is sustenance. He sees how his servitude sustains him, though, he acknowledges, "My state, my imagination, oh, Nari, has become so chaotic / That people fear my poems as they would a savage" (lines 21-22). It is one transgression to feel these ways, to behave in accordance with these ideas, but to

commit them to paper is a third act of aggression against social mores. Articulating his exile from his beloved, he exiles himself from all human understanding of acceptance.

This state of exile from the beloved, incurring all other worldly exile, can evoke in the poet fear for himself as a man, even perhaps anger at a man's own corporeality. Salim says, in "[Let the heart]," "Let the heart be ruined, as it ruined me" (line 1). The heart and its desires ruin man, so man wishes ruin on the heart: the traitor living within his body. And yet, the heart is also the mirror we polish to see the Beloved, the divine. Bekhod, later in the century, writes disparagingly in "[My heart for the hair]," "This old heart, like a drunkard / In the corner of the tekiye, cries for the bar" (lines 7-8). The heart is both the path and the pit, the mirror and the well into which we can fall. In "[Since she left, I am]," Bekhod writes, "Since she left, I am estranged from my heart. / How I search. There's no trace of my heart" (lines 1-2). His heart is not his own, but the beloved. He can search his own body, but he will not find his heart. "What ocean," Bekhod wonders, "has my heart fallen into? It drowns" (line 8). He continues, "He is like chaff in the mouth of the wind, my heart" (line 16). This heart, lost to the body, drowning in some ocean, is finally carried away, like dust, on some wind.

The heart, fundamentally, cannot be trusted. In "[Yesterday night, to our party]," Bekhod argues:

A punctured heart must, from time to time, spill its secrets.  
Grain by grain, the lentil and the pea will drop from a sieve, a beak.

Until morning, she gives me the bud of her mouth.  
I moan like the nightingale. She sings like the partridge.

Don't trust the scab crusted over the heart's wound.  
Peel back that skin, Bekhod, you'll see it's infected. (Lines 13-18)

The heart is not to blame. The "punctured heart" was built to, from "time to time," leak. The heart was not built as a reliable vessel. It is the center of wisdom and also one origin of man's "lesser" impulses. Wafai, too, accuses the heart. In "[I grieve over you]," he writes, "I'm a nightingale, not a moth. Take no pleasure from my burning. // My heart doesn't mind me. It delights in my insides on fire" (lines 8-9). Hamdi, meditating on the heart and its disappointments in "[If I hadn't fallen ill]," concludes, "When it comes to love, Hamdi, don't taunt the heart. / It is the soul that burdened this neck, the day it said

yes” (lines 11-12)<sup>2</sup>. Where Salim and Wafai blame the heart, Hamdi finds fault with the soul, the one who agreed, the day before birth according to Islam, to tie itself to the body. That moment of marriage between the corporeal and the ethereal, Hamdi argues, is when all the trouble began.

And there is fear here. A man may wish to efface the animal of himself, but if he succeeds, he dies. Death may be union, but it is also death. Sheikh Raza, in “[I know the verdict],” admits, “...I fear the pain of separation / will end me, that no day in the country of union is allotted me” (lines 5-6). There is fear in the Sufi path—a man is still a man even though he pursues the spiritual. Fear can dog his love—fear that he cannot survive the separation, fear that union will never arrive and that he will live in constant disunion, even fear that the beloved will arrive, and her arrival will be his undoing.

Wafai, in “[The heart moans],” writes:

With my soul on my lip, I wait for you by Sinai’s light.  
Just once, show yourself because you want to. Death is my desire.

The sign and glance of your eye pierced my heart.  
I have become a target for the Turks, they have cut my liver in pieces.  
(Lines 5-8)

The poet, his soul on his lip, waits for the beloved by the light of Mount Sinai. In this holy place, the poet begs his beloved, “Show yourself.” And yet the poet knows this unveiling, the full revelation of the Beloved’s face, will kill him. But here, Wafai is not worried; death is, in fact, his desire.

One specific and recurring instantiation of mortal fear on the path to divine love is that the lover will turn from the true faith, becoming an infidel. But this is also something the poets celebrate: turning one’s self over to love so fully that even religion kneels to the force. In “[On doomsday],” Salim says, “And if I don’t bow to the mihrab of her eyebrow, I’ll be damned” (line 4). In “[I know the verdict],” Sheikh Raza maintains, “Those tempting eyes of yours -- enchantresses, witches: / a glance, a wink, and they turn an anchorite of a hundred years” (lines 7-8). Later in the same poem, Sheikh Raza writes, “A Sheikh, if his eyes fall on your hair, would change / his robe and prayer beads

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<sup>2</sup> A short note on form: this poem’s rhyme scheme relies on the sound “la,” meaning “no,” in Arabic. Given the importance, and betrayal, of “yes” in this poem, it would be wonderful if the poet had intended that formal and contextual turn. We cannot be sure given that many poems in the collection of his poems draw on this same rhyme scheme.

for the gartel<sup>3</sup>, crucifix, cross” (lines 15-16). More personally, in desperation, Mahwi writes in “[If I can’t see],” “The mullah’s hand and his beloved’s hair, a zunnar<sup>4</sup>, don’t share a path. / So, a sheikh, I choose the Christian Order. What else can I do” (lines 5-6)? The debasement of turning from Islam to the Jewish or Christian orders is only the beginning. In the next couplet, Mahwi continues, “Before that beauty’s path, I made myself dust. Still, she wouldn’t step on me. / So, I throw the whole world’s dust on my head. What else can I do” (lines 7-8)? In “[My eyes, don’t point the arrow],” Nari contends, “By *sharia*, I deserve *zakat*: your beauty” (line 19). Hamdi, in “[The blood of the wise heart],” a ghazal in which he redefines what is lawful and illegal, *halal* and *haram*, says,

The sermonizer forbids me to gaze, but he has others in mind.  
Like the sun’s, my gaze on the beloved’s cheek is lawful.

The heart worships sight, before and behind the eyebrow.  
This Ka’aba, for wayfaring idolaters, is lawful. (Lines 13-16)

Love makes sacred what appears apostasy. Wafai opens “[From my head to toes],” “From my head to my toes, I cried out, burning, and my beloved didn’t come. / I blackened my eyes with the dust from her path, and my being’s comfort didn’t come” (lines 1-2). He continues, “The Ka’aba of my soul, my beloved, I’m amazed: still she hasn’t appeared. / The Qibla of my prayers, the physician for my mysterious illness, didn’t come” (lines 13-14). What begins as his being’s comfort becomes the Ka’aba for his soul, the Qibla of his prayers. Longing accomplishes this transformation.

Among all the poets, Wafai returns most frequently to this image. In “[The fall wind],” he calls out to his beloved,

Oh, mineshaft of milk and sugar, oh, flower-thief, heart-thief,  
Oh, new flower on the flowering tree in the garden of my heaven,

No one knows the secret of that mouth, the love of that waistline.  
My tears shed all the heart’s secret speech. Such gossips. (Lines 9-12)

He mourns his state: “I am the owl, yet I love morning” (line 18). Finally, he must concede, “My Qibla is gone into the wine of the old, drunken magi” (line 22). In “[The

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<sup>3</sup> Gartel: a belt devout Jewish men wear to separate the ethereal (the mind and heart) from the temporal (the genitals).

<sup>4</sup> Zunnar: a belt that the Pact of Umar required Christians to wear to set them apart.

heart moans],” he tells his beloved, “Your beauty musses me like your mussed hair / Oh, lantern of Muslims and infidels...” (lines 31-32). His sorrow, he says, comes from his failure: “I died without reaching the Qibla: your arched eyebrows” (line 35). Finally, in “[I grieve over you],” Wafai declares, “I’m love’s infidel. Don’t convert me to Islam with your Qibla” (line 6). He forswears the markers of faith he knows and embraces the new markers of his new faith. Wafai perhaps most ardently uses this image, but he is far from alone in its use. Throughout all the poetry of the nineteenth century, across the various styles and lifetimes, the theme of love making the lover an infidel persists. Love reorients the lover toward the beloved. All other monuments fade into the far-reaching shadow of the beloved.

We see a man can fall to the beloved, the divine. But a man, being corporeal, can also fall to his enemies—the Turks, the Persians. Surrendering to the beloved or Beloved bears honor in it where surrendering to one’s enemy carries with it shame. Surrender to the beloved, or Beloved, can spare a man a humiliating earthly submission to the Turks or Persians. Nineteenth-century Kurdish poets cannot see a life for themselves as men, or Kurds, without one surrender or the other. If he must acquiesce, Wafai implies, he will submit to the divine authority, an annihilation that in killing him, saves him humiliation at the hands of the Turks. In the poem above, “[The heart moans],” the “sign and glance” of the beloved’s eye only ‘pieces’ his heart. Barely alive, the lover becomes “a target for the Turks” who “cut” his “liver in pieces.” In “[I grieve over you],” Wafai says, “With a glance, you bring me before the firing squad of your eyelashes” (line 11). “Don’t wait,” he commands his beloved, “Shoot. I’ll not be a Turkish captive” (line 12). Surrender, in both the divine and ethereal cases, is more than surrender: it is death—and death at the hands of the beloved, which results ultimately, spiritually speaking in life, outstrips death at the hands of one’s enemies.

Similarly, the illness of love outshines human conceptions of health. Rather than try to shake the malady, the poets cling to it. Exile from the beloved, painful though it may be, is relationship to the beloved. In “[The heart moans],” Wafai says, “Injury, illness, sulking are all like fresh juice to me” (line 16). In “[I grieve over you],” he instructs: “You who haven’t burned, don’t you stop my crying” (line 10). He addresses his would-be doctor, “Don’t ask me, doctor, how many times my beloved has murdered

me / And don't cure me. It would be pointless. The illness of love is sweetest" (lines 13-14). Nari, in "[My eyes, don't point the arrow]," seconds his sentiment: "My illness is heavy, oh gentle physician, / Don't trouble yourself over my cure. It's pointless" (lines 5-6). Arrival is death. Distance is life. Life is only longing, the lover's illness.

These themes we can pull out in threads, but the weave of the cloth comes from the poem in its entirety. Throughout the dissertation, I analyze every poem piece by piece, but here I will intentionally present this poem of Bekhod's in its totality so the reader can draw her own meaning from Bekhod's (and his translators') lexical choices, so that the reader can decide how (and if) Bekhod's syntax contributes to his meaning, so that she can see how, across the course of one uninterrupted poem, Bekhod deftly knots together the fears, the angers, the joys and devotions of the lover's perpetual exile from the beloved:

Heaven's abundant spring is the whirlpool of my watery eyes.  
Hell is the fiery pit of my smoking heart.  
I wonder: is it electricity that has made nights just like days?  
Or is it the glowing flames of that fiery pit?  
Is it the furious, soaking rain that swells Khasa Spring or  
Tears that flood my red eyes?  
Not one place remains for me in this water-logged world.  
I mean, hold off on "flood," this world is saturated ground.  
Is it kebab? The fat tail of a sheep frying? That smell coming from far off?  
Or the smell of my miserable liver and heart frying like meat in a pan?  
Is a nest of honeybees swarming tonight?  
Or is that the growling of my pierced chest?  
This sigh is not over heartbreak or accusation.  
It is sickness: an accidental stone that broke some glass.  
I am poor, without people. Sorrow is before me.  
Sorrow is my bread, my water, my tea, my meat, my rice.  
I am untied. Still my soul, my heart  
Gushes over those straight bangs in their layers.  
And youth, don't you think I shake with age.  
I shake from the arrow of a young beauty's glance.  
The memory of sweat on a beauty's neck  
Is my cologne, perfume, rosewater.  
A beauty's smiling lips are  
A bud, watered by the water of life.  
A beauty's eyelash is a hundred knives of Abraham  
Dulled from sacrifices like me.  
I am not a moth in love with an unlit candle.  
I am a moth around a lantern, eternally shining.

I am the Majnoon for Leila's doe eyes,  
My own witness to my decent psyche and torn collar.  
Joseph's touch is not mine. Take it from me, beloved.  
I must recite your letter. I must risk love.  
The tip of the blade of the eyebrow, singular as  
Egyptian women's, has cut the palm of his hand with desire.  
For one pinch of the mud of heaven's sighs  
I become a daffodil, always looking, looking.

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The mud's slope is a mirror for my eyes.  
Breaking His heart is a sin I consume.  
The mud of dust and gravel and chipped stones is my  
Gold and silver and coin and cash.  
That mud, that dust, that landed on my head  
I wouldn't trade that hat for the crown of Khosrau or Jam.  
Oh, circling hawk, for God's sake, why not catch  
Your prey: the partridge of my flown heart.  
Thinking of you is the only cause of my life.  
Worshipping you is the only strength in my knees.  
Describing your face is the only speech on my tongue.  
Your trembling hair is my entire messy imagination.  
He is a Kurd, a child, who has lost his father.  
I cry facing Medina, "Father! Father!"  
Don't look at these wet eyes. By God, I am shamed.  
These aren't tears; they are dripping humiliation.  
I don't care if I never rest, but  
I fear you will command me to sit still.  
Bad work nags my good.  
What do I do? My house is looted.  
So, plead, "Leash the servant at my door.  
He is a blackened dog.  
By night, a dog. By day, a pup.  
He guards. He hunts."  
I have nothing but poems and ghazals  
To serve you. I send these two gifts always  
Dedicated to my master. In return, only say,  
"Bekhod has earned my promise with these prayers."

## *The Family*

Two of the most striking examples of familial exile among the nineteenth-century Kurdish poets are Sheikh Raza Talabani, the second son of the Kirkuk's, and one of Kurdistan's, most powerful Sufi family, and Jamil al-Zahawi, a Kurd by birth who grew up in Baghdad, the arguably-atheist son of the Mufti of Baghdad. The chasms the two men endured between themselves and their families are so vast as to be instructive: how did these poets fit—or not—with their families? How did the idea of exile creep into even the idea of family? How did the poets who experienced this distance from their families transform that particular pain into poetry? How did their poetry act as a place for them to rail against the way their era treated them and to accept themselves, however humbly or arrogantly? The poetry of both Sheikh Raza Talabani and Jamil al-Zahawi offer ample territory for analysis of these questions.

The Talabanis had, in three generations, become a leading force in the regional resurgence of Sufism. The family reached one peak, geographically and financially speaking, of their power with Sheikh Raza's father, Sheikh Ali. The spiritual guidance of the network of mosques and tekiyes, a kind of religious hostel for study and sustenance, passed from father to son. When Sheikh Raza's father passed, Sheikh Raza's brother, Sheikh Ali, assumed his place—and Sheikh Raza went the usual way of second sons, with all the usual frustrations of a second son. He found himself having to beg position from his brother or his uncle, a sheikh in Koye, a city north of Kirkuk into which the family had expanded its Order.

By his own admission, Sheikh Raza was a complicated man to keep around. He was full of contradiction. One moment, he would be writing of his deep devotion to God; another moment, he would be writing about how he never intended to pay that Bulgarian male prostitute he seduced. Had he stopped at pointing out his own foibles, perhaps he would have been easier to excuse, but he called others to justice, no matter how high their station. He could not be hushed. In his poem, “[If, in this state, I return],” he says, “...I can't be controlled: by nature, I am not like others” (line 15). After flattering himself as “gentle, nomadic, and meek” (line 16), he says, “I embrace this world / that so far hasn't made me slave to master” (lines 17-18). But in a tribal world, he who has

no master is either the headman or the cast away. This dichotomy epitomizes Raza's consistent pendulum swing from terrific arrogance to abject humility: the poet's twin necessities.

What hones the poet, though, can come close to breaking the man. Sheikh Raza was not a man to serve a master—still he needed some source of income. In “[The day I spurned Kirkuk],” he summarizes his life story. Falling short of the family throne, he “spurned Kirkuk” (line 1) and sought refuge with his Uncle, Sheikh Ghafoor: “The universe dragged me, leashed tight, to Koye, / as the guest of Uncle Ghafoor” (lines 2-3). This destination, though, was not what he dreamed. Rather than flourishing under his Uncle's care, he “faded” (line 4). He “wanted to tour Ottoman lands” (line 5), but his uncle “forbid it and heaped / hundreds of white-haired mullahs on [his] head” (lines 5-6). Unsympathetic to Sheikh Raza's desire to travel, to understand the world, Sheikh Ghafoor says instead, “‘Let him sit,’ he said, ‘I will give him my daughter in marriage. / I will attach him to this world, make him respectable’” (lines 7-8). These promises—marriage, a place in the family, perhaps even inheritance of his Uncle's tekiye—swayed Sheikh Raza. He stayed and served.

But the promises were false. For his work and loyalty, Raza received no compensation. He complains in “[The day I spurned Kirkuk]” that his clothing is worn down to its threads, that he has no hat to wear, that for “six months, [these] fantasies kept me beside him” (line 11). He moans, “I didn't know, break my neck, I'd annihilate myself in failure” (line 12). Here he makes a tragic word play: annihilate is the word Sufis tend to use when they speak of shedding ego and seeking union with God. He came to Koye to annihilate himself in God, and in so doing to find a place within his family and his world. Instead, he found only the annihilation of failure. He was humiliated. He has, he says, mostly himself to blame,

I told myself, Work well. Uncle will be kind.  
Ay, good work, suitable beard, by God,  
the hardworking, even authorized, shouldn't copy.  
I am hardworking, yet I came and copied the donkey.  
I shit on the kindness he gave me.  
I forsake this mercy and kindness. (Lines 15-20)

He regrets having yoked himself to his uncle. The kindness he hoped to find was no kindness, but further neglect and humiliation.

This leaves Sheikh Raza in a bind. Where can he go? At some point in his life, he visited Tehran and, by reports, found favor with the Shah. He visited Istanbul and provoked the Sultan. He lived for a time in Egypt. We cannot say precisely when those travels occurred, but at the close of this poem, he finds himself longing for a sense of home that he cannot claim. Having spurned Kirkuk, his hometown, and burned all connections in Koye, what will he do?

Seeing the arrogance of [Ghafoor's] heart, I said over and again,  
"Oh, God, why did I fight with Sheikh Ali?"  
I must return to his side, though he will say, "Back again,  
after I kicked him out, the shiftless rat,  
Raza, the cause of our infamy." Returning  
in disgrace and shame? I will look elsewhere. (Lines 21-26)

He cannot fathom having to grovel with his brother once again. He cannot imagine the shame of returning to Kirkuk bearing the shames of his disappointments in Koye. Town by town, Sheikh Raza discovered he could not come home.

He begins his poem "[If, in this state, I return],"

If, in this state, I return to Kirkuk they will all know:  
not a single stalwart hair grows on my head.  
Why should I return to Kirkuk, pimp city, when  
its people froth and roil like the waters in Hamamok?  
I would rather live a hundred lifetimes foreign, broke, and wretched  
than under my brother's oppression, my peoples' blame. (Lines 1-6)

He clearly worries over his pride. He almost audibly growls over his wounds, licking at them protectively. He states for the record, if anyone is listening, that he would rather live in poverty than under his brother's authority and his family's reprobation. He continues with stout hope, "One day, time will revolve in my desire. For now, / this one is unsettled, at times apart from, at times a part of" (lines 7-8). Perhaps worse than anything, he cannot decide whether to embrace or reject the poverty in which he finds himself. In the very next couplet, he tries on acceptance, "Without means, we celebrate humbly: / for the grateful, boiled wheat tastes better than long rice" (lines 9-10), and returns immediately to complaint, "Since my father's death six months ago, I / have been aggrieved, abject, jaded, depleted" (lines 11-12).

In his poem "The Universe," Piramerd says, "He who is a man must live door to door" (line 2). In "[When the heart melts]," Mahwi echoes the same sentiments, "I said: on this doorstep, in this place, let me rest a while. / He said: a lover must live doorstep

to doorstep, city by city: leaving” (lines 5-6). For Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century, there is honor in exile; if they will not let you return to your city, you must be doing something right. The true lover of God, the true man, lives doorstep to doorstep. At times, Raza seems to accept this stance, even arguing for it himself. More often, he rails against this sense of homelessness.

It is this blunt anger, fashioned in poetry’s most charming cadences and given wit’s most cutting edges, that gained Sheikh Raza his infamy. Unlike most other Kurdish poets then and now, Raza turns to the curse poem. Originally a Persian form practiced notably by one of Raza’s greatest literary heroes, Saadi, Sheikh Raza draws the form into Kurdish for the first time. Others, like Nali, had hinted in that direction, using innuendo and metaphor to play in the shallow waters of the profane. But Raza being Raza, he dives into the deepest waters the profane can offer. Half-measures were not his pleasure.

It is not surprising that Raza, among all his peers, would have been the one to draw on these inspirations: though all poets of his age took snippets of Persian, Arabic and Turkish into their poetry, Raza writes fluently in both Persian and Kurdish. Of the poems of his that remain to us today, there are more in Persian than in Kurdish. Given his linguistic abilities and his love of Persian literature, it is natural, though no less amazing, that he would turn to a Persian form, giving it newness in language and purpose.

In pre-Islamic times, in the Arab and Persian worlds, people thought poetry had physical impact. Words shaped well could cause illness and death for enemies or bring health and wealth for loved ones. Genre developed according to use: the ode—*staish*—and the curse—*hajū*. Meter and rhyme were not tools of artistic effect, but of spell-casting, incantations, charms, what Gelder calls “a form of magical warfare” (4). Sir Charles Lyall, an Arabic scholar who worked for the British colonial administration in nineteenth century India, notes “The menaces which [the poet] hurled against the foe were believed to be inevitably fatal. His rhymes, often compared to arrows, had all the effect of a solemn curse spoken by a divinely inspired prophet or priest” (Arberry 3). There was little to no separation of sign and signified. The poet was a champion of the tribe’s honor, a skilled archer, better than a hand-to-hand warrior.

The social value of the poet was enormous and tangible. A.J. Arberry, a twentieth century scholar of Arabic, Persian, and Islamic Studies, quotes Lyall:

When there appeared a poet in a family of the Arabs, the other tribes round about would gather together to that family and wish them joy of their good luck. Feasts would be got ready, the women of the tribe would join together in bands, playing upon lutes, as they were wont to do at bridals, and the men and boys would congratulate one another; for a poet was a defence to the honour of them all, a weapon to ward off insult from their good name, and a means of perpetuating their glorious deeds and of establishing their fame for ever. And they used not to wish one another joy but for three things—the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet, and the foaling of a noble mare” (Arberry 2).

With the arrival of Islam, the genre evolved. The most condemnable *hajn* was that which raised one tribe above another and so was divisive among the nation of Islam. The most redeemable *hajn* was that which assaulted the non-believers: “Two Prophetic sayings quoted widely used to justify *hajn* in the service of religion are: ‘A believer combats [idolatry] with his tongue and his sword’ and ‘The Prophet of God said to Hassan b. Thabet, ‘Ridicule the idolaters’” (Sprachman, xxvii). This command provided cover to invectivists. By “the middle of the Seljuq period (1038-1194), *hajn*” which “belabor[ed] the unmentionable in what appears today to be redundant detail” became popular (Sprachman xxix). By the late eighth-early ninth century, *hajn* had moved on from the tribally divisive to the sexually explicit as well as having “evolved into a highly elaborate literature” (Sprachman xxvii).

As feudalism became the governing structure, princes harnessed the power that families and tribes had already perceived in or given to poetry. Poems could exalt, glorify and honor or they could slander, vilify, and defame. Poets, princes saw, had not only social, but financial and military value. From approximately the tenth century onward, in areas that today comprise Iran, “. . .the material welfare of a large number of the poets devolved upon the court, which in its turn needed and employed them for purposes of propaganda” (Rypka 108). Poetry as propaganda worked so well as a tactic that “[Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna] introduced the office of *Maliku’sh-shu’arā*, ‘King of Poets” (Rypka 173). Equivalent to our Poets Laureate, the King of Poets professionalized and organized the court’s poets, “regulat[ing] the relations of the masters of the profession and their pupils in the manner of the mediaeval guilds” (Rypka

174). The system was effective: the number of poets at court swelled to over four hundred (Rypka 174). The profession became so steady over the next handful of centuries that “court poet” became a “means of subsistence,” a fallback career—as in, if you do not make it as a farmer, do not worry, you can always become a poet (Rypka 174).

Absent modern technology, princes formed propaganda machines: poets wrote persuasively on their employer’s behalf and equally persuasively in derision of their employer’s enemies. The political system generated a financial structure under which verse proliferated, but invention was dis-incentivized: any writing outside praise and curse had no value to the prince. Poetic propaganda had such effect that it lived on long after its golden era as verse, long into the stagnation of content and form.

The turning point for Kurds came with the fall of the last of the two Kurdish principalities: the Ardalans and the Babans. Dates vary, but between 1840 and 1860, the Ardalans had been defeated and the Babans suborned as part of the Ottoman machinery, rusted as it was. This collapse precipitated a strong shift in the Kurdish poetic consciousness. Kurds had managed a balance between the powers around them—the Persians, the Ottomans, the Arabs, and in the background, the Russians and the British. Kurds had carved out and successfully defended their sense of place, belonging, Kurdishness. The demise of the Ardalans and the Babans, not twenty years apart, created among poets a universal sense of exile.

This political, economic, and existential exile set the poets free. Without a prince to praise, without the prince’s enemy to curse, the poet saw he could set the terms for his own creation—and the poets went wild. They expanded the definition of what “poetry” is at the same time as they subverted the old genres of the *staish* and the *hajū* for their own purposes. The curse poem originates as part of the propaganda programs of tribal princes in the Arab and Persian territories, but is transformed by nineteenth century Kurdish poets into a private, almost confessional vehicle.

Kheznedar, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, is able to look back on this literary moment. He can see the implicit, beginning with Nali, and the explicit perfected by Sheikh Raza. Though he argues that curse poetry “exposes a person’s bad manners,” using “exaggeration” and “curse words,” he also defends curse poetry’s

ability to be “creative, detailed, and aesthetically developed” (1: 198-199). Kheznedar continues, explaining why he classifies erotic poetry as a subgenre of curse poetry. “Erotic poetry,” Kheznedar writes, “exposes the private parts of men and women. These discussions are shameful in this community, which is why we consider poetic eroticism a form of curse poetry” (1: 198-199). While some Kurdish poets explore erotic subject matter more metaphorically, more playfully, more acceptably—Kheznedar cites Nali’s “Mestura” as an example—others, like Sheikh Raza, do so explicitly. Kheznedar, as others before him, take the difference between the implied and the outright seriously. Nali, he does not consider a curse poet. Sheikh Raza, he does: “Sheikh Raza mixes the private parts of men and women. He discusses homoeroticism. In Kurdish society, if you even accuse anyone of homoerotic behavior, he will be seen as debased until his death” (1:199).

Kheznedar recognizes the remarkable “verbal artistry” that Gelder will later defend in these poems that marry the coarse and the fine, the bawdy and the witty (3). But Kheznedar’s judgment of these two poets and their work supports what Gelder succinctly states, “what is insulting is culturally determined” (11). As we approach the idea of the curse poem, we must understand “what constitutes obscenity (*vaqahat*, *fohsh*)” in regions relevant to the poetry at hand: Arab, Persian, Ottoman, and Kurdish lands. Sprachman, a scholar of Persian literature, sees obscenity as “expressed in the simple formula ‘revealing what cannot be revealed’” (Sprachman ix). ‘What cannot be revealed’ differs for men and women, between sects and individual practitioners of Islam, across ethnicities, but the basic concept comes directly from Qur’anic verses. For most, the private space (*awrat*) of the man’s body extends from “the navel to the knees” and of the woman’s body excludes only “the face and the hands as far as the wrists” (Sprachman ix). For some, a woman’s *awrat*, what should remain veiled, includes her voice. Profanity begins where the veil is drawn back and what should remain covered and hidden is made open and public. The greater degree of euphemism employed, the more polite, respectful, and civil the language; conversely, the more direct the language, the more obscene it is considered (Sprachman xiv).

Across Arabic and Persian, transgressive literature falls into three categories: “*hazl* (bawdy); *hajv* (verbal aggression); and *tanz* (satire)” (Sprachman xxii). *Hazl*,

humorous, raucous, is often defined by its opposite: *jedd*, serious speech (Sprachman xxii). *Tanz* has, as a Western reader might imagine, “moral features,” a habit of blending “derision” with the “socially redemptive” (Sprachman xxiv). But the most common of the three forms, and certainly the most controversial, is *hajv* or *hijā’* or *heju*: “a form of aggression” “meant to be heard, or read,” goading a response. Westerners know this mode as “flying,” practiced by poets we call “lampoonists.” Like *hazl*, not to be confused with the poetic form of *ghazal*, *hajv* is easily defined by what it is not: *madh* or panegyric (Sprachman xxv). Both *madh* and *hajv* share a sharp tendency toward the personal and the hyperbolic, but *hajv* is more than the anti-panegyric; it is invective (Gelder 1).

The distinction Kheznedar draws between Nali and Sheikh Raza is one of culturally critical degrees. Nali implies transgression, he flirts with the obscene; Sheikh Raza does not flirt, he fucks. Where Nali invited us all to the edge of the cliff to look down, Sheikh Raza jumped. Given the Qur’anic definition of obscenity, Sheikh Raza is the more transgressive between the two poets. That said, Nali was the older of the two by over three decades and one of the Three Pillars of the Babans. With his winking and indirection, Nali contributed to the permission Sheikh Raza needed to do more than wink. In the lineage of poets, Sheikh Raza is Nali’s descendant.

As concepts of literature have changed over time, readers, publishers, and translators have struggled with this pervasive and deep poetic participation in the obscene. With the introduction of movable type printing in Iran, publishers would often print the “initial consonant followed by dots” to replace whatever offense followed. Educated readers could infer the missing words; curious children only became determined to understand (Sprachman xxxi). Certain Persian poetry scholars skirted injunctions “by burying offending verses in appendices or publishing them piecemeal as citations for entries in dictionaries” (Sprachman, viii). CJ Edmonds, in his twentieth century translations of Sheikh Raza’s poems, balked at the original verses, translating and sanitizing the verses at the same time. Even on my first readings of the poems, I blushed and had to sternly return myself to the language, being careful not to whitewash and, on the other hand, not to sensationalize the original poetry. The discomfort, no matter its origin, cannot be ignored: *hejū* is ubiquitous among the collected works of Persian poets. *Hejū*, as Gelder notes, “is not by anonymous, shady versifiers, collected

by disreputable editors in broadsheets and shoddy booklets distributed in seamy-side subculture circles” (3). Tribal and feudal dynamics and the economic incentives they provided poets made the panegyric and invective necessary to any poet’s professional range (Sprachman xxviii). The political shifts of the nineteenth century contributed to how Kurdish poets electrified these long-sleeping forms.

Hundreds of years before Sheikh Raza, medieval Persian poets sang mock-panegyric praises to their penises, drew in the city and landscapes around them, played with the “phallic potential of Islamic architecture” (Sprachman, xxix). Suzani of Samarkand wrote, “Before the dome of the cunt-madrasa/Verily like a minaret, its head soars into the air” (Sprachman, xxix). They saw the *awrat* out in their world; more than unveiling the private, they transformed what was public into the taboo and private. They provided an intriguing example for Nali, who saw the mountain that Sheikh Raza would later summit. Sheikh Raza, exiled from the security (and confines) of a Kurdish court, made new the old occasional modes of *staish* and *hejū*.

Cornered by circumstance and his sharp tongue, Sheikh Raza lashes out, cursing his enemies. A poet of his stature would, in another era, have used this power for his prince; Raza uses it for his own relief. When his uncle betrays him, he lets his tongue loose. In “[My uncle],” he first sets the scene:

He has a leader’s luck and God-given fortune.  
To nourish him, the Sultan gave him two or three villages.  
Each one holds as many goods as storage can.  
What carpet, what china, what fields, what estates...  
of each, he has a hundred and eighty, yet  
with all these stores and accounts, he remains a scoundrel. (Lines 2-7)

With all this wealth, he still lacks a single “generous tendency” (line 8). Uncle Ghafoor, Sheikh Raza says, has tattered the family’s good image, created across generations (lines 9-10). “His profile and beard may look manly,” Sheikh Raza continues, “but don’t believe it: / He has only the appearance of devotion” (lines 11-12).

Sheikh Raza names Sheikh Ghafoor’s son, Rashid, only to insult him worse than his father, “In prayer,” Raza says, Rashid does not call out to God, “he calls only to cock” (line 17). But Raza is only warming to his subject matter. He continues, “Look at that cock-sucking pimp, what recitations he has. / I spit in his mother’s cunt: she thinks she has brought out a son. / I shit in his father’s beard: he, too, thinks this is a

child” (lines 18-20). Most importantly, Raza notes, as a way of returning to directly insult Sheikh Ghafoor, “For all Rashid does, he was trained by his father: / he isn’t an independent peripatetic, he has a master” (lines 21-22). Here, Sheikh Raza uses the metaphor of how religious learning worked: one either wandered under his own direction or with the guidance of a spiritual master. Sufis often say that Sufism cannot be learned through text alone, but is only completed in a learning community, with a master who has been given permission by other masters to show others how to look for the signposts, the way, the path. Rashid has been taught these terrible habits of his by his master, his father.

His father is not Rashid’s only bad influence.

In his dwelling, he has maidservants, a mother, sisters:  
Fatim, Asm, Aman, and Parizad.  
Night and day, their cunts clap and dance *hilperke*.  
Their pussies are fiery as the blacksmith’s forge.  
All of them are brazen in bulk... (Lines 23-27)

*Hilperke* is a high-spirited Kurdish line dance. Children on their way to picnic, families at picnic, dear ones celebrating a wedding—the dancing, led by whooping and a twirling handkerchief, can, and often does, erupt from nowhere and go on for hours. What keeps the beat in Rashid’s house is not the drums, but the nether-clapping of his female relatives. Sheikh Raza knows how to make his insults cut across all cultural markers of good conduct. Not only do the men of his family fail to achieve generosity, devotion, and honor, but the women of the household delight in the forbidden.

As the poem draws to a close, Sheikh Raza accuses the “hostile universe” of having “unjust intentions toward” him (line 30). He calls himself “forsaken and unhappy” “after the abuses of the universe” (line 32). These are the tender sentiments of a victim that echo in one of the definitive lines of the poem, “An ass-fucker and a bitch: [that’s] Rashid, a failed replica of Raza” (line 31). The high spirit in these poems belies the great sadness of the poems themselves: having written them, Sheikh Raza has closed every door on himself. The honesty and vigor that defines him across time and space ensures his exile within his own time and space.

In his poem “[I faced my dear nephew’s],” we see the inevitable occur: the poet goes to visit his nephew who rudely turns away. Within one short poem, Sheikh Raza is at once both heartbreakingly vulnerable with his reader and characteristically coarse

with his own pain. “I faced my dear nephew’s good situation / tonight,” he begins, “with generosity and faithfulness and shame” (lines 1-2). The guard at the door stops him, as if, Sheikh Raza says, he had been told to do so. The guard “puff[s] himself up” and pokes at him, asking, “And who knows you” (lines 5-6)? Sheikh Raza responds, “It’s me, you so-and-so, Uncle Sheikh Raza, / as if you don’t know me...” (lines 7-8). He remarks, as if to himself, “If this door is closed to me, I should go,” but begs a little more: “have pity, you fag, you slut. My nads are iced over” (lines 9-10). At this, the guard appears to recognize him, “Oh, yes, / you’re the sheikh of fraud, gambling, and donkey thieving” (lines 11-12). Sheikh Raza gives a linguistic shrug and ends the poem with this couplet, “At this treatment, I understood the intention and / slunk back home, stranded and stung” (lines 13-14). He sees, after all, that even his nephew will snub him given the chance. He sees himself, after all, “stranded.” The stinger has been “stung.”

Sheikh Raza curses many people, and animals and places and objects, outside of his family, but the curses against his family are from a certain perspective most poignant because of all they cost him. He believed his greatest enemies were within his family. He turned the curse poem toward them, like the traditional weapon it was, only to discover the difficulty in defining an enemy. He was driven, or drove himself, to write the poems in protest of his isolation, which, in turn, isolate him further. He admires his family and the spiritual knowledge they have. In other poems, he speaks adoringly of his family. In “[God, when He wants],” Sheikh Raza looks back at his father, grandfather, and their fathers, saying that they are “counted among the first” (line 15). He grieves that he has spoiled the family and asks for forgiveness—from the reader, from himself, from his family, from the Almighty: “Raza also is from that lineage, God forgive him. There can’t be / flower without thorn, ocean without mist, fire without smoke” (lines 16-17). Though he appoints himself accuser of others, he stands accused. He is his own apologist in a world where those apologies could not buy him out of exile. He ended his life in Baghdad, taken in by the Qadiri Mosque.

In 1932, Jamil al-Zahawi, Sheikh Raza’s contemporary and a fellow fly in the ointment, wrote a brief autobiography. Given the shortage of contextual documentation around nineteenth century poetry, this is a valuable account of how the poet saw himself. He begins with the obvious details: he was born in Baghdad to Kurdish parents,

his father was “the grand Mufti of Iraq, the great Mohammed Faidi al-Zahawi” who “descended from the Baban princes.” His mother was a woman from “a well-known Kurdish family” who had an “angry temperament.” The poet muses in a parenthetical aside, “Maybe I inherited by anger from her.” He remembers that as a child, he was considered “crazy” and “reckless,” “exaggerated” in his pleasures and “daring for [his] resistance to tyranny.” These qualities in him as a child formed him as “heretical in [his] old age.” He tell us that he learned much from the “sciences of the ancients,” but they did not satisfy his mind as the “sciences of the West,” texts his private tutors translated for him. He found himself “fond” of these texts, unable to hold himself back from them (51).

He tells us that his “first rhymed poetry was in Persian, then in Arabic” and that he was “the first to defend women in Iraq, the first to resist the tyrannical reign of the Sultan,” “the first to rebel against the ancients, to care about renewal and confront intolerance” (52). We see these firsts clearly in his writing, where he displays his “free opinions” on “place, time, force, material, life, and gravity” (55). He tells his reader proudly that in articles, essays, lectures, and other written venues, he presented “philosophical lessons” and “responses to the Wahhabis” and “opinions that contradicted those” of his contemporaries. He “simplified the Universal Law and explained Universal Gravity” (57).

Zahawi’s legacy is clear in the work of poets of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. Qani’, a late-century poet and activist, criticizes society’s treatment of women. He begins “The Life of Girls” by examining how mothers and their communities respond to the birth of a girl, rather than a boy: “When she is born, there is no celebration. / They say, ‘Ay, it’s a girl, what’s the use’” (lines 3-4)? He imagines:

Old men and women surround her mother,  
Each reassure her:  
“Don’t be sad. God is generous.  
You will have a son, too. Be grateful.  
For house work, for errands,  
This one can take the place of a servant. (Lines 7-12)

He mourns that this “tongue-tied girl, her life is a role / in a drama, a film” (lines 1-2). She does not belong to herself, but to others. She is kept secluded, unable to choose a profession. “If she peeks her head out from the courtyard,” Qani’ says, “Her mother will

screech at her, ‘You shameless ass’” (lines 23-24). When she comes of age, her parents will “callously” “marry the girl off / to the master’s, the tailor’s, the butcher’s boy” (lines 28-29). He narrates the proposal process: “They propose to her, good people, bad people / A half-efendi, a widower haji” (lines 30-31). Her father finally decides, “The Haji is good. / He has money and a pure heart. / Who cares that he has no teeth left” (lines 39-41)? When the girl, to whom Qani’ gives the epithet of “tongue-tied” throughout the poem, knows her parents’ intentions, she “curls around herself like a wounded snake” and finally speaks (line 48). She says,

Why guard animals  
When you don’t ask about how girls live?  
If they are not human, they are animal.  
Why must we face the world without sympathy?  
Go with God. Free my neck.

I will begin walking toward the city of death. (Lines 53-58)

As in many of Qani’s other writing, he gives voice to the voiceless so that they may utter their anger and despair, so that they may name the hypocrisy they see in the world of men. Here, the girl, finding her parents’ treatment of her worse than if she were an animal, finding the world entirely unsympathetic to her concerns as a person, chooses suicide as her only course to freedom. Poems like this, and so many others like it that shaped the early twentieth century, were presaged by the social consciousness Zahawi forged in his poems.

Some of his work Zahawi consciously saved to publish posthumously; he worried “it contradict[ed] the stance of the intolerant.” He worried his writing would “energize [the intolerant] against [him].” He “wasn’t comfortable with the consequences” (58). Zahawi had reason to beware the consequences of his published work. Many times, throughout his life, he would publish only to be widely condemned, which thought it made his work sell out dogged him personally and professionally. In “How He Was,” Zahawi vents his fear that “human hatred” will grow within mankind until he devolves, “end[ing] as an ape / Just as he was” (lines 1-4).

Toward the end of his life, in his landmark poem “Revolution in Hell,” he re-imagines Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: he scripts the interrogation that the angels Munkar and Nakir administer when he dies and wakes as a soul in his grave. The angels ask after the opinions he held on earth and he explains himself to them. This poem caused

a sensation: Friday sermons condemned it and the book sold out immediately. The receptions he received as a public servant, a professor, and an author were perfectly split between the two extremes of love and hate—the latter far more vociferous than the former. He states, in his poem “An Answer In Response,” that “if this nation, so hostile to me, opened my heart / They would see I am pure of all but love” (lines 1-2). He cannot bring himself to blame “hostility’s children” (line 3), but he finds fault with his friends who leave him ostracized. He cannot decide which is worse: living within or without his society.

His employment record reflects his fraught relationship with his era. Employed by the Ottoman government, he met the Free Turks. Persuaded by their ideas, he “publicized his discontent,” was hounded by spies, and eventually exiled to Iraq with a meager salary (52). With the announcement of the Ottoman constitution, he journeyed back to Istanbul only to fall ill and return home once more to Baghdad to work as an “instructor of the civil code in the Faculty of Law.” From this position, he defended women’s rights and “a tremendous hype” ensued; “fanatics started foaming and howling, cursing and insulting me” (53). Though the “well-mannered among Egyptian and Syrian writers supported” him, “intolerance in Baghdad at that time was more influential,” so the governor “couldn’t do anything other than dismiss” Zahawi to “appease public opinion.” When a new governor arrived, Zahawi was returned to his position. A council was created and dissolved, so Zahawi travels to Istanbul and back again. He gives speeches “defending the rights of Iraq,” which causes him trouble, but he refuses to care (54). The Great War begins, British soldiers invade Baghdad, and intend to take him, captive, to India. He points to his publications in *al-Meqta’*, a newspaper known to be loyal to the English, and is released. He serves on another committee until Faisal is kinged and the committee is dissolved (54-55). He travels to Syria, then Egypt, then Lebanon only to return finally to serve a four-year term, by appointment of King Faisal, in the Senate Council. At this point, Zahawi is 70 years old. His “left foot has been paralyzed for more than twenty years,” and “still neuralgia attacks” him, causing continual “hardship and pain” (55).

Over the course of narrating his long life, the only regret he expresses is that he never learned “any Western language.” He states that at the age of 30, he married a

Miss Zakia Hanim, a woman of 16 from an “honorable Turkish family.” Of his wife, he tells his reader, “We never had a child. And she served me in old age with sincerity and honesty” (52). We cannot tell from his tone whether living childless was personally painful for him and his wife, but it would certainly have set them apart in their society where children are the primary mode of creating legacy. In line with his principles on women’s rights, Zahawi does not implicitly or explicitly blame his wife for not being able to have a child. Instead, he uses the first-person plural pronoun “we,” sheltering her with him, and praises her kindness to him throughout his long years.

At no point in his writing or in his life was Zahawi at peace with his era. He agitated for change so strongly that he found himself alone and vulnerable, if also proudly, beyond the vanguard. His poetry reflects his mind clearly: a mind that can take the stock images of court poetry (the moth and the flame, for example) and conceptual language of Islam (the idea of orders, for example) and recast them in his age of scientific progress. In some ways, this reinvention is far more challenging, one might even say blasphemous, to the religious order of the day because it co-opts Islam’s very underpinnings to empower new scientific concepts and the scientific mind.

In “I think of nature,” he says,

I think of nature, I observe,  
atheism.

My strength? I am human; I think.

So, they count my thought as

Doubt invites truth.

Zahawi, clearly a student of the era’s scientific advances, cannot keep his thought on the old ideas, but drives himself and his verse into new intellectual territory. In the same poem as he derides the perception of doubt as atheism, he states,

These thoughts clearly diverge from the accepted thought of the day. Zahawi was entranced by ideas that his society, on the whole, either rejected outright or

And electricity made many worlds  
And our bodies are built from that overflow.  
And the galaxy is one among many

By the tension of opposites.  
And so, too, our souls within our bodies.  
Non-existent things broadcast across space.

(Lines 19-24)

misunderstood, whether willfully or accidentally. His thoughts of science people perceived as conflicting with or undermining the precepts of Islam.

In another poem, "The Visible and the Veiled," Zahawi writes,

What connects the two worlds	Are links in a chain of ether.
And maybe, annihilated, life	Is only cells to join the ether.
That is the source I came from	And the fate I return to.
And maybe the ether sees what	The eyes can't behind the veil
And maybe the ether hears what	The ears don't from that distant
source	
And maybe the ether knows what	The soul does not of the hidden
things	
And maybe ether is the origin of	And maybe the ether is the origin of
contemplation	impulse

These lines posit precepts not yet accepted in Zahawi's world. Electricity, not God, formed the world (including the human body and soul). More, electricity formed the worlds, plural: there are more worlds than ours. The source of life is ether and we are only immortal in that our cells return to that source. Detailing this controversial vision in verse was yet another controversy. To this day, Iraqi readers debate whether Zahawi is even worth reading since his poetry does not conform to the classical ideas of what poetry is.

Zahawi himself answers his critics. As he concludes "The Visible and the Veiled," he says,

My sect is the unity of existence. No	Creature other than God is the Ancient, the
Capable.	
This is me. So, what if	The crowd agrees I am a sinner.
People today don't understand	What I say. I wish I had come centuries later.
But this existence is a sprawling sea:	Beachless, boundless.
I am just a bubble on its surface.	So, I appear. So, I vanish. (Lines 25-34)

The way this poem ends resonates in the Islamic mystic tradition. In Sufism, and in great poetic celebrations of the Sufi path, many poets have used the same idea: I am nothing. I am dust. I am the dust on the hem of the beloved. Zahawi draws on the same sentiment but ties it to a new mindset. So, he appears. So, he vanishes. He is only one more manifestation of the ether. He again cloaks himself in his nothingness for his own protection in another poem that questions his critics, "They say nothing and they stone me / But does nothing deserve to be stoned" (lines 1-2)? This ability to twist the ideas of Islam to his own purposes recurs.

He begins his poem “The Sun,” en medias res with the phrase, “But you know” (line 1). The phrase is both a contradiction and an assertion. The poem’s contemporary reader, in fact, did not know. The poet, beginning the poem this way, establishes his perspective against, even victorious over, other reigning beliefs of his time. He uses this opening to establish,

the sun is at the order’s center,	Sinking into a sea of unsounded depths.
And she is in a larger galaxy, so know:	Her fate yields to the fates.
On earth, we all live	In the orbit of one small celestial
body,	

Again, he twists words like “order,” traditionally a word used in reference to methods of practice within in Islam, for his secular, scientific purposes. Religion is not the source of “order,” he implies, but a scientific understanding of the cosmos. In this passage, too, he repurposes the image of the moth and flame. Traditionally, the moth and the flame represent the lover and the beloved who, in their turn, stand-in for the disciple and the divine. Here, though, the moth is not the lover or the disciple, she is the earth. The flame is not the beloved or the divine, but the sun. This relationship is more literal—the earth literally is moving around the burning sun, perpetually attracted to it by gravity. He repeats the same renovated image in “The Travels of the Mind”:

And the earth, the daughter of the sun,	Leans on her mother to walk and withstand
And circles at her edge,	Tied tightly by magnetism.
So, she floats like a moth who has	Found light in the midst of the night.
She turns her self so that	Her cheek draws toward the sun. (Lines

Zahawi is concerned not with the love a moth must feel for the flame, but with the natural forces at work between them. In the case of the earth and the sun, Zahawi’s lover and beloved, that force is gravity: a scientific and constant force of attraction. what was an image about the power of love, an emotional, charismatic, subjective Zahawi attempts to show the beauty of science and progressive understanding—that no beauty is lost in pursuit of truth—that beauty is only transformed.

This trend continues in “The Travels of the Mind,” when he re-casts Sufi sentiments in scientific terms. “Don’t accept a count of the asteroids,” he tells us,

Don’t accept a count of the asteroids,	No, and not limits to the endless.
The mind returns disappointed	From infinity, even if it spares no
effort.	
Rising within her, shown by	Thought, see the darkness, the prison.
Depend on science:	There, what is lost will be discovered <sup>196</sup>
And be ready—those who seek	Find help when ready.
So, travel at a night among her	Stars: blossoming, igniting, sparking.

Except his command to “depend on science,” these lines would fit easily into the religious and poetic traditions from which Zahawi rose. But the very injunction to “depend on science,” changes every one of these seemingly familiar lines. Zahawi continues in this vein. He commands his reader further,

Rise. Climb.  
Raise up and go deep. Shun

Behind farther there is farther.  
Exhaustion; shun him.

Stroke the galaxy with a firm hand  
My self desires. How do I deprive

And stroke her clouds’ hilt.  
My self of desire? (Lines 15-22)

He

incites his reader to push the mind past exhaustion and into discovery. He moves from the external command to his own inner drive, an interest so intimate it becomes sensual. What was an athletic striving becomes a seduction between the individual and the galaxy, which Zahawi genders in the feminine. Unlike in Sorani Kurdish, in which gender does not exist and all translations have assigned gender to make pronoun reference more succinct, Arabic speakers can exercise the ability to assign gender. For Zahawi, the galaxy is a woman of intense mystery and depth, a woman who inspires such curiosity and desire in him that he cannot imagine not indulging.

It is a critical aspect of Zahawi’s beloved—not God, but the galaxy—that she, just like the divine, humbles her lover. Zahawi continues,

I fooled myself when I didn’t  
If I were to stand against her,

See it was possible: I could be fooled.  
She would be a merciless opponent.  
(Lines 29-32)

Giving

himself over to his beloved, the true lover only learns how small he is, how much he should marvel at his limitless beloved. The only foolishness is to not see that one can be fooled. Wisdom lies in the ready mind and the diminished ego:

The mind learned from his travels:  
That the galaxy was nothing  
That the clouds in it are stars,  
Moving in the sky.

(The first victory)  
But worlds beyond count,  
Distant, distant suns  
Some say they have purpose.  
(Lines 33-40)

This poem is a paragon of Zahawi's ability to adopt the literary modes of Islam, of Arabic and Persian poetry, to advocate for the wonders of the scientifically understood world and the power of the scientifically devoted mind.

One of Zahawi's most impassioned poetic pleas is on behalf of libraries: the tekiye, khanaqa, and mosque for his lovers. In a poem titled simply "Libraries," Zahawi argues, "Libraries expand / The nation's limits" (lines 7-8). In the "delicate task" (line 16) of creating civilization, he says, "They are wells for men / That offer a different drink" (lines 11-12). He speaks from the borderlands between the head and the heart:

The book is the teacher,                      The entertainer, the friend.  
Its pages are, in a lover's eyes,        The white comfort... (lines 21-24)

He

warns his reader that while "Knowledge between human hands is a light that meets every need," "ignorance is a surrounding darkness, spreading in every direction" (lines 31-32). He advocates for the power of knowledge, what libraries collect, maintain, preserve:

With knowledge, man navigates the clouds.  
With knowledge, the east and west might connect.  
With knowledge, the single man can speak with another.  
With knowledge, people crossed the seas and the savannahs. (Lines 40-43)

He bemoans the state of his nation: "Others have the sun. / We have weak light" (lines 46-47). He expresses his concern that "ignorance of / Modernity is a fatal flaw" (lines 60-61). Finally, he implores, "Oh, nation, knowledge then / knowledge then knowledge: that's our duty." A Sufi could say this sentence, but the religious definitions of the key terms in this discussion—knowledge, the lover, the beloved—would diverge severely from Zahawi's. Both could say: the lover is one who strives for knowledge; the beloved is the font of and the inspiration to seek knowledge. But Zahawi's lover goes to the library, not the tekiye. Zahawi's beloved is the galaxy, not God (though there is room to interpret that Zahawi may have seen the divine in or even as the cosmos). Zahawi's

knowledge comes from science's emerging technologies and methodologies. Zahawi's miracles efface man's ego not by prayer, but by scientific understanding of how man fits into his larger universe.

Sheikh Raza and Jamil al-Zahawi experience literal exile from their families partially because they present such a challenge to the status quo. The distance they feel from their families is precipitated in part by the distance they sense, and create, between themselves and their people, the Kurds. As political circumstance forces Kurds to develop an extra-political consciousness of Kurdishness, poets find themselves both frustrated and disappointed in their nation. They acknowledge that Kurds are victims, "pure immortals" as Haji Qadir Koye says in his "[Until the Kurdish tribes]," who are "homeless and oppressed" (lines 9-11), but also continually return to the problem they see: that the Kurds themselves have facilitated their own exile by their failure to unite militarily and socially against the empires around them. Haji Qadir Koye remarks, "Until the Kurdish tribes get along / They will be a house in ruins" (lines 1-2).

In the same poem, he deplores the "towering law," the subversion of Kurdish rule as Ottoman or Persian, as "hypocrisy, / A door only half open" (lines 17-18). He unleashes his anger at the "hundreds of sheikhs, mullahs, princes" who "take pleasure in life and living" without thinking of their people (lines 19-20). He describes them at length:

They bark.  
They somersault.  
They throw mud all over the country  
Until they trash all property and pasture.  
What you do, none of them do.  
They won't worry even if every Kurd dies. (Lines 21-26)

Kurds who profit from the Ottoman and Persian presences and in their profit forget the greater hope of independence: these men Koye blames for the state of his nation. In "[The land of Jezyr and Botan]," he attempts to rally Kurds around the urgency of protecting Kurdish lands as Kurdish. He promises them, "...the country of the Kurds / They will turn it into Armenia" (lines 1-2). Speaking as a soothsayer, he envisions that

Mosques will become churches, muezzins: bells.  
The Bishop will become judge, the Mufti, monk.  
I swear a hundred times by the Quran, no courage remains.  
If Armenia appears, no Kurds will remain. (Lines 7-10)

Holding this vision in one hand, he commands with the other: “Raise your heads from the mud. See our situation” (line 11). He exhorts his readers,

In the meantime, make a heroic agreement  
That doesn't separate shepherd, farmer, prince, and cowherd.  
And swear by religion, faith, and three divorces  
That to protect the religion and nation you will sacrifice yourselves.  
(Lines 23-26)

He continues, “Mobilize like bees, but plan quietly. / Find the furniture of war: cannon, rifle and mortar. / Begging and reliance on others are useless” (lines 37-39). He goads the Kurds, the people he loves, to unity, to action. His love for his nation constantly provokes in him both sorrow for his people and frustration with his people. In the same poem, he despairs. He imagines Kurds will not rise to his call, that his nation will be overrun. He concedes, “It is the Armenian's right: they take courage from each other / While we quarrel and squabble” (lines 69-70). If Kurds cannot be Kurds together, then the poet allows, they will forfeit their independence to other peoples who can. Koye's final plea to his reader is his most wrenching: he asks only that if his fellow Kurds will not fight for their nation that they at least abstain from causing its downfall. “Even if following the nation is a lie to you,” Koye says, “It's better for the enemy to be a stranger, not from us” (lines 27-28). The poet is overwhelmed by his love and disappointment in his own people. He admits, “Haji is a person without people. He measures mud for others” (line 73). He uses his last line to warn his reader again, “If you listen to [Haji], good. If you don't, you bring trouble on yourself” (line 74).

Decades later, Qani' will echo these sentiments. In “Pain and Cure,” a ghazal where the repeated word is “Kurds,” Qani' begins with an invitation, “My brother, come and watch the actions and behavior of Kurds. / Then, sink your head into mud seeing the sorrowful hearts of Kurds” (lines 1-2). The poem details the advances and failures of the Kurdish people to gain independence, to take care of one another, until Qani' ends in disillusionment similar to Koye's, “Qani', you almost decided to quit writing, but / This makes you write, the imperfect work of Kurds” (lines 21-22). The imperfection of his people drives Qani' toward poetry. And this is the most optimistic Qani' can be. In his taghmis on Bekas, he celebrates, festooned in irony, his failure as a poet to rally his nation. “I studied for many eras,” he says,

...only to become a cautionary tale.

I have no mind or consciousness: I gave them to the nation.

For the shallow, today we feast. Welcome, all. Gather.

“Many thanks, hurray, I escaped knowledge and art.

They will not capture me again. I will dance with joy.” (Lines 6-10)

The victory, in the poet’s mind, is to escape the burden that both Koye and Qani’ detail: trying, through verse, to hold up a mirror for their own people so that progress might occur. “Never, ever” Qani’ continues,

...imagine a life of freedom.

Spit on knowledge and news. Come, play the *zurna*.

Arrive with a *thbt* and give the occasional donkey kick.

“Even though I have said, ‘Understand and grow,’

Never believe me. I was a dog and I barked.” (Lines 11-15)

Independence for Kurds is a dream that both poets willingly break themselves against. Qani’s anger runs deeper, understandable given that he lived further into the exile and the failures to obtain independence than Koye did. He accepts that his very fight to wake his fellow Kurd caused his isolation among Kurds:

My bad name rings out, brayed among the Kurdish tribes,

Because I used my life’s fortune to buy the homeland’s mind,

Because I fought until I cut the curtain of ignorance,

“I chased justice so hard, I burned my own bread.

My name is reduced, disgraced, come to a bad end.” (Lines 21-25)

This fight he now sees as naïve. “I was a child,” he says, “for the nation, I threw myself into the whirlpool of risks” (line 31). He regrets only that he did not grow up fast enough to see “philosophy, poems, and art aren’t worth a penny” (line 32). He sees now that “Without taking a breath, [he] wore the donkey’s hide” (line 33). He quotes Bekas to finish the poem and the stanza’s form, “A scholar, a wise mind, knows he cannot get away with it. / I wore the fool’s clothes and escaped from of prison” (line 35). Though the verses drip with bitterness, they clearly also contain love and yet one more fight for his nation. By memorializing his difference, Qani’ elevates the very values that make him different. He stands alone because he alone fights for Kurdistan. He writes his exile for his exiled people, so they might continue fighting for the idea of homecoming.

## *The City and The Land*

The nineteenth century brings with it the fall of the Ardalans and the Babans, what had been the two bastions of Kurdish power. Most relevant to these poems was the demise of the Baban principality. As the nineteenth century began, the Babans were at their peak in terms of patronage, giving rise to Sorani, the predominant dialect of these poems, as a literary language. For the poets they cultivated, their collapse was particularly stunning. Nali and Salim, two of the three poets known as the Pillars of the Babans, responded deeply to the loss of their princes, but also of their cities, which the Ottomans quickly, chaotically, occupied. When Sulaimani, the seat of Baban rule, fell, Nali was abroad—by most accounts on *hajj*. When news of the city's fate reached him, he wrote to Salim, asking after the places they had known, asking if he should return. Salim, still within the city's borders, responded, informing his friend of how their beloved places have been depredated. Salim advised Nali, quite bluntly, to stay away.

If Nali came home, Salim knew, his memories could not remain his reality. He would witness Sulaimani's transition to Ottoman governance. Nali's exile would "divide his self in two, that of the past and of the present, here and there," but it would also protect him, affording the respite of nostalgia (Sewaili 62). Salim endured the death of being present in and for his city as foreign rule took hold. He could not take refuge as easily in what had been. He knew too well how all that had been was no longer. The poets' "geographical existence" was, as the contemporary Kurdish literary critic Rebwar Sewaili writes, their metaphysical existence (53). Their exile disrupted all existence they knew. In their poetic correspondence they mourn the home they cherished and yet assert the sense of belonging they gave each other as friends, poets, and Kurds. Even as these poems contain and discuss the great loss these two poets helped each other withstand, they signal a moment of artistic arrival for the two poets. They become more than two Pillars of the Babans: they become the first heralds of a Kurdishness that to this day extends beyond any one kingdom or princely line.

Speaking to the morning breeze, Nali begins his poem with petitions, "Like my tears, be pure as the waters of Shiwazur<sup>5</sup>. / Wash away the dust of this earth with that

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<sup>5</sup> Shiwazur: a stream just outside of Chamchamal, near Sulaimani

wind. / Be happy, wind and water, to meet: wind is clean and water is the cleanser” (lines 16-18). Still addressing the wind, as if Salim eavesdrops, Nali continues, instructing the wind,

...don't stop until you reach the spring of Sarchinar,  
Its water full of pomegranate and sycamore, flower and pine.

A source like the sun, at once in a hundred places, a bright  
Eruption, pure light from a stone, a geode.

Or it is the reflection of the sky as  
Its stars fall in meteoric light.

Or it is the source of full blessings from the knowledgeable,  
The spring of the light that consumed the burning bush. (Lines 19-26)  
“Don't enter the desert,” the poet continues, “Go through Sulaimani” (lines 29-30).

“Observe the stones and trees,” Nali begs, “Ask questions, make inspections, high and low” (lines 41-42). The poet then details for the wind the questions he has for the city:

Has the psyche of Sharshakam Bridge collapsed?  
Has the body of the Pirmasur tree become frail?

Is Sheikh Habas still dressed in green flags?  
Or has he become homeless? A notable naked?

Do people gather around Kani Ba?  
Or have they become divided over revolution and resurrection?

Is Saywan still green and clear as the dome of Sirius?  
Or has it become a circle of graves?

Does Kaniaskan still belong to the deer?  
Or has it become a field for wolves and their howling?

Is Awdar Stream still crying with love?  
Or has it become a dry Sufi, distant from truth?

I wonder: does the Tanjaro still roar? Does it run clear?  
Or is it captive to the land, silted?

Look closely at the grass inside the khanaka.  
Do deer roam or are tame beasts tied up?

Around the flowers, is it green? Misted as lines in the lover's face?  
Or is it dry straw, rough as the beard of Kaka Sur? (Lines 43-60)

He concludes this list of questions with the most sensitive: “Will I have the chance, the permission, to return from the liminal or / Is it in my interest to keep myself from returning until the breath of Sur” (lines 83-84)? Sur, a mountain that Azrael blows like a horn first to cause death and second to bring about resurrection, indicates the arrival of Doomsday. Nali uses the poem to wonder aloud if he will be able to come home in his lifetime or live out his days, waiting for the end-of-days to return him.

Salim receives the poem and responds, similarly addressing the morning wind, the “servant of spring’s green carpet” (line 6), the messenger from whose breezes “rains the honey of the tamarisk tree / Which swayed the bosom of the sugar cane” (lines 9-10). He, too, asks that the wind “fearlessly try to accomplish [his] request,” that the breeze act as his messenger across the great distance between him and his dear friend, Nali. He must inform his fellow poet:

Since the governor was made homeless by force  
No one has seen art shining from anyone’s face.

When it became the place of the Ottoman’s rising sun  
The thirsty grasses burned, every puddle evaporated.

The desperate people of the city didn’t want kebab,  
Only liver, fried in the fire of sadness. (Lines 27-32)

This city the two poets love is “the place of Ottoman Turks”—it no longer belongs to them (line 37). Salim moves on from this general description of the loss to take Nali’s questions one at a time. He tells Nali,

My heart burns for Sarchinar Creek.  
Its source is muddied as eyes that have gone blind.

In early winter, the clothes of Sheikh Abbas became threadbare.  
Ottomans are such ill-fate they harm people.

They brought sadness too the elderly tree of Pirmansur.  
Shivering consumes it, head to foot.

The Turks, brutes, took branches from its tree and bashed  
Every headstone, the fortresses of the dead.

It’s like an eye without sorrow, Shiwi Awdar:  
His eyes struggle to squeeze a single drop out. (Lines 43-52)

Beyond the places Nali has inquired after, Salim tells Nali: he cannot even bring himself to describe what has happened to the room in which Nali had lived.

It was common at the time for students to travel from city to city, staying in the rooms the mosque or tekiye or khanaqa provided. Historical records remain both thin and scattered, so we cannot know at this moment whether the room Salim references is the room that Nali discusses in his poem, “[Like a cage, this room].” Nor can we know whether Nali wrote “[Like a cage, this room]” before his exile began as a lopsided ode to the room or after his exile as a sideways elegy. Ode or elegy, the poem strikes an ironic tone, somehow both decrying and defending the room’s deficiencies. “Like a cage,” Nali begins, “this room traps me inside, / Like the spiders’ warp and weft” (lines 1-2). He continues,

In the roof, post by post, you can count the rafters like  
The visible ribs of a workhorse, alive in name only.

Rather than strong mud, they shower fine leaves on the roof.  
Like autumn rain the leaves fall, one by one, into the room.

Even now, in this room, the chill feels chilly  
It’s not a room. Call it a chill with four walls.

When the sky clouds, we cry,  
Oh, God, what do we do in these abandoned ruins?

Summer days, sunlight fills every pinch of space,  
There’s not half a pinch of shadow inside.

Summer is hell and winter is hell frozen over. (Lines 5-15)  
The humor and specificity in these lines complicates the direct insult to the space; this is how one complains about dilapidation one knows through and through. Nali knows how to navigate this broken-down old room, with its shutters as “fragile as a spider’s web [that] catch nothing, not even swarming mosquitos” (lines 19-20). He has learned this space with all its faults. He knows how to live here:

In snow and wind, get a sleigh. In rain, get a barge.  
Get a paddle or at least a broken basin to bail.

Use the bowl to throw the flour out.  
Use the paddle in case you get washed out.

If this isn't a mill, why all the flour?  
If this isn't a barge, why does it float?

Bowl and spoon, mat and rug, they surge with the tides  
Like turtle and fish and octopus. (Lines 23-30)

Nali finishes the poem with lines that are both a defense of the space and attacks against those who have failed to care properly for it. "The kind roof repairman," the poet says, "allowed us all to learn: / If a man drowns, he will float, not sink" (lines 43-44). And you, the poet turns to direct and accusatory address, "You didn't resurface the roof, / So, don't punish the room, for God's sake, let it weep" (lines 45-46). Nali beautifully personifies the room in that last word, "weep." When the room has not received loving care, such as proper roofing or caulking, let the room grieve its state in the way it knows how: by leaking—weeping.

We cannot be sure of the immediate context this poem came from, whether it was written in the room, in Sulaimani, or written away from the room, in mourning for Sulaimani. Either way, though, the poem describes a physical space in all its imperfections, noting humorously how one learns to live with, and then perhaps even love, the flaws. The anger the poet expresses is not for the room, but for the abstract "you." "You" could be the reader, but also anyone entrusted with the care of the space. When "you" fail to properly care for the room, the poet says, do not scold the space—let it weep. The space takes on human characteristics, needing protection, care, love, and finally, in abandonment, needing to weep.

Perhaps it is this room that Salim references when he confides to his friend, "My heart won't let me tell you what has become of your room" (line 63). In Nali's absence, Salim says, "No voice comes from its window except the whine of an owl. / The trails of ants are the only footsteps or paths" (lines 65-66). With this news of the room, Salim ends his catalog of damages, specific, exacting, "When Sulaimani is so, walk past" (line 68). And even more flatly, "If you intend to travel here, don't" (line 72). Sorrow, an emergent, but lasting bond between the two poets, accompanies them both into exile: Salim within his own city, Nali without.

Beyond this exchange, Salim creates his own moment to say goodbye, forming an entire poem around the word itself, "goodbye." "Goodbye, oh power of the Babans, goodbye," he writes. Playing into the repetition of the form, the ghazal, and adding

additional repetition of his own, he continues, “The plains of your departure are dark as a tar sea. / Goodbye, delightful sun, goodbye” (lines 7-8). He declares of Sulaimani, “I am ready for the city to be Shi’a” (line 3). He describes his fate, “Like a Turcoman prisoner, they take me by force,” “I go to the east, the property of Tehran” (lines 5 and 9). “Goodbye,” he says to Sulaimani, “oh, Qibla of the soul, goodbye” (line 10). Casting his mind out, toward the larger world, Salim addresses even those he imagines do not care about what are to him vast changes. He concludes the poem by saying, “Though you are unconcerned about Salim’s situation, / Goodbye, non-Muslims, goodbye” (lines 19-20).

Salim and Nali have a certain fame as Pillars of the Babans who watched their princes fall, but other poets lived through this change, too, responding in their own verses to the loss and subsequent exile they endured. Haji Qadir Koye, born around 1815 and coming of age before the fall of either the Ardalans or the Babans, uses his verses to defend his manhood, which he perceived as directly offended by having to live at the mercy of the Ottoman Turks. In “[My body and soul are so busy]” he writes, “He who is not a poet is sterile. / In my poems, I have many sons” (lines 7-8). He turns any insult to his virility back on his occupiers: “Don’t say Haji had no work in the Ottoman Empire. / I am a man in a city of women” (lines 9-10).

Sheikh Raza, by his own accounting, a child of five years old when the Ardalans fell, a young man as the Babans transitioned out of power, writes nostalgically,

I remember Sulaimani as home and domain to the Babans,  
not judged by Persians, nor enduring Ottoman ridicule.  
Before Sira's Gate<sup>6</sup>, all gathered: sheikhs, mullahs, ascetics.  
The masters of need circled Saywan Hill<sup>7</sup> as pilgrims do the Ka’aba.  
Soldiers in their multitudes hindered the gathering of kings.  
Music and the kettledrums’ voice rose to Kaywan’s balcony<sup>8</sup>.  
What nostalgia for that era, that time, that age<sup>9</sup>, those days,

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<sup>6</sup> Sira’s Gate: a public gate at the center of Sulaimani.

<sup>7</sup> Saywan Hill: a region of Sulaimani that was during Sheikh Raza’s time and is today a graveyard.

<sup>8</sup> Kaywan: the Kurdish word for Saturn

<sup>9</sup> Age: this word in a secondary meaning names a particular prayer, the third of the day

when horses paraded in Kaniaskan<sup>10</sup> Square. (Lines 1-8)  
He remembers, preserves, and defends the city he knew: “Arabs, I won’t ignore your ascendance, you are transcendent, but / Saladin, who seized the world, was the best fruit of the Babans” (lines 11-12). Though the poet cannot reverse the historical shift he witnesses, he can memorialize the bygone order. CJ Edmonds, a British Political Officer in the region approximately fifty years after the fall of these princely houses, says, “... most of the adult population must have heard at first hand from their fathers glowing, and no doubt much embellished, accounts of those spacious days of Kurdish independence” (Edmonds 57). He read Sheikh Raza’s poems and heard in it the voices of many.

Piramerd, born just after the fall of the Babans, can only grieve what he never knew. He sees his fate, the fate of the Kurdish tribes, written in the sky:

The high stars are bright at night  
Like me, they have no joy, no peace, no rest.  
For years, we have been friends during these sleepless nights.  
We are vagabonds. At night, we can’t put our heads on a pillow.  
I am up and down in the empty hand of misery. They  
Like the doomed and ruined Kurdish tribes, are strays in the sky.

(Lines 1-6)

The stars, Piramerd imagines, share his feeling. “Last night,” the poet says, “near dawn, they cried over me. / They saw me distraught, between friends and enemies” (lines 9-10). In a quick aside, he admits that he appropriates sympathy from the natural world, “It was dew, but I took it for their tears” (line 12). He returns to his fantasy to “charge the wind”: “Why do stars consume sorrow? / They are not like us. They live nearest God’s house” (lines 13-14). At this interrogation, the natural world breaks with Piramerd, the stars confess, writing their “response in dew on the leaves,” that the Kurds themselves are to blame for the stars’ sorrow (line 15). The stars write, “The sparks of your evil lit the sky. / The great Kurds blew on the flame. / Their breath, their smoke, makes our eyes water” (lines 16-18). Speaking with the voice of the stars, fellow vagabonds from whom Piramerd drew comfort, Piramerd expresses his anger at his own people. Piramerd and the stars wander in exile because Kurds started the fire. Kurds burned down the sky.

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<sup>10</sup> This is a compound word/name whose parts mean Spring of Gazelles

Hamdi, born around 1876, coming of age as the twentieth century arrives, expresses the most sympathy for the Kurds. “The land is dear,” he says, “Don’t say it is the earth’s dust” (line 1). More, “It’s kohl dust that deepens the eyes of recognition” (line 2). He begs his reader, “Don’t say its stones thickened from water and dust. / Say the livers of Kurdish martyrs are fearless” (lines 3-4). He gently argues with his reader, positing: “If the gardens don’t bloom and grass doesn’t gild, / It is their right—Kurds have been so long disrupted, in tragedy” (lines 9-10). Kurds are, to Hamdi, victims and not to be blamed. In the final couplet of this poem, he directs his blame, “Hamdi knows the Turks and Iranians, foreigners, / Are enemies to Kurdish lands. If you see them, run” (lines 11-12).

Writing across the nineteenth century, assigning blame for their exile to various parties, all Kurdish poets evince pervasive despair. They write about this meaninglessness, given their education, in terms that would be familiar to any disciple of a Sufi order. Haji Qadir Koye gives hopelessness its moment:

...We become dust on traveled paths.  
 Tomorrow’s dawn is a burning oven.  
 The city’s businesses and shops will open.  
 This one sells, this one buys.  
 This one tears at his collar. His father has died.  
 This one sews a new dress. She is a bride.  
 Without a mace, the universe has created a gristmill  
 To search us out and grind us down.  
 Villagers water their farms and cut their flowers.  
 Animals give birth. Dogs bark. Donkeys bray.  
 In this world, the sage who kills himself is only a shepherd.  
 Plato, ripped apart by grief, is only a cowherd.  
 If this hand vanishes, another hand appears. (Lines 1-13)

These lines radiate exhaustion. The universe grinds us down. The greatest among us are ignored, their sacrifices and contributions inconsequential. If this hand vanishes, the poet says to himself, another hand will appear. In “The Visible and The Veiled,” Jamil al-Zahawi echoes this image of Koye,

“So, I appear,”	But this existence is a sprawling sea: I am just a bubble on its surface.	Beachless, boundless. So, I appear. So, I vanish. (Lines 31-34)
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Zahawi says, “So, I vanish” (line 34). Both Zahawi and Koye are, in these poems,

almost void of anger at their state. The conditions they live within reinforce their own insignificance and in these poems; they accept that nothingness. Whether the Muslim and Sufi traditions influenced them or whether the political losses of their era unmoored them, eroding their psychic presence on earth, both Koye and Zahawi outline here a fundamental exile from their time.

Bekhod and Hamdi, writing later in the century, add their own voices. Bekhod, writing from the anguish of Piramerd's death, calls the world "vile and faithless," begging the planet in its "tilted path" to "mete out a bit of justice" for him (lines 1-2). He prays for violence to visit the world as it has visited violence on him, listing the Kurdish poets and heroes he and his people have lost. Finally, the poet says, somewhat conspiratorially to the reader, "Brother, the world is asleep. He who wakes / Tells you, 'You are drunk with sleep'" (lines 31-32). Hamdi corroborates and explains the hypocrisy the era is capable of, saying, "All lovers are without desire. All provinces are without light" (line 25). Even those who should remain bulwarks of truth, the lovers, have succumbed to a dry life; all the provinces formerly enlightened by Kurdish leadership have fallen dark.

Partially, the despair emerges from the way exile compounds in the nineteenth century. Beyond the physical and political exiles these poets experience, they also stand outside the mainstream practice of the region's predominant religion: Islam. In the most extreme cases, poets felt themselves atheists or agnostics; more often nineteenth century Kurdish poets identified as disciples of a Sufi order. Sufi orders underwent a resurgence in popularity during the nineteenth century. The rise of charismatic religion—in this case, Islamic mysticism, Sufism—accompanied, as it so often does, the political and economic upheaval. Sufism encourages an individual relationship to the divine, unmediated by authority figures. It requires training the mind into boundlessness of thought until, just to take one example, self-annihilation is union with the divine. It disparages the worldly system of punishment and reward, of permitted and forbidden. This invigorates the creative arts, but sets the traditional structures of politics, society, and religion on the defensive.

Nali, in a poem some say he wrote in defense of religion, against the atheism he perceived in Jamil al-Zahawi's work, writes, "The cross-eyed, with their diffuse sight, study reason. / The wise, who know oneness, are ashamed at the suggestion" (lines

1-2). Knowledge, from Nali's perspective, comes from oneness, the annihilation of the individual ego in divinity. In two different comparisons, Nali draws distinction between himself and other men. In line five, he says slyly, "The Toothbrush<sup>11</sup> and the Torchwood are both called tree..." In lines 11-12, he says more directly, "Like a parrot, your ambitious heart puts your neck in greed's noose. / Like a nightingale, filled with love for the rose, I sing and harmonize." Both he and his detractors may look like men, but he enlightens, he sings, filled with love. The images here are particularly important as the nightingale and the rose are traditional Sufi tropes. Respectively, they represent the lover, the disciple, and the beloved, the deity. Nali describes how Sufism and his practice distance him from his fellow man, even if, in appearance, they retain outward shared characteristics.

In another poem, Nali attacks this visual falseness directly. The beard, an outward symbol of a pious Muslim man, Nali says, has been corrupted. In "[His beard]," Nali writes, "His beard, in its width and length, serves as two faces. / It's obvious. He grows his beard long and wide to deceive" (lines 1-2). The appearance of faith has grown large enough to obscure the absence of faith. Nali mourns that even among the faithful, even among the devotees of the Sufi orders, he alone has faith:

The Sufi, cloistered, naked, and broke, is made greedy  
By heaven's countless beauty marks and matchless ruby kisses.  
On the surface and below, on the slate of truth and metaphor,  
On the secrets of the pen, no one is left but Nali. (Lines 11-14)

Nali here begins a theme that many other Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century will repeat: even within their Sufi orders, the poets see abuses and corruptions that they cannot abide. Even within their religious homes, physical spaces of study and spiritual brotherhood like the tekiyes and khanaqas, the poets feel their exile. Nali concludes, in "[In this world]," "So what if the world awards him head to toe? / His existence is non-existence: content, detached" (lines 5-6). And, a few lines later, he elaborates, "Tekiye, sheikh: all are traps of attachment. / Nali will go on, drunk on ruins and detachment" (lines 9-10).

Proceeding chronologically, we see Haji Qadir Koye, another early poet of the nineteenth century and a firebrand for Kurdish independence, pick up the theme:

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<sup>11</sup> Arak: the tree from which primitive toothbrushes, sewak, were made.

Khanaqa, sheikh, tekiye—tell me:  
What do they do  
But teach laziness,  
Collect land and stockpile wealth?  
People don't examine them:  
Are they toxic or opiates?  
Put them in a crucible like gold.

Understand if they obscure or show the way. (Lines 7-14)

In the same poem, he takes a lighter, yet even more definite tone, "Mullah shmullah. I beg you: don't become one. / No one blesses another" (lines 15-16). In another poem, "[World, you are an island]," Koye contends, "Don't say Sufis are liars and mullahs speak true. / They are the same, one is not more or less" (lines 11-12). In frustration, in "[Her hair, snakes]," Koye argues with these "dry sheikhs,"

Tell me, you dry sheikhs, Why  
Does the bartender's bed hair ignore his forehead?

To sin against the great mouth is to understand that mouth.

I heard what I heard. What I saw, I said. (Lines 7-10)

Koye cannot find companionship among these sheikhs who fail to understand the power of sin. Finally, he speaks to his eyes, "Come to my heart," he tells them, "It is heaven for the living. / The garden spans the heart's desires. There is water as far as the eye can see" (lines 13-14). But even his heart, his own most intimate and inviolable home, he admits a few lines later, "has ignored [him] for a while" (line 18).

Koye continually asserts his exile within his own world—even the world's exile from itself. Speaking directly to the world, he says, "World, you are an island in the ocean I cried" (line 1). Sustaining the direct address, he tells the world, "It is no rumor: you are Zin and I am Mam" (line 2). Koye sees his world and himself as Zin and Mam: the most famous star-crossed lovers in Kurdish literature. He continues, "They say, 'The beloved will come to my pillow.' / I know better. God knows even better" (lines 7-8). Whatever exile Koye sees, God sees even more fully. Exile is not a melodramatic dream, but reality; seeing it draws nearer to divine wisdom.

Often, these poems in which the poet expresses exile from himself or his community indicate the poet's momentary understanding of the divine perspective. This shift in point of view makes him foreign to himself: he no longer can nor wishes to conform to the human perspective. Sheikh Raza, never one to shy away from criticism

or transgression, implores in “[There is a dome],” “Oh, people, settle your clothes in the wine cellar / Not in mosques where little faithless hermits live.” The spiritual sight that Mahwi teaches himself puts only distance between himself and his fellow man. In “[Those enthroned today],” he writes,

Those enthroned today, surrounded by ululating creatures,  
Will be corpses tomorrow, surrounded by shrieking creatures.

Tomorrow will cut and cut them down. Had they faith,  
They would not be so eager for this world, these creatures. (Lines 1-4)

His fellow men have become “creatures,” twisted by earthly desire, their sight distorted by their corporeal, and fleeting, ambitions. He continues, “We thought this life was water, but it was only mirage. / All drown though they swim in drought, these creatures” (lines 11-12). Man thought life was sustaining, but life—as Mahwi will note elsewhere—is not life. God, the beloved, is the only life. The temporal life man understands only intoxicates, blurring his vision of lasting life. Man as creature, though surrounded by the absence of water, drowns. “Jewels for shit, Mahwi,” the poet concludes, speaking to himself, “this is the behavior of creatures” (line 14). While the everlasting perspective brings with it a boundlessness, it can also usher in despair. A man may see the corporeal world from the ethereal stance, but he remains within it. The double-vision can be a heavy burden.

In “[If I can’t see],” Mahwi stresses his feeling of futility:

If I can’t see worship’s tyranny by wine’s light, what can I do?  
If I can’t cure night with a candle like this, what can I do?

All that my heart has left in its warehouse is bitter melancholy.  
With this cash, I bargain with love sickness. What else can I do?

(Lines 1-4)

Mahwi wishes to break the sense of habit around his devotions, but, as he says, if wine cannot illuminate the strangle-hold of worship, what can he do? Mahwi wants to light the darkness but has only his meager candle. He has nothing to offer his infinite beloved, what can he do on behalf of his wasted heart? “For so long,” Mahwi says, “the riotous city of love has gone dead silent. / If I can’t incite revolution by the law of madness, what else can I do” (lines 9-10)? If madness cannot bring love back to life, what can Mahwi—nothing compared to the laws of madness—do? He concludes this poem, so focused on his own insufficiency and despair, by pleading with his beloved—God: “My loved ones

abandoned me. I don't fit. Death, hurry up! / If death doesn't excuse me from this failure of life, what else can I do" (lines 15-16)? Mahwi's acceptance of the spiritual perspective on life has made him foreign to his loved ones, to "this failure of life." The only solution left is for death to hurry up.

In "[People in this world]," Mahwi revisits the idea of the people who surround him being gullible and faithless. The poet writes that if he declared himself a prophet, they would believe him (lines 1-2). He begs his fellow man to consider each tear of the homeless, "Those floods of uncertainty—each: an arrow, a heart-finder, a musket bullet" (line 4). He both mourns his isolation and prays that God sustain it: isolation is his only protection from the "useless, eager" "conspirators and condemners:"

No one becomes my one. No beloved stands at that doorstep.  
God, you cure me. I am one with no one, with no doorstep.

Don't surround me with gossips. Forget the smug  
Who accuse love and blame mind; be deaf and dumb.

The slippery tongue and ear doesn't repeat or absorb proverbs.  
Useless, eager, they come and go, the conspirator and condemner.

(Lines 5-10)

Exile from the men around him, the communities he sees, weighs on him. He belongs to no one. No one waits to visit him; he has no doorstep at which anyone could wait. Yet, he sees this exile secure his mental clarity, keep him aloof from gossip, blame, and advice. The exile Mahwi feels from his fellow men could be seen as a strong geographical barrier, like a mountain range keeping his enemies at a distance, providing him safe places to hide away from the world and live in a heightened awareness.

Piramerd, writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, echoes Mahwi's sentiments, but adds his own sharp critique of Sulaimani's Great Mosque. Founded by Kak Ahmadi Sheikh, to whom Sheikh Raza Talabani dedicated one of his odes, the mosque had, since its founder's death, apparently fallen into what Piramerd considers disrepute. In the first section, the poet begins, "Like a fox, I was liquid, circling and encircling. / I found the slope of the Great Mosque's courtyard" (lines 1-2). Thinking he would find space, "a corner for worship and isolation" (line 4), the poet is disappointed to find it "an attic with two breaths of air" (line 5). Piramerd bitterly describes the difference between the founder and the space as the current occupants keep it. "For those with

attentive hearts,” he writes, “Kak Ahmad’s light is so clear, / But fountain to floor, the place is crooked” (lines 7-9). From here, Piramerd lays on his criticisms of the once-great mosque:

They say the water runs clean,  
But it is full of scum, like dung.  
It is no fountain, but a collection of snot and phlegm,  
Dripping like a tuberous root, a turnip. (Lines 11-14)

With a shrug, Piramerd says, “I guess hocking loogies is their duty” (line 16). “In the courtyard’s fountain,” the poet continues, mercilessly, “they pull up ass and / Ripping shame’s curtain, they slosh and squelch, / Washing in the snot and phlegm and shit...” (lines 19-21). Ablution, the ritual purification of the devotee, has become a shameless public display in what is deplorably unclean water.

“Here,” the poet continues, “we make ablution, we hear the call to prayer” (line 23). And this is where Piramerd launches his next criticism: of the call to prayer, “a barking like that of a cow” (line 24). Piramerd wants to know: when did the artful call to the faithful of Islam become an opportunity for any fool?

When we wake, let that bark be dumb.  
This barking is ok, people say,  
It’s in the interest of the nation.  
There’s no person to say: Muslims,  
Muhammed’s call should be a splendor.  
Why is there no fine voice to call?  
Only here have I seen this: the call by  
Anyone who comes, anyone who speaks,  
He who shows up and swears to do it. (lines 30-38)

Only here, Piramerd says, at Sulaimani’s once-Great Mosque can anyone, on time or late, “whinny” out the call (lines 39-40).

There is no one to say, Piramerd says, but obviously there is Piramerd who says, of this muezzin,

He scares people, is fierce, and nothing’s to be done.  
He makes a fright of Islam’s call.  
Why doesn’t God end his barking?  
Why doesn’t the Prophet browbeat him?  
He has no taste for Islam’s call. (Lines 41-45)

His criticisms, as so many other poets of his generation, set him apart from his fellow man. In this case, his opinions likely would have ostracized him from the central religious community in Sulaimani, his city. Similar in sentiment to Mahwi, though

different in expression, Piramerd points to how far the worldly life of the religious men around him has fallen from its spiritual ideal. Partially, his criticism, like Koye's, must have been meant to goad the mosque and its practitioners into better behavior, if not at least better hygiene.

Hamdi, a poet born in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the gentlest of insurrectionists, carries these sentiments forward. He acknowledges that love, the divine love, costs the lover comfort today, but gives everlasting knowledge and ease. To decide according to the next world's demands, rather than this world's, creates a distance between the individual and his fellow man. More: the orders that led these poets also often led them to friction with their own mainstream religious communities.

Hamdi loves Love, but Love is not an easy master. Hamdi says,

Love reveals all secrets and yet keeps itself secret.  
Love is full of the body and yet the body of soul.

Each creature is a part of all parts of each creature.

Love is the source of each action in creation. (Lines 1-4).

Divine Love, if measured by human metrics and time-bound morality, contains contradiction. Hamdi acknowledges, "The heart shouldn't be in less misery. / Love desires spectacle, that's why there's lightning" (lines 11-12). Hamdi concludes: "Love is today's problem and tomorrow's ease" (line 20). Rather than resist the exile listening to Love can bring, Hamdi embraces it.

In "[The blood of the wise heart]," he claims arrival for himself, making what is illegal lawful by his own edit: "It's fatal, anything that by law is illegal. / The act that fits the hero is lawful" (lines 5-6). The heroic act, whatever it may be, is lawful. Hamdi specifies:

The dissolution of love is suicide, immolation.  
Anything the nightingale and moth does is lawful.

Wine is religion's enemy, so say the mullahs.

If I drink it, this enemy of religion, it is lawful. (Lines 9-12)

To ignore love is suicide; to embrace love, in any way, is life and law. Within his own body, the lover transforms what is illegal into the lawful. The poet confronts the criticism he receives from his community:

The sermonizer forbids me to gaze, but he has others in mind.  
Like the sun's, my gaze on the beloved's cheek is lawful.

The heart worships sight, before and behind the eyebrow.

This Ka'aba, for wayfaring idolaters, is lawful. (Lines 13-16)

The sermonizer forbids Hamdi to gaze on the beloved, but, Hamdi says, this man has confused him with others, whose gaze perverts. His gaze, he says, is like the sun's on the beloved's cheek: lawful. The beloved's cheek, a Ka'aba for "wayfaring idolaters," is lawful. Hamdi concludes that there are many thoughts and actions that "...may be Muslim, but [are] not lawful" (line 18). Hiding behind the label of Islam or Muslim, much that is illegal has found sanctity: a trend Hamdi addresses directly.

The family of men, of religious men, of Islam may ostracize him, but he stakes his territory in the vast landscape of Love. Exile from the corrupted communities of devotion is, for Hamdi, arrival. He recognizes and understands how Love makes him irrevocably different:

The lover and the Sufi, since creation: he is the angel and he the devil.

The wine's elder and the tekiye's sheikh: he is human, he is animal.

I took love's secret to the ascetic. He nodded like a donkey.

I understood he was empty, his wide neck busy over bread.

Wine's light differs from the electrical flame.

One is wide thought's lantern, one is the alley's blessing. (Lines 1-6)

It is only Love that gives Hamdi direction: "It is love that leads Hamdi to philosophy's field, to understanding" (line 21). It is only divine love that gives Hamdi understanding, "Remove love and let me know if he retains any knowledge" (line 22). In fact, Hamdi states explicitly that "Arrival and separation are poverty and fortune" (line 19) and "Arrival is trouble. Separation is simple" (line 20). Hamdi is blatantly suspicious of contentment and peace. Separation, trying as it is, purifies man where arrival might corrupt. Hamdi accepts the simple, difficult clarity of exile. In "[I grieve over you]," Hamdi confronts the reader, the public. "Leave me alone," he says, "I'm love's infidel. There is no converting me to Islam and its Qibla" (line 6). The poet, as a true lover, does not belong to his time, but to his God.

In "Era," Hamdi expounds on this idea. "This era is child's play," he begins, "Such an absurd world, like an empty envelope" (lines 1-2). He notes the sweeping political changes, citing them as proof of the instability of the physical world:

The lack or perfection in the world's creation is not reliable.

Both, it's true, end in the hands of demise.

A shift: the day becomes the dark night's prisoner.

A shift: the full moon gives its affection to the crescent.  
A gift does not come from knowledge, nor bad luck from ignorance.  
Today, we see a hawk. Tomorrow, a falcon.  
Jam's terrace, that for a while kept Kaywan company,  
Is today such a ruined place it could be an abyss. (Lines 5-12)

He contends that true life does not come, as Nali says, from the body's constant, thoughtless breath: "Life is the breath that isn't let out or drawn in" (line 21). Hamdi defends the spiritual world as man's home beyond the vicissitudes of the corporeal:

With all the age that Noah had he said,  
Life in migration is a dream without imagination.  
The universe is the foam on the water's head, man. Think.  
It is a home for no one and won't become one. (Lines 23-26)

He deplores as duplicitous those who worship God for gain (line 31). He mourns that "This era's piety is bought with the price of sin" (line 32). When piety has such foundations and definitions, Hamdi can rejoice in his isolation. The poet can celebrate his exile.

Nari, one of the last poets born to the nineteenth century, can only agree with the poets who have come before him. In his poem "[All my friends]," he says simply,

All my friends have left the village.  
Only I remain in my place.

For this world, none remember the next.  
God, what should I do here or there? (Lines 1-4)

He warns, "An open courtyard invites shame. / The tilted silo fills with thorns" (lines 7-8). He reverses ideas of wealth, "Until someone is given the cash of sorrow / He is someone, my dear, without a penny" (lines 9-10). Imagining this world and the next as a man's two wives, he says only, "It is difficult, Nari, to keep two wives / balanced on the scales of The Law" (lines 21-22). Nari, like every major poet of this era, thoroughly schooled in the principles of Islam demonstrates the influence of Sufism, a path that invites individuals to seek, without tangible limitations: a volatile undertaking. As the old Arabic proverb says, "What is forbidden is required." The political and economic disorder of the time put singular pressure on poets to re-evaluate and find new life in old forms; the spiritual discipline of Sufism, almost as if it were a by-product, demanded it.

The perspectives that set them at odds with the religious communities of their time also set them outside conventional wisdom on social topics. Nali writes more than a defense of his beloved, Mahbuba, whose physical characteristics he first asks and

then commands his reader to see beyond defect. In the first line, he tells the reader the common perception, "They tell me: Mahbuba is cross-eyed, lazy-eyed, spoiling for a fight." In the second, he immediately begins the redefinition that will constitute the poem: "Cross- and lazy-eyed or is the scale of her allure a little off balance?" Is she cross- or lazy-eyed, the poet asks in line three, or is she taking "aim at hearts, squinting, [seeking] / A straight shot" (lines 3-4)? With the arrows of her eyelashes, the poet says, she will "cut the heart's every leg" (line 4). Her eyes, of different colors and openness, Nali describes as flowers, "Her eyes, drunk night and day, share colors: / One is a violet's bud, the other, a full lily" (lines 5-6). Nali twists traditional imagery of the beloved to show how his beloved, Mahbuba, is perfect, not deformed as society would have seen her. Nali casts her, even, as the lover, the true disciple, drunk day and night.

The poet takes society's accusations and redirects them to society itself: "You have it upside down: her eyes reflect yours. You / Have the tilted sight. When will you learn" (lines 7-8)? It is not Mahbuba who cannot see properly, but those who view Mahbuba as anything other than beautiful. Nali transforms the eyes of his beloved into a mirror: whatever the passerby sees is a reflecting of his character, his true self. The poet continues, "Anyone can throw her lacking face onto a mirror / And cite the witnesses, but who believes the visible" (lines 9-10)? It is easy to shove someone in front of a mirror and point, easy to induce others to point, but that corporeal reality is precisely what Islam and its mystical practices teach the faithful to distrust. Nali holds as faithless those who fail to move past the visible. "The writer," Nali says, "sees two books at one time" (lines 11-12). In direct contradiction to conventional perspectives that might say all suitors found Mahbuba undesirable, leaving her alone, the poet remarks to himself, admiringly, "Nali, that wild gazelle falls into no man's trap / For her peregrine eyes are sharp, always alert" (lines 13-14). It is Mahbuba's discerning sight that keeps her free from the traps of men, that allow her to remain untamed, graceful. This poem, noteworthy in so many ways, may represent the first Kurdish poem arguing for equality between humans and their differing manifestations.

Jamil al-Zahawi, arriving on the poetic scene in the mid- to late-century, looks explicitly to social issues as well. In his autobiography, he describes many occasions on which he drew the ire of the more traditional elements of society. In response to an

article he published in an Egyptian newspaper on the rights of women, “A great furor rose [...]. And fanatics started foaming and howling; they hurled curses and insults at me” (53). He tells his readers, “The well-mannered among writers in Egypt and Syria supported me, but intolerance in Baghdad at that time was more influential, so the governor couldn’t do anything other than dismiss me to appease public opinion” (54). In response to his 18<sup>th</sup> collection of poetry, a book length poem titled *al-Thawūrah Feh-al-Jahym* [Revolution in Hell], “A great furor rose around it. Because of this poem, some of the intolerant cursed me from the pulpits during Friday sermons, and, after a while, all copies sold out” (58). There is some satisfaction here in that the rage directed toward his writing brought infamy with it—and infamy helps sell books. Even as his detractors lambasted the book, they drove up sales until, Zahawi says with a little grin, “all copies sold out.” Repeatedly, Zahawi tells us, he “recorded [his] opinions that contradicted those of contemporary scientists” (57). He considered his 17<sup>th</sup> collection of poems, *Nazaghāt al-Shaytān* [Temptation of the Devil] so contradictory toward “the stance of the intolerants” that he refused to publish it until after he died. He felt the book would “energize the intolerant against” him and he was “uncomfortable with the possible consequences” (58).

Among his favorite topics of dissent were the rights of women. He felt, and clearly said, that women were men’s equals and that the institutions of marriage and veiling darkened women, weighing them down, preventing them from contributing to society. In “The Woman and The Man,” the poet paints his picture of marriage: “With him, she lost / Her rights in life” (lines 1-2). Her husband “bargains her into submission. / If she complains, he divorces her” (lines 5-6). She is soul; he is tyranny. Eventually, his cruelty corrupts her:

He forces her to lie                      Whenever she opens her mouth.  
If she’s honest, he doubts her        If she lies, he believes her. (Lines 11-14)

In his

famous “Revolution in Hell,” the poet narrates how, at his own death, two angels interrogate him. At first, knowing that his answers will determine his everlasting fate, he attempts to answer as he knows he should. Finally, the stress of the encounter collapses his artifice and, interrupting his heavenly interrogators, he confesses. When



with her. The very posture of the genders within the poem contains the poet's opinion. That alone might have caused the "great furor" that Zahawi describes so frequently as the common respond to his poetry.

In his "Philosophy," Hamdi, following on late in the century, writes a concise defense of the poets he claims as his heroes, the Kurdish poets of his age, "Worthless men don't come from cowardice" (line 2). As Nali, as Zahawi, as Piramerd, as so many of the exiled men he respected, Hamdi postures defiantly against "them"—"them" as political enemies of the Kurds, religious hypocrites, the backward-minded, or all three:

So, they force me to dry the white sea by handfuls—  
I won't wet their lips come summer.  
So, they force me to shoulder the earth until resurrection—  
I will stand on my two feet until Doomsday.  
So, the mill of the universe that grinds all livelihood  
Takes my head under its millstone.  
So, I must use my nails to pry apart steel rods,  
So, I must make a dagger from that steel for my own liver,  
So, in the water, in the winter, I must be a fish,  
So, in the fire, in the summer, I must be a phoenix,  
All that is better than I bow my head,  
To a tightwad, a traitor, an ass. (Lines 3-14)

Whatever punishment or degradation "they" can inflict on him, Hamdi will find a way to hold his own head high. In Kurdish, the word for independence comes from just this concept and translates closely as "to have/hold one's own head." Hamdi, he says, no matter what the circumstances or consequences, will hold his own head.

In the second section of "Philosophy," Hamdi speaks more intimately to his reader, explicating the more rhetorical first section. He writes, "God gave you two ears and a tongue / Two listen and one speaks the secret language, / Two councils to manage one existence. (lines 15-17). He scolds his reader when he says that those who cannot differ between their left and right are children, unaware (lines 19-20). He decrees, somberly, "This is corruption: if the heart weren't in charge, he'd do right thing" (line 21). "So," he concludes, "the world was, is, and will be: / Torn apart, head from feet, feet from head" (lines 23-24).

These lines hold what seem to be complete despair. So the world was, is, and will be: torn apart. Hamdi's world was torn apart in every way a person's can be: politically, economically, religiously, socially. Salim, writing at the beginning of the

century that Hamdi was drawing to a close, gave voice to the same hopelessness. In “[Silence your call],” he writes, “People these days don’t stand with art. Seek hope, / Salim, in nothing. You work for nothing” (lines 17-18). In Salim’s era, this was true: the Ottomans and Persians dethroned Kurdish patrons, the money patrons had provided their artists evaporated. The poet had to adjust his expectations from a life at court, surrounded by poets and a lively, well-financed artistic community to a life alone, seeking out his fellow-strivers. His poetry, once powerful to his prince, suddenly held power only for himself—an abrupt and severe delimiting of his sphere of influence. When the courts crumble and the system poets relied on for centuries is in ruins, Salim cannot see a way forward in the world.

But these two lines contain critical Sufi word play. Nothingness is the state the lover strives to achieve, annihilating himself in the beloved. When Salim writes, “Seek hope, / Salim, in nothing,” he is reminding himself, and perhaps his reader, that nothing is the only true desire. When Salim writes, “You work for nothing,” he sounds as if he has given up on the value of poetry, the purpose of the artistic pursuit, but by sleight of phrase, he is also saying, “You work toward or on behalf of nothing.” Salim strives for nothing, which, by Sufi definition, is also everything and all-ness. Superficially a hopeless statement, this is—more deeply construed—transformational. The poet is nothing; the poet is exiled, impoverished, destroyed. The poet is nothing; the poet is freed from material constraints to launch into new work, the unmapped lands of nothingness. Sorrow and exile launch the poet into invention.

These contradictory pairs—nothing and allness, exile and arrival, *faq* and *wşl*—scaffold the thinking of Kurdish poets in the nineteenth century. They turn to the concepts over and over again to discuss their suspicions of themselves, their longing for their beloveds (who often begin or serve solely as metaphors), their status in their families, their status in the larger family of men and Kurds, their standing of their nation and their place within their nation. These pairs structure the nature of nineteenth century Kurdish literary—which was also religious and political—thought.

### Chapter 3: Arrival

These pairs begin as clear contradictions. From the Sufi perspective, however, they can become more and more opaque. Negation and affirmation, union and distance: these seem easy opposites to maintain. But the poets' Sufi training, as we have seen over the course of this dissertation, teaches negation and distance as preparatory, perhaps even the only preparation. And toward what end? Annihilation, *fanā*, which from a human perspective would be considered negation or exile, but from a divine perspective would be considered union—arrival. The exile nineteenth century Kurdish poets went through could have destroyed them—and in so many ways did—but the lens with which they could view destruction helped them transform one destruction into another, exile into arrival. Mahwi, paraphrasing a hadith, writes, "...die and you survive death. / Death is ahead of you. Before that, come. Go" (lines 13-14). Nineteenth century Kurdish poets, in their various ways, died before they could die and so, survived death.

Having lost their princes and the economic stability those princes provided, nineteenth century Kurdish poets turned to themselves as their own sovereigns. Poets suddenly found themselves motivated not to curse the prince's enemies or praise the prince and his allies, but to say about the world around them. For some poets, this meant clear critiques of how Kurds treated other Kurds, of how certain Kurds treated the Kurdish nation. For others, this meant bending the old court forms into new quotidian forms. While this may not immediately appear radical, it led to the reconception of what could be written about in a poem. Poets began redefining what could be "poetic." They repudiate the accepted discourses of haram and halal, in the grand tradition of Persian mystical poetry. They establish and defend Kurdish as a literary language, particularly in Sorani. In their exile, they build each other up as heroes to follow, comrades-in-arms. They use verse to speak with one another about their state, physical and emotional. They develop intimacy that plays along the entire spectrum of the homoerotic. They explore the voiceless as symbols of the stateless, bringing animal voices, and by extension human cruelty, to the forefront of the poetic conversation. Again, moving out from the self in concentric circles of concern, this chapter will look at how these poets transform the exile they survive on the most personal and most public of levels.

## *The Self*

Exile from the world allows the poet to arrive at himself. Three poets, writing in distinct modes, express their exile from their world, their fellow Kurds. Haji Qadir Koye speaks politically—Mahwi, from deep within the Sufi tradition—Sheikh Raza, from within the courtly modes, but all three articulate a distance from others that pains them. For Haji Qadir Koye, that pain and disappointment can morph into anger or frustration. Mahwi forges acceptance. Sheikh Raza seeks acceptance, but often settles for retribution. For all three poets, the painful expanse between their selves and their world forces each to see himself as sufficient, even abundant.

Arguably, Haji Qadir Koye's most significant poems come from his attempts to show his Kurdish readers what possible futures exist for them—as Kurds and as people—and why those futures have not yet come into being. Koye fashions himself as the gadfly, an identity he takes on for the sake of his people. The mantle of “the gadfly” separates him irrevocably and intentionally from the very people he loves, the very people his poems strive to embolden. In “[It is good for readers],” the poem we examined in the last section, Koye traverses the entire emotional range from disappointment to anger to accusation to acceptance and resolution.

He begins the poem, as we saw, with a scathing evaluation of the religious institutions of his day:

Khanaqa, sheikh, tekiye—tell me:  
What do they do  
But teach laziness,  
Collect land and stockpile wealth?  
People don't examine them:  
Are they toxic or opiates? (Lines 7-12)

He then addresses the “people” in line six directly. He commands: “Put [khanaqa, sheikh, tekiye] in a crucible like gold / To understand if they obscure or show the way” (lines 13-14). This command is not enough, Koye fears, so he takes a denigrating, though humorous approach: “Mullah shmullah. I beg you: don't become one. / No one blesses another” (lines 15-16). In just this opening sally, Koye established his opinion. Places of Islamic teaching have rotted with corruption, taking advantage of the Islamic pillar *zakaat* to become vaults. He finds fault not only with greed transforming schools

into banks, teachers into bankers, but with the common worshipper and student for not looking critically at his religion and its teachings.

His fault-finding is not idle. Koye's frustration stems from this: he holds his people's lack of critical thought responsible for their lack of social progress. In the next lines, Koye again uses the confrontational direct address. Though the tone is agitated, even angry, the poet seeks only to unveil what is possible in Europe, where he believes religion's sway lessened by reason's power:

You, busy with secrets, vainglory and desire,  
Europe's art has reached the miraculous.  
Its Eiffel tower reaches into the cosmos—  
All other nations search underground.  
They measure the universe's horizons  
And put people in the mood to dance.  
Words on their tongues today, a hundred years from now  
They could repeat for you without a single change.  
Each year, they learn a hundred and fifty languages,  
For each year, a new name for creation and art. (Lines 17-26)

The accusation in the first line extends to anyone, any "you," but Koye means to point the finger, at least in part, at Islamic clerics whose priorities lead them away from the achievement he sees in the West. The words he chooses even indicate a specific frustration with Islamic mystics whose search for secrets (God) would, traditionally, have led them away from the material, and scientific, worlds.

In further frustration with the Muslims of his day, Koye brings the Prophet Muhammed's direct speech into the poem. He asks his reader, "Why did the peaceful prophet plead, / 'Ask for your education, even if it comes from China'" (line 29)? The poet observes, "This verse makes no difference between men and women" (line 30) and then draws his conclusion, "If a mullah makes one, he isn't truly religious" (line 31). Koye strives to convince his reader, against what we can assume are the ruling mores of his time, that education is a Muslim's duty, a thought we will hear Jamil al-Zahawi echo in his poetry, and that a true education has no limits. Education, Koye propounds, extends across genders and cultures. "You come to learn art. What do you care if it's / Gentile, Hindu, or Jewish" (lines 33-34)? Koye is, as he often is, adamant. The critical evaluation, not the origins, of wisdom matter. More than anything, Koye wants the minds of his fellow man to be ever-active. Finishing this line of thought, Koye says, "It's

necessary to keep moving, like the millstone. / Every decade, order and wages change. / Laziness is the work of cursed assholes” (lines 35-37).

Koye localizes the human impatience he feels when he shifts his attention to the Kurds. Concerned for his people and exasperated by their failures to rule themselves, he asks, “Who says Kurds have perception” (line 77)? He maintains,

Our Kurds are foolish and backward.  
Together, they act like kindling, fire, and oil.  
If they could stand, hand in hand,  
They would conquer the world, as Alexander did. (Lines 61-64)

But they do not stand together. In-fighting, cross-purposes, back-stabbing—these riddled the politics Koye witnessed. And these are not popular messages to deliver. Koye admits, “They don’t listen to me. / They find fault with my straight speech” (lines 78-79). The common man, Koye says, clings to “the sheikh’s illusions” (line 80), the same sheikh who “has no bread or onions, but” “hunts after ass, orphans, women” (lines 81-82). Koye gives up; “For a pure man,” he sighs, “there is too much / Talk of dirt and piss” (lines 83-84).

He bemoans the lack of Kurdish leadership not only in the spiritual community, but also in the secular. “A rich man,” Koye continues, “is a slave / To the filthy Ottomans. / All would die for a thin waist and thick ass” (lines 87-89). The men who should be princes, the men who should be his patrons, financing the heights of Kurdish arts, serve the Ottomans. They cannot cleave to his verses, supporting him, because that act would undercut their sources of money and power—both foreign. These rich men would “give their souls to buy a couplet of praise” (line 90), but Koye’s “constructive couplets” (line 91)—they “die exiled and alone” (line 92). Koye sets up his poetry, and the poetry of his generation, in antithesis to the court poetry that came before it. No more can Kurdish poets make an honest living supported by their Kurdish patrons. The verse that can be bought should be anathema to any red-blooded Kurd, Koye establishes. Kurdish poets, to maintain their purity, must accept their exile, their role as the outsider even from their fellow Kurd. Only there, cleansed by their poverty and separation, can poets speak truly.

Koye, sorrowful, but resigned, imagines that until his fellow Kurds “die under Ottoman oppression / They won’t value my difficult couplets” (lines 93-94). He speaks to

himself: “So, Haji, enough. Enough. / I told you: this speech is useless” (lines 99-100). He urges himself: “Leave it be. Your people are all snakes / Thieves, assholes, murderers, and wild men” (lines 103-104). And yet still the poem goes on. The poet knows his poetry will only deepen his sense of distance, and yet, he says, he must “reach” for his reader “with straight talk” (line 111). He brings the poem to a close with defiant resolve, “Even if I anger others, I won’t quit until I die” (line 112). He rails against and yet accepts the changing landscape of the Kurds, and, by extension, Kurdish poets. He accepts his own exile, an exile more personal than the political disenfranchisement of the Kurdish people.

Koye condemns the religious leadership and practice of his day, but the other strong proponent for the purifying power of exile and the necessity of the poem as truth is Mahwi; in a way, Koye’s closest ally is the great Sufi poet of the era. Koye’s mistrust of his immediate surroundings emerges from looking outside the immediate and assessing European advances as the product of scientific, catholic education and exploration. Mahwi shares Koye’s sense that distance from the world allows for true sight. Mahwi agrees that the only way to grow as a person, though Mahwi does not specify as a Kurd, is to maintain critical detachment. Yet, his conviction rises from his faith. In “[The world is a cabaret],” Mahwi tells his reader, “The world is a cabaret. Don’t stand still. Move through” (line 1). He queries his reader, but also the cosmos, “Who survives [the world] without being debased by it” (line 2)? He describes the instability of corporeal reality:

Life consoles you one or two days. On the third,  
it dissolves, the mother of all ghost disease.

It is, at the same time, sour and sweet faced.  
Its spite is a lie. Its kindness is a lie. Both just lies.

It leans back on your back to back break.

Today, you thank God. Tomorrow: oh, brother. (Lines 1-8)

Mahwi’s spiritual discipline leads him to the same conclusions that Koye drew: this world is not to be trusted. The poet’s role is to create and maintain intellectual remove so that he, and so his readers, can see more clearly the progress that is possible. For Koye, self-imposed exile leads him to encourage broader education and more technical advances. For Mahwi, the same conditions lead him to deeper practice. He finishes his

poem with instructions to himself that reference a hadith of the Prophet Muhammed: “Mahwi, die<sup>12</sup> and you survive death. / Death is ahead of you. Before that, come. Go” (lines 13-14). Mahwi’s suspicion of the world drives him away from himself, away from his own sense of life, into whatever sense of life surrender provides him. Koye might deride Mahwi as “busy with secrets,” but the fact remains: the two poets shared a rejection of the world they knew that was representative of their poetic generation. They held in common a desire to bring about a better world and they transformed poetry in their attempt to discuss that desire.

Koye would have that world constructed by the rational sciences, but Mahwi would ask that world to be revealed within the heart. “The duty of the sincere,” Mahwi says in “[Heard or unheard],” “is to observe sincerity’s rites. / Discovered or hidden, I remember with the heart” (lines 3-4). Constant remembrance is its own reconstruction of the world. The same poem concludes, “Soon enough, oh, Mahwi, I will wear out the long path. / My hand empty or full, still I strive” (lines 13-14). The poet is clear: the outcome unfolds, but unfoldment, not outcome is the disciple’s joy. Whether or not he can grasp the lessons of his teachers, he will study. Aware of his mortality, he does not act on erratic earthly gain; he simply strives. Mahwi does not find his self-acceptance the way Koye does, and still he finds it. During the far-reaching upheaval of his time, Mahwi makes his peace with his exile not only as a Kurd, but as a poet, a thinker, and a man through his charismatic and mystical relationship with the divine.

These kinds of dramatic differences between poets emerge as the court system that sustained poetry collapses. With the Ardalans and the Babans gone, Kurdish poets became their own princes. Kheznedar writes of the freedom Nali exercised, “...he wrote poetry only to express himself; no one could tell Nali what to write” (3:74). Koye thought science could create progress; Mahwi thought study of the inner secrets. Both could explore their opinions in their poems because they were the only prince they needed to worry about pleasing. With each poet his own prince, the old courtly forms—the ode, the *staish*, and the curse, the *heju*—saw dramatic transformation. The ode need not sing

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<sup>12</sup> This line translates literally as, “By ‘die’ you survive death,” and is a reference to the hadith of the Prophet Mohammed, “Die before you die.” Sufis commonly believe that this hadith is an instruction to believers to annihilate themselves in God, to die in God, and thereby understand and achieve true life.

the prince's or God's praise, but could be directed to the poet's heroes, a particularly fine mare, a particularly fine young man, or even new inventions of modernity like the telegraph. Praise could be used like a fist, wrapped around and disguising a curse. The curse becomes as flexible as the ode, directed at the poet's enemies, someone who gave the poet a defective fighting rooster, a prostitute who insisted he be paid. This subversion goes so far that the forms are reinvigorated. And as poets repurpose these forms, elements of banality enter the poem. The poet can complain about a lazy donkey rather than about separation from the nightingale; the poet can bemoan his own anatomy's disfunction rather than curse the prince's enemies. Traditional symbols of court poetry remain but recede into a much larger landscape of possible poetic subject matter.

The poet most active in using these forms is Sheikh Raza Talabani. Of all Kurdish poets, Sheikh Raza is the most controversial. Even saying his name makes most Kurds blush. He delights in the explicit. Perhaps because he grew up in a Sufi environment, where to transcend limitation was to find union with the divine, he refuses any limitation on his verse. His very transgression, perhaps, makes him a better disciple of the order. Stylistically, he is most consistent with the court poetry tradition, privileging the praise and blame forms, but he is a master of using those forms in radically new ways.

Sheikh Raza, in the courtly, hyperbolic vein, praises not his prince, but whatever princes he appoints: Sheikh Abdul-Qadir Gaylani, the founder of the Qadiri Order, specific members of the Jaff clan, the Jaff clan in its totality, Ahmad Nazim Beg, the Wali of Zawra, another name for the Wali of Baghdad, among so many others. Many of the "princes" he nominates were spiritual leaders of his time—men he thought the world should receive as royalty. At the death of Sheikh Star, Raza's cousin and grandson to the founder of the family, Mullah Mahmoud, Raza frames his grief in classic terms,

In your light, even the rooster spoke  
like Mansour Hallaj, "I am Truth."

[...]

I was an absolute constitution, well-governed.

Now, my temper is short. I am laid low.

My voice does not crow. I am fitful. (Lines 9-10, 12-14)

For Kak Ahmadi Sheikh, the great leader in Sulaimani, a neighboring city to Raza's native Kirkuk, he writes, "I wish I were the dog at the door of Ahmadi Kaki, / He, the

power of the powerful: heavens' inhabitants / fight for his prayer rug" (lines 2-4). For Sheikh Abdul-Qadir Gaylani, known as "The Great Helper," Sheikh Raza writes,

Whoever has his heart's eyes open will see:  
The fourth firmament's throne is under the sublime foot of the Sheikh.

The universe's shell lacked the magnitude of the pearl's expanse:  
So, he departed this world, the Sheikh. (Lines 3-6)

These terms are consistent with poetry of the epoch that was passing as Sheikh Raza came of age: the poet lowers himself, elevates his subject, adding sentimentality and hyperbole for effect. But here, Sheikh Raza broadens the application of these terms past those who govern his world to include those who are sovereign in his spirit.

Just as often, however, Sheikh Raza wrote odes to benefactors, potential benefactors, and friends that worked as the literary equivalent of a petition or thank you note. Sheikh Raza used verse to ask or give gratitude for items as small as some tobacco in ambergris or a fighting rooster and as large as financial support for his father's tekiye in Kirkuk. The poet is not helping the prince obtain good will or reputation among the public but helping sustain himself.

In his "[Sweet like Khosrau] <sup>13</sup>," Sheikh Raza curries favor with a powerful tribe while also setting himself above the very act of currying favor. He begins with pure praise for Kaka Jaff: "Sweet like Khosrau, the son of Jupiter: Jaff. / Doe eyes, crimson lips, faithless: Jaff" (lines 1-2). He opens his praise onto the whole tribe: "Chaos of the world, their glance disrupts creation. / A single soul, the world is powerless in their hands: Jaff" (lines 7-8). Though "the world is powerless in their hands," the poet argues "Raza alone has not become subject to him" (line 11). Praise of the Jaff clan occurs frequently in Sheikh Raza's collected works. As one of the most powerful tribes of his time, even into the present day, the Jaff clan would have been an important group to honor. In "[Oh, loved ones, don't lay a finger]," another poem praising the Jaff clan, he begs his loved ones, not to "lay a finger on the Jaff Clan" (line 1). "Insects," the poet says, "should steer clear of great summits" (line 2). He elaborates for his loved ones: "These unyielding blood-shedders, brawlers, and subduers, / the lowest among them is

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<sup>13</sup> Khosrau: a common Persian title for "king," this could also refer to Khosrau I (531-579) or Khorau II (590-628), famous kings of the Sassanian period.

a lion at the front lines” (lines 5-6). Then he addresses himself to God only, it seems, to beg the Jaff to let him speak freely,

Oh, God, I pray You punish he who antagonizes Jaff:  
hands shackled, hands behind neck, neck against rope.

Let the secret kindness of God fill you, so Raza may speak again:  
what a sorrow to sheathe a spear, diamond-sharp. (Lines 15-18)  
The last couplet could be read as direct address to the divine but also as a plea to the Jaff clan. The ambiguity works in the poet’s favor. Infamous for his sharp tongue, it is possible to imagine the poet needed to make amends for some prior offense.

In the most traditional of terms, Sheikh Raza writes to the Wali of Zawra, another name for Baghdad: “Bowling, I sweep the road’s dust with my eyelashes, / grateful for each footstep of the Wilayet’s guardian” (lines 1-2). He magnifies this praise in the lines that follow:

Traditionally, Westerners throw the hats from their heads  
to praise people of high rank.

I find their manner insufficient:  
I throw my head at your feet, along with my hat. (Lines 5-8)  
But this praise has purpose. The poet has wrought all this praise to put the Wali in a generous state of mind. Finally, the poet asks,

Listen to my complaint, this black fate I have:

My father’s legacy to me is a tekiye so old  
it has seen as many months and years as Noah.

There, the Order’s devotees  
spread their foreheads across the ground in worship.

Sheikhs and disciples raise their hands to pray,  
“God, give the King enduring life.”

Perhaps consider sustaining  
Those who come and go from the dervishes’ house. (Lines 22-30)  
Though Sheikh Raza had, and memorialized in his poems, fights with his family throughout his lifetime, he remained fundamentally committed to his family’s legacy. In this poem, he does not ask for his own sustenance, but for the family tekiye in Kirkuk. He describes it as his father’s legacy to him, when in fact, his father left the tekiye to his

brother, Sheikh Ali, a source of much contention. Still, Sheikh Raza uses his skills as a poet for the sake of the tekiye.

Some praise poems were not in supplication, but in gratitude. When Nazim Beg, then the Wali of Baghdad, sends him an aba, he writes eloquently, if with a wheedling edge, that he does not let “greed stretch [his] neck long like a camel’s” (line 3). “For the dervish,” he says, “one aba of camel’s wool is enough” (line 4). He details his contentment, almost by way of inviting further gifts:

One woolen suffices for my clothing.  
One bulrush mat for my floor is enough.

We, your servants, need nothing else:  
The handwriting you sent me is enough.

When the owner of kindness remembers  
His slave in a letter—that gift is enough.

Nazim Beg complimented me by sending a present.

For me, the destitute, this honor is enough. (Lines 5-12)

He accentuates his need by expressing gratitude for the smallest of gifts. The praise for Nazim Beg, “the owner of kindness,” is functionally another petition from the poet.

As modernity hit the nineteenth century, Sheikh Raza found truly revolutionary subject for praise poems: new inventions. The apocryphal story goes that on one of Sheikh Raza’s trips to Istanbul, the poet sought an audience with the Sultan to convince the ruler to employ him. The Sultan refused, so, naturally, Sheikh Raza calls him not the Prince of all Muslims, but the Donkey of all Muslims. The two phrases are close homophones—a clever play on words to express the poet’s displeasure, but the Sultan’s displeasure at the insult carried far more weight than the poet’s at not getting a job. The Sultan called for Sheikh Raza’s death. The poet fled to the Persian embassy where he called on the Shah’s mercy. The Shah, some years before, had assured the poet that if he ever needed a favor, the Shah would help. The embassy staff, in disbelief, wire the Shah on the telegraph who wires back, extending his protection. Sheikh Raza, in relief, writes an ode to the telegraph, this machine that saved his life:

Oh, Telegraph, you link justice seekers.  
You make the king aware of the beggar’s state.

Like the sun’s light, in the movement of a glance,

you travel a hundred years' distance.

To cut across a farsekh<sup>14</sup>, for you, is like flying  
from the eye's courtyard to the peak of an eyelash.

Go to the leg of the King's throne, to the world-conqueror.  
For me, kiss the dust on the court door. (Lines 1-8)

The reader sees elements of the traditional court praise—"the eye's courtyard," the eyelash's peak—but the human figure is eclipsed by the mechanical, this thing that can "cut across a farsekh" in the blink of an eye. The telegraph was the poet's stand-in, begging for him at the king's door.

Just as remarkable: Sheikh Raza uses the *staish*, the ode, to contemplate the beauty and gravity of young men he desired, as in "[Last night, for a vital expulsion]" or "[The day of Sunday]." It is tempting to look at these verses and apply our contemporary label of "homosexual," but Sheikh Raza and his contemporaries would not have understood that word. Relationships between men were flexible and concepts of gender far more fluid. That said, Sheikh Raza is one of the rare Kurdish poets of his time to speak openly of these desires. We will look back and separate these verses for study, but Sheikh Raza made no delineation. The men he loved were simply the men he loved. Kak Ahmadi Sheikh, Amin Faizy, and the orphan from Sanandaj were all people Raza chose as his royalty by using this poetic form.

Sheikh Raza, playful as he is, often uses the guise of praise to curse. He transfigures the open palm of the praise poem into a swift, strong backhanded slap. He uses the mode of praising to set himself apart from other poets, to set the person he praises apart from others who have, perhaps, not been so generous. In "[A gift is not pearls]," Sheikh Raza thanks Muhammad Beg, a leader of the Jaff Clan, for some cheese he sent:

...I do thank you for the gift, I your charity's servant.  
I recognize good, unlike Makhmur Efendi, the monkey.  
I recognize none apart from you, lord, as  
You recognize no servant apart from this.  
I, who have melted in your sincerity's forge,  
Cannot be compared with others. (Lines 13-18)

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<sup>14</sup> Six kilometers

Sheikh Raza establishes his gratitude only to mark his difference from this man Makhmur Efendi. Sheikh Raza is an incomparable servant, he says. He names himself a “poet of rare words and scarce speech” (line 21) where Makhmur Efendi, “That big-bellied, big-lipped man, Sir Penis Pusher,” (line 24) has nothing to give but evil. The praise poem is a thin veil to disparage not just Makhmur Efendi, but a judge who Sheikh Raza deems guilty of neglecting him:

And the judge doesn't ask after me. Has he forgotten  
Eating dried whey, years old? Sack clothing?  
If a donkey wears spun gold, it's still wool.

This wool-cloaked judge. Fart on a bird. (Lines 29-32)

Having expressed his superiority to Makhmur Efendi, a competitor for Muhammed Beg's favor, and his frustration with this judge, someone Muhammed Beg may have had influence over, Sheikh Raza returns to his stated purpose: praising Muhammed Beg himself. “If I don't thank people, I don't thank God. / You are the crowned grace. I thank you” (lines 37-38). Thanking Muhammed Beg, the poet implies, is a sacred duty, equivalent to thanking God—an idea that places Muhammed Beg in a distant, but present, comparison to the divine.

In “[This poet is a stinking beetle],” a praise poem for Abdullah Pasha of Rawanduz, Sheikh Raza takes the opening twenty-two lines to tell a story:

[The poet] went to the medicine man for  
A syrup to cure his ills.  
The medicine man, prescribing a laxative, said,  
“This will bring you to function seven times.”  
The poet drank, but emptied himself only four times.  
He trotted back to the medicine man to complain,  
“You are no medicine man. You can't discern  
A she-camel from a he-camel.  
You promised me seven or eight.  
And seven has dwindled to four.”  
The medicine man protested, “You must  
Have taken something to dampen the effect.”  
“No,” the poet said, “I have not eaten, but  
I did imagine poetry and ghazals.”  
The medicine man said, “Did you write anything?”  
The poet replied, “Yes, three hurried poems.”  
“Read them,” the medicine man commanded.  
As the poet read, the man laughed, “You fool!  
You did function seven times, only  
Three from above and four from below!” (Lines 3-22)

He segues from the story to the praise by saying,

There are some poets who deserve  
This saying brought to them, those  
Who can't see the good and bad among poets  
Except the glorified prince, that one  
Who governs Erbil. (Lines 23-27)

The next few lines of praise are fairly standard. Sheikh Raza calls “the glorified prince” “the country’s moon,” “the people’s sun” (line 24). He defines the man’s “generous palm” as a “cloud that cultivates hope” (line 26). The poet, as if exasperated with his own inability to describe this man in properly exalted language, finally determines, “He doesn’t fit into words” (line 33). The condensed praise seems the thinnest excuse to tell the raunchy story.

In his curse poems, Sheikh Raza does not even try to veil his intentions. He curses his enemies with delight. He attacks Hama Wasta Fatah, the man who ran his brother’s household and controlled the flow of resources, by denigrating his beard, a symbol of a man’s religiosity: “A thousand fantasies and spells entwine in this beard. / If it has a cure, it is either a fart or the razor, this beard” (lines 1-2). As a ghazal, the opening couplet’s repetition sets the poem’s obsession—the beard—and each subsequent couplet revisits the beard only to find further fault: “On the surface, smooth as white silver, but beneath / blackened, filthy, grimy as the bottom of cast iron, this beard” (lines 7-8). The insult of this poem is so clear it is almost bald. Sheikh Raza assigns blame to the beard, but were Hama Wasta Fatah to shave, he would be unfit not only for service in the home of the poet’s brother, Sheikh Ali, but for residence among other Muslims.

Sheikh Raza unleashes his fury frequently, unhesitatingly, and creatively. To a woman he perceived as faithful, but seduced a local bureaucrat, he says, “For your abaya<sup>15</sup> I set you apart, God’s wretch, / but this is your abaya: my dick in your ass” (lines 5-6). To the Judge of Koysinjq, he says, “Because he cheated the Radiant

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<sup>15</sup> Abaya: a loose robe or dress worn by some Muslim women as a signal of modesty and devotion.

One<sup>16</sup>, I vow to fuck the judge so / harshly that his intestines will shoot out whatever shit rots inside” (lines 3-4). Cursing the wife of Masty Efendi, a poet and scholar from Sulaimani who held senior positions in the Ottoman government during Sheikh Raza’s lifetime, he curses Masty Efendi himself. “What a pimp,” Sheikh Raza writes, “If they fucked his children before his eyes, / he would offer them his beard, *Here!, wipe your cocks clean*” (lines 3-4). No one was safe from Sheikh Raza’s sharp tongue, not even the Sufi Order of which he considered himself a disciple, if a wayward one.

In his poem “[Two meters],” he declares, “Two meters<sup>17</sup> of turban, three meters of aba<sup>18</sup> and one meter of beard, / Two hundred disciples walking before, escorting from behind, / Worldly people are cheated by appearance” (lines 1-3). He continues, “What tricks, what magic, what artifice / I have seen from those infidels: Sufis” (lines 5-6). He disparages Sufis precisely, naming different orders within the practice:

[They claim] “I am a Mawlawi Sheikh. Our path is  
The flute, hand-drum, dance, sama’, hash and opium.”  
One has palmed a weapon long as my dick to say,  
“I am a Raffa’i Sheikh who skewers and self-punishes.”  
Sheikhs who consume the world with this conspiracy  
Are the same as the pubes of the indigent. (Lines 9-14)

He concludes with a prayer that God will set him apart from these usurpers and phonies: “God, give Raza refuge from these sly sheikhs / Who appear to pray, but keep the creed of hash” (lines 15-16).

In some ways, Sheikh Raza’s anger with his fellow Sufis runs deeper than some of his other furies because, by his record, they are justifying unholy behaviour as holy acts. The worship that took place in Sheikh Raza’s tekiye, likely very similar to what takes place today in that same tekiye, might appear to the Westerner to include music and dancing. Sufis, however, consider neither the *daff*, the Kurdish percussion instrument, nor *thikr*, the ritualized movement including whirling, music and dancing. As an adherent of a Sufi order, it would have been important to Sheikh Raza to draw and

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<sup>16</sup> Lami’: established poets generally chose or were given pen names or nicknames. Lami’ is Raza’s. It translates as “Radiant One.” Also spelled Lami’i, Raza could also be referring to the Perisan poet, Lami’i, a student of Suzani (d. 1166).

<sup>17</sup> Meter: in the original Persian, “ell,” which in the Kurdish lands of the Persian Empire was a measurement a few centimeters longer than a meter.

<sup>18</sup> ABA: a robe-like garment made specifically of rough cloth to show humility.

keep the distinction between the real Sufi worship and Sufi worship as an excuse for indulgence; certain sections of the Qur'an forbid both music and dancing.

The poet's expansive ire includes animals. "The prince," the poet says scathingly, "as some great favor<sup>19</sup>, sent this hinny bare naked, / His hooves spindly as spider legs, his innards ruined" (lines 1-2). The prince, though he is the curse's origin, is not the poem's focus. The hinny, the animal that results from the mating of a female donkey and male horse, consumes Sheikh Raza's attention:

Even after handfuls King's Clover, brittle grass is his halva<sup>20</sup>:  
He circles it, scoops it up, and gulps it down like a whale.  
Even when he can't be bothered to move, emaciated as he is,  
Tempt him with a single barley grain and he'll run 'til Judgment Day.  
(Lines 5-8)

He curses a sorrel mare in another poem at similar emotional pitch:

...once her gait was a doe's.  
Now, rising from her manger, she calls, "Oh, God! Oh, God!<sup>21</sup>"  
I never give her a scant cup of black barley – still she's scrawny.  
Twelve months of the year I don't ride her – still she's worn-out.  
The expanse of her asshole could hold castles.  
At the crack of her cunt's gate, wrinkles pile on wrinkles.  
If I dissect her thoracic cage, rib to rib, this side to that,  
she'd not even twitch to tell me if she is alive or dead. (Lines 1-8)

Sheikh Raza uses language traditionally reserved for people to complain about his animals.

"[Raza needs a rooster]" and "[He appears a rooster]" he writes to a local military man, begging for a champion among fighting roosters, one with "a monster cock's comb and a hot mouth, wild / and belligerent, a rooster who, lunging at another's ear, / fills his mouth and rips it off" (lines 2-4). He debases himself in juxtaposition to the military man, appropriate for the petitioner's style, calling himself "the dog at Gaylani's door" (line 14). Still, neither the man nor his family sends him a thing. Sheikh Raza finally laments, "... all this poetry I've sent, and not one rooster I've received" (line 9). He concludes the poem by giving up on his own poem, "Poet, don't try to grasp a rhyme scheme this

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<sup>19</sup> Favor: this phrase translates literally as, "reminding me a hundred times of my debt."

<sup>20</sup> Halva: a dense, crystalline sweet of Arabic origin made from tahini, a sesame paste.

<sup>21</sup> Oh God: in the original Kurdish is "Yahua!" - a cry to God through the pronoun "He" that has a lovely resonance with the American English exclamation, "Yahoo!"

thick. / Let go the one word to finish it: dick” (line 15-16). Even in his supposed defeat as a poet, he cracks a joke, using “dick” as the only word he knows that could possibly complete his rhyme scheme. His play brings energy to a centuries-old form. Adapting the curse poem to the most mundane of subjects—donkeys, mares, roosters—barnyard animals—Sheikh Raza enlivens the curse poem and its tired expectations.

The curse poem introduces the territory of the erotic. Though the erotic was common, if not accepted, in Persian and Arabic poetry, it was new to Kurdish poetry as of the nineteenth century. Nali, a court poet of the Babans, one of the three poets who would be known to future generations as “The Three Pillars of the Babans,” used eroticism as a political tool. In “[Mestura],” a poem meant to provoke the Ardalans, fellow Kurds, but royal enemies of the Babans, Nali imagines a conversation with a fellow poet, a poetess who was the second wife of the last prince of the Ardalans. Nali imagines that Mestura, the poetess, comes to him in a dream, “winking and teasing,” with “a riddle.” She says, in Nali’s dream, “This secret—what is it” (line 11)? “An antique store,” she asks, or

...The spring of shame or survival?  
The majestic dome of domes yet to cave?

A curtained tent that stands on two poles:  
At the apex, a thin, gossamer slit?

A Sufi testing his mettle, sliding into his sanctum,  
Sheltered, honored, sublime, above?

Or the silver of a miser, far from generous,  
Shut tight with thrift, like the fists of mullahs?

An overturned wine glass, such waves  
Of soft crystal, it has chipped? (Lines 13-22)

On and on “she” goes, phrasing her question in the most sheer metaphors, almost speaking what must not be spoken until Nali takes on his own voice once more to answer her:

The one for this puzzle must be a brutal specialist  
Of strong build who can wound to the bone,

Who is firm and tough as the arduous books of the wise,  
Who can hide away any study of this secret.

He must be fine velvet and prolific as scholars in their prose,  
Long and rising as the hands of prayer. (Lines 69-74)  
And on and on he goes, describing the one who can answer the riddle, in the sheerest  
of similes, until the poet interrupts himself to command himself: “Nali, come on. [...] /  
dedicate your thoughts and dreams to God’s secret paths, not / the search for pleasure.  
Don’t be the flag that flaps in desire’s wind” (lines 93-98).

Later in the century, as the nineteenth opens onto the twentieth, Nari will revisit  
the idea of metaphorical representations of the vagina. He will rehash it in his own  
“[Mina’s envelope],” writing, “The depths of the Red Sea cannot be measured by just  
anyone. / Only an experienced diver can test that bedrock” (lines 5-6). “To recognize an  
ant’s eyes,” he will say, “one needs a magnifying glass. / To find the new moon, one  
needs heightened senses” (lines 7-8). Nali’s “[Mestura]” is a poem that generations of  
Kurdish poets will test themselves against.

Whatever search Nali kept himself from, Sheikh Raza made his work. Sheikh  
Raza moves the erotic from the curse poem into the praise poem. He makes the erotic,  
the private, a pervasive element in his poems. In “[When my dick],” an ode to his own  
anatomy, Sheikh Raza writes, “When my dick got hard, it didn’t ask, ‘Relative or  
stranger?’ / It slugged away at whatever it had, from the front or the back” (lines 1-2).  
Immortalizing his fallen hero, he says,

Though large, I have fit it into so many tight holes that  
Its face is bruised, its ribs are cracked,  
Its neck has sunk into leather, like the Mullah’s *sewak*<sup>22</sup>,  
Its hair is loose and flowing down its neck, like a dervish. (Lines 3-6)

The title in the Aras edition of this poem is simply “Sheen.” In this case, that could have  
several meanings. At some point in cataloging Sheikh Raza’s work, these poems were  
identified not by number but by letter. The name for the letter “sh” in Kurdish is “sheen.”  
Rasul tells us that often books of collected poetry relied on classification by alphabetic  
order—each poem assigned a letter (*New Kurdish Literature* 20). As well, Sheikh Raza,  
a scribe, or a later reader of his work could have titled this poem “sheen” meaning  
“blue.” This could imply the color, but more likely it would imply a state of sadness or

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<sup>22</sup> Sewak: a twig of the *Salvadora Persica* tree used as a toothbrush. Commonly referred to in  
Islamic hygienic jurisprudence. Also known as *miswaak* and *arak* (Arabic).

mourning. “Elegy,” the latter meaning, resonates with the content of the poem. Though we cannot rely on it as a title, this poem is a humorous twist on elegy. Sheikh Raza mourns the dick of his youth as other poets would fallen heroes of the battlefield or princes of ages past.

In his “[My courtyard],” he continues contemplating his penis through conceit: the extended metaphor. He bewails his house with its ramshackle architecture. He relates his struggle to maintain to maintain his courtyard, which, he tells us, is the width of his palm:

I prop it up by day. It collapses by night.  
Gates, cracks, leaks, no matter how  
I grab or beat it with my hands and feet  
When night comes, it froths, rabid<sup>23</sup>,  
A dog that barks at me. (Lines 1-6)

He portrays himself as the hardworking tenant, a victim of the builder, which in this case, since the poet is discussing human anatomy, is The Builder: “The Big Man may yet be great, but / the hands and feet are damned” (lines 10-11). The irreverence of these poems is a revolution in what poetry can be. Though nineteenth century Kurdish poets inherit and preserve the poetic forms of the past, not breaking into free verse until the twentieth century, they completely reimagine content.

In one delightful mash-up, Sheikh Raza combines (1) the typical Sufi image of a heart laid low by separation from the beloved and (2) a visceral image that manages to be erotic, banal, and excruciating. In his “[Separation chokes],” Sheikh Raza sighs over his lover who “rise[s], note by note, from the tapestry of Iraq” (line 5). Far from his lover, “Separation chokes [his] heart with its hands, / As the trap grips the testicles of the fox” (lines 1-2). The juxtapositions in this short, six-line poem, demonstrate Sheikh Raza’s mastery over the conventions and possibilities of the praise and the curse: forms he inherited. Sheikh Raza bends the forms effectively because he recognizes but is not bound by their conventional purposes. He receives monarchic forms and fashions from them fundamentally personal tools.

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<sup>23</sup> Rabid: translated literally as “wild,” this word refers only to a dog wild with rabies.

## *The Beloved*

All the nineteenth century Kurdish poets wrestle with the mystical relationship with the beloved, which is by nature contradictory. Man, a spiritual beast, attempts to efface his animal self, finding union in spirit with spirit. The relationship is filled with longing that manifests in the body and yet the body is not the origin of that longing. Achieving union, or, better said, being granted glimpses of arrival, as this is arrival of the infinite, would obliterate man. The disciple seeks a state that will annihilate the only reality he knows. The poets seek divine union, but write about the pursuit with hands, on paper, acknowledging the very physicality that keeps them from the ethereal.

Nothingness is a state these poets idealize: a narrow path that minimizes man as beast and gives man as soul primacy. This path demands constant vigilance from the journeyman. In “[Mestura],” Nali conflates “the obvious and the hidden,” “earthly love” with the sacred (Kheznedar 3:74). In the same poem, after 97 lines of playful and euphemistic eroticism, he rebukes himself, “Don’t be the flag that flaps in desire’s wind” (line 98). He waits so long to enact the reversal of the last line, one wonders how much he could mean it. Salim imagines a conversation with his beloved in which he gives her signs that she then interprets. He tells his reader, “I drew a zero” (line 5). His beloved bites her lip in concentration and responds, “More comes by measurement. That nothing is an open mouth” (line 6). The zero Salim posits, his beloved negates as a something: an open mouth, a tangible connection of an intimate kiss or pending speech. Sheikh Raza knows, “Without the pit, there is no pinnacle” (line 11). But he beseeches his beloved, “On the path to your love, I’ve seen nothing, by God, but the pit<sup>24</sup>” (line 12). Both poets struggle to see their nothing as the something the beloved tells them it is. Wafai contends, “I died without knowing what fire consumed me” (line 33). But in the very next line maintains, “The yield of a glance, the path of lovers, is all wonder” (line 34). Across the century, the poets work to hold the contradiction within

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<sup>24</sup> These two lines could be interpreted slightly differently looking toward the Islamic Science of Speech, which would change “pit” to “sorrow” and “pinnacle” to “hypothesis.” With those changes, these two lines would read, “Without hypothesis there wouldn’t be sorrow, that’s for sure, but / on the path of your love, I’ve seen nothing, by God, but sorrow.”

themselves: separation is union, nothing is wonder, exile is homecoming, absence is presence, all the extremes of Sufi states (*aḥwāl*) (Chittick 254; Sells 70).

What to the human, material eye is contradiction is, “from the standpoint of *tawḥīd* [the assertion of God’s unity],” “exactly as it must be” (Chittick 7). The divine reality is infinitely wider than contradiction: “...God’s majesty and severity demand separation, while His beauty and gentleness call for union. God is both gentle and severe, merciful and wrathful, so people will always be hanging between separation and union” (Chittick 341). Man’s attempt to live within infinity may be innately conceived to fail, but the attempt, Sufism says, is God’s gift to His creation. Chittick provides his translation of Sam’ānī who says,

When His men carry the burden of caresses, they carry it while contemplating severity. When they carry the burden of severity, they carry it while seeing gentleness. [...] The angels were nurtured in gentleness and never had the opportunity to carry the burden of severity. But the Adamites are the threshold of both gentleness and severity. (Chittick 344)

At the threshold, the Adamite, the lover, can reconceive pain, absence, separation, and death; by accepting the divine contradictions Sufism posits, the lover can even come to desire what are physically treacherous states.

Union is desired; union is dangerous. Union is death; death is desired. Wafai complains to his beloved, “Remove all veils. Push away the darkness, your hair. / How long should my heart be unhappy, lonely, breaking” (line 17-18)? Salim, having found union with his beloved, cries out, “Silence your call and crow tonight, rooster! / Leave me to my beloved’s neck, to pleasure. // I won’t depart my sweetheart’s shores for the cry of poultry...” (lines 1-3). Salim dwells in this pleasure for a time: “I comb the illusion’s hair, describe its face. / I adore the daughters of my thought” (lines 11-12). He lingers on the image of his beloved, whose “hair softly obscures her breast / As the handle of a cane masks its burdens” (lines 9-10). In the same poem, though, Salim describes the battle his beloved wages on him, her lover: “The eyes order the glance, ‘Aim for the heart.’ The lip is an army. / The regiments of the eyelashes are disciplined as French legions” (lines 7-8). Finally, in frustration, as he scolded the rooster, he scolds the ascetic. “Go,” Salim tells the holy man, “You have no business advising me. / Friendship with scowling mullahs has dulled you” (lines 13-14). Later in the century, Hamdi echoes

Salim when he describes the difference he sees between the lover and the disciple who pretends to love:

The lover and the Sufi, since creation: he is the angel and he the devil.  
The wine's elder and the tekiye's sheikh: he is human, he is animal.  
I took love's secret to the ascetic. He nodded like a donkey.  
I understood he was empty, his wide neck busy over bread.  
Wine's light differs from the electrical flame.

One is wide thought's lantern, one is the alley's blessing. (Lines 1-6)  
Love, what "leads Hamdi to philosophy's field, to understanding," is dangerous and misunderstood as wine, as wide thought (line 21). "Remove love," Hamdi challenges his reader, "and let me know if he retains any knowledge" (line 22). Union exists past human concepts of right and wrong, past corporeal understanding: a dangerous place.

Nari, another poet of the later nineteenth century and early twentieth, narrates the confusion that union brings. "Happiness," he says, "struck like lightning and mourning vanished and each / breath became musky. The one who owns my sword and pen returned" (lines 7-8). He had "lived, yes, day and night, shoved into a tight corner," but now, he says, "The light of the sun and moon, night and day, returned" (11-12). "Barkeep," he says, "spin the wine glass like my landscape spins. / The time to dance, entertain, and get drunk has returned. // My verses are sugar cubes..." (lines 13-15). Happiness, what he most yearned for, disorients him. Before the poem can end, Nari remembers, "The dust of His hem is beyond anyone's reach, anyone's imagining" (line 21). "Happiness," he finally admits, "has me so confused" (line 23). It is as Haji Qadir warned, "Your hair [...] / Contains both my help and my harm" (lines 3-4).

The desire for and danger in union is a theme Salim continues. "Kill me without mercy," he says, "That is mercy. / Let me live a martyr in the shadow of your blade" (lines 11-12). Life is not life, but the death the beloved brings. In the closing couplet of the same poem, the poet commands himself and prays to God in the same breath, "Never dare desire pity from the beloved, Salim. I beg: / Let her have no pity for me, so I never get addicted" (lines 15-16). Pity, not union, is the lover's death. In yet another poem, Salim pronounces, "I got revenge on separation by arriving" (line 17). But, he reminds readers, "On arrival, joy and pain stand in the same line" (line 5). He says, "Water and fish are as body and soul: connected. / My head is her shadow. The dust of her path is my head" (lines 9-10). Union with the beloved is debasement of the

lover. "Kill me," he concludes the poem, "so long as she is ready to arrive" (line 19). Separation kills the lover, but the lover only dies in arrival. Haji Qadir addresses the beloved, "My body and soul are so busy with you / I wouldn't know my own death" (lines 1-2).

The only relief is realizing the union of pain and pleasure, separation and arrival. Absence is presence. Exile is arrival. These maxims are of the infinite. Finite man lives between the two. Haji Qadir writes, "It is good for a man to have his own home before his eyes. / So, in this world, my eyes see only water" (lines 3-4). Haji Qadir's home is his tears; he is at home in the absence of the beloved, which he accepts. The beloved, at her kindest, hides herself, her full face, from her lover; she knows her full revelation would destroy her lover. Again, Haji writes, "Above, is the water of Moses, below is the fire of Mount Sinai. / It's a marvel that Pharaoh's mustache neither drowns nor burns" (lines 5-6). Recognizing his own finitude, his nothingness compared to his beloved's all-ness, Haji Qadir is grateful that "If an ant brings as a gift the lip of a kiss or / A locust leg, Solomon accepts it" (lines 9-10). Mahwi, too, accepts that he is nothing to his beloved, "When you are absent from my eyes, what do you miss? / You fill my eyes to the brim. I am absent from myself" (lines 1-2). He states his own sorrow simply, "My thoughts don't leave you though yours have left me. / So long as you are with me: enough. Let me be absent" (lines 7-8). Quoting a line of Hafiz to himself, Mahwi remembers, "He is the day and I am the night" (line 9). Hafiz, again simply, gives Mahwi an impossible solution, "If you desire His constant presence, never be absent" (line 10). Mahwi, as the other poets of his generation, accepts the nature of the lover, which is always both ecstasy and agony.

In "[When the heart melts]," Mahwi assures his beloved, "When my soul understood that you wished it to leave, it left. / When he sees the beloved tire, a lover needs no instruction to leave" (lines 3-4). He imagines himself in conversation with his beloved, "I said: on this doorstep, in this place, let me rest a while. / She said: a lover must live doorstep to doorstep, city by city: leaving" (lines 5-6). He pleads with his beloved to "[b]anish the watchman who soils this sweet doorway" (line 7). "Why run off a dog," the poet asks (line 8). His beloved speaks again only to emphasize their inverse relationship, "Mahwi, you and I are as sun and shadow. / When my greatness appears

to you, your grace disappears” (lines 9-10). The lover knows: exile from the beloved is the lover’s arrival. The beloved’s arrival is death to the lover who subsists on longing.

## *The Family*

When the Ardalans and the Babans fell, so did the last vestiges of independent Kurdish government. The shadow-presence of the British and Russian Empires intensified and, in some places, burgeoned into outright governance. Kurds became exiled in their own lands. While this exile was both painful and psychically confusing—how does one integrate the disparate ideas of being displaced without any tangible displacement?—it also prompted a turn toward the imagined homes Kurds retained: their ethnic identity or the family of Kurds and their poetic identity or the family of Kurdish poets. These generations of poets began to articulate and cleave to their Kurdishness, an evolving idea, and also toward each other as the masters, teachers, and companions they sought.

In political exile, Kurds articulated Kurdish identity as distinct from the surrounding ethnic identities. In “[Let the heart],” Salim gives a political twist to the common trope of the poet unable to reach his beloved. He begins with adoration:

As long as I live, I seed thistles in my heart, hoping  
When I die, if you visit my grave, they will catch your hem.

I see the eyelashes of ants, as if in a microscope  
I study your hair that closely with my heart. (Lines 3-6)  
But is ultimately frustrated by the unbridgeable gap of language: “My moon spoke in Farsi, ‘Salim, how are you?’ / I said, ‘My body! I don’t speak your language. I’m a Kurd’” (lines 11-12). Here, language—as a representation of ethnic identity—separates Salim from his “moon.” While decorum or mystical distance often separates lovers, in these verses ethnic identity does. One seductive couplet follows another, but the poet ends with a simple declaration, “I am a Kurd.” He will not find union with his beloved; his Kurdishness will divide them.

In “[I have the sugar-bearer’s nature].” Nali speaks not to his beloved, but to his reader. He says, “If he writes in Kurdish / He tests himself. He does this on purpose” (lines 1-2). Nali wrote at the forefront of Sorani as a literary dialect when Kurdish more broadly had yet to be accepted regionally as a language of literature and intellect. Rather than shoulder the burden of proof and play the supplicant, Nali places himself, as well as the language he speaks, above proof. Speaking as from a great

height, Nali continues, “Don’t try my words. They are Kurdish: self-made” (line 5). If they are smart, Nali says, his readers will become devoted to his verses. The intelligent reader will, Nali predicts, sneak into the poet’s room and “trade his soul for scraps, for drafts” (line 8). His reader will be desperate to own the artistry Nali has achieved because, the poet asks, “When will other poems have the delicacy of mine? / When will rope contest the precision of silk” (lines 9-10)? Nali declares his verses’ rare value to establish and advocate for the value of the Kurdish identity, language, and dialects.

The irony is that Kurdish poets, including Salim and Nali, demonstrated their fluency in Turkish, Arabic, and Persian constantly. Within a single poem, it was commonplace for a poet to use all three of those languages in addition to his native Kurdish. And, at that time, with the borders porous and fluid, the dialects of Kurdish had not yet diverged as severely as they have today, so often all major dialects of Kurdish were in play as well. What can function today as seven languages often appeared in a single poem of as few as three couplets. In Salim’s assertion, “My body! I don’t speak your language,” the word for “language” (more closely translated as “idiom”) is taken from Arabic and Persian, even written with its Arabic and Persian spelling. The very words in the line, which could be translated, “My dear, your idiom doesn’t guide me,” undercut the line’s claim. The idioms of Farsi do guide Salim, but that is beside the point: Salim’s identity as a Kurd sets him irrevocably apart from his Persian love.

The idea that Salim will not be “guided” by the Persian idiom echoes in his other work, where he celebrates Kurdish poets the way poets of previous generations lauded Persian poets. He imagines a “poet’s competition,” where, “girded in artistry” all the “love-hunters” of his generation arrive. He names them, these poets he takes as his paragons, and includes himself: Nali, Mahwi, Kurdi, and Salim. Salim raises up the Kurdish poets of his generation, even himself, as masters of the arts and as Kurds. All four poets represent a critical moment in the history of the Kurdish language and arts. It was Salim’s generation that brought poetry into Sorani Kurdish. The dialect of Kurdish poetry had been Gorani. Often, Kurdish poets would use Persian or Arabic to write a piece considered to have artistic merit. These influences remain clear in Salim’s poem, in which the four poets turn as much toward each other as teachers as they do to their Persian and, to a lesser extent, Arabic poetic forefathers.

The four poets appear on the field of battle, “[a]ll in the press, the heat of creation, calling on Mawlana,” ‘Mawlana’ being a nickname for Rumi, a Persian master of Sufi poetry (Salim 131). As they call on their Persian teacher, they ride “onto the field of rhetoric, each on an Arabian stallion”—but “[i]n Kurdish, mounted on the horse of meaning,” they ride the Baban lands (Salim 131). The interplay here between Persian, Arabic, and Kurdish influences suggests a Kurdishness that is by nature inclusive. Salim infers that while the Kurdish identity can and does stand on its own, part of its strength is its ability to draw in the best of the surrounding cultures. Kurdish poets tower among poets not because they ignore or deny the ascendancy of poets from Persian, Arabic, and Turkish, but because they recognize literary contribution where they arise—Kurdish or otherwise.

Haji Qadir Koye strives toward the same idea: the Kurdish family of poets and how those poets fit into the family of poets they see all around them. Koye begins “[These dogs]” with a scathing pronouncement,

These dogs that are our ministers and lawyers,  
If they come to you, by God, don't think them shepherds or cowherds.  
That's donkey piss. They say they inherit the prophet's religion,  
But they are all slaves to an idol. Don't even look at their leader.  
Any literature there is, God put in our mouths to say:  
They gave the state to the asses, they threw their blessings to the dogs.  
(Lines 1-6)

He looks down on Kurds in government who, though fairly independent in function, represent and serve either the Ottoman or the Persian empires. These ministers and lawyers are worse than liars, they turned over Kurdish lands to foreign “dogs.” Whatever is left to say that has any grace or artistry to it, Koye contends, must be a gift from God, bypassing the fallible human structures. As “[These dogs]” comes to a close, Koye laments, “They go to the state hoping for something of true beauty,” but again, the ubiquitous “they” are looking in the wrong place (line 15). “My poems,” Koye says, “head to toe, are like me: without head or toe” (line 16). Koye’s poems, as Koye boasts of himself personally, are a haven of endless truth and beauty, where governance is only failures and betrayals.

Boasting may seem a puerile approach to achieving status, but when others will not sing your praises, perhaps you learn to sing for yourself. The boast takes on an

important, if playful, place in Kurdish poetry. In “[I closed both doors],” Koye brags, “Wear my tough silk until doomsday. It won’t rip. / These poems are spun of new meaning. That’s their fiber” (lines 3-4). In “[My body and soul are so busy],” Koye, calling his poems his many sons, citing them as evidence of his virility, commands his reader, “Don’t say Haji had no work in the Ottoman Empire. / I am a man in a city of women” (lines 13-14). But Koye does not stop at praising himself. His purpose is larger. He means not only to encourage readers to turn to him as a source of true vitality and Kurdishness, but to see his fellow Kurdish poets among the masters of poetry.

In “[I closed both doors],” as he contends his poems are “tough silk,” he informs the reader, too, “It’s clear my couplets are not less than Nali’s or Kurdi’s” (line 5). He elevates himself by referring to the Kurdish heights of artistic might: Nali and Kurdi, his contemporaries. In his comparison, he constructs a Kurdish family in a Kurdish landscape—both of which exist primarily in the poem. While Koye worries in “[These dogs]” that Kurds have given “the state to the asses” and thrown “their blessings to the dogs,” Koye salvages the Kurdish relationship to the land by emphasizing the fundamental tie between poet and place, comparing the emerging Sorani Kurdish poets to the established Persian and Gorani poets: “Nali and the Baban earth, Haji and Koye for example, / Are the same as Hafiz and Shiraz, Kalim and Hamadan” (lines 17-18). Koye seems to believe that Kurdish poets can counterbalance the political shame that has occurred to the land. A poet’s love of his land, and by extension his reader’s love, cannot be interrupted by any political machinations. As the city of Shiraz defines Hafiz Shirazi, the city of Koye can define Haji Qadir—the city of Sulaimani can anchor Nali, in exile or in residence.

Koye held dear his mission to celebrate Kurdish identity, memorialize its progenitors, and forge a sense of belonging for Kurds in a world where the ability to be Kurdish seemed in constant flux. And he was far from alone. His example inspired poets born later in the century to take up the same call. Nari, in “[Because of his arrows],” mourns Mahwi’s death as one would a prince’s. He uses the traditional courtly metaphors of the nightingale and the rose, while revealing an intimacy he feels for the great poet: “Over the thorn, the nightingale mourns the flower. / I mourn for his face, which needs a shave” (lines 3-4). Grief for Mahwi takes over his poetry, “My verses,

head to head, mourn Mahwi's death" (line 13). Nari's happiness in Mahwi's poems, Nari says, is a happiness that has killed him. He will not outlive the loss of Mahwi's unwritten verses.

Hamdi, in his "Moan for Piramerd," strikes a similar tone as he grieves Piramerd's passing, which he characterizes as a personal and public loss of the greatest magnitude. Personally, he declares himself "home-wrecked," "dismal," "dreary," drifting (lines 1-2). Quite graphically, he says, his "ulcers crack within the psyche, / Pus overflows, my liver full of ache" (lines 7-8). He blames the universe, that "each time" "plays the tyrant" (line 9). The universe, he says, "parts lovers" with its "cheerless heart" (line 12), the universe that is "October to flower gardens" that is, "each day, [...] man's enemy" that is "lethal poison for he who owns a name" (lines 14-15). He extolls Piramerd's virtues and contributions to Kurdish letters and public life:

Haji Tofiq Beg, known as "Piramerd,"  
The wise teacher of Kurds, north and south.  
Which elder? The elder who spent his years  
In awareness, in sacrifice.  
Which elder? The elder who with Life, Life<sup>25</sup>  
Filled Kurdistan with knowledge.  
Which elder? The elder who worked  
In Kurdish writing, breaking new road.  
Which elder? The elder who turned the ancestor's  
Proverbs into teachers for relatives and strangers. (Lines 16-25)

When the great Piramerd died, Hamdi says, "That's when I knew the ill fate of Kurds, / The bad luck of the tribes of the Kurdish language" (lines 28-29).

Then, in a move similar to that of Salim's and Koye's, Hamdi begins to list the Kurdish poets, the Kurdish leaders, he and his people have lost over the course of the century:

Zewar, he aimed an arrow at my wounds.  
And Bekas, he heaped mud on my shoulders.  
Didar of Koye, who emboldened me in my youth,  
Drew a curtain, darkness, over my eyes.  
Where is Haji Qadir? Where is Badirkhan?  
Where are the conquerors, the blazing Babans?  
Where is Shamzin's Swara? Where is the Zandi hero?  
Where are the Ardalans, the lion's roar?

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<sup>25</sup> Life, Life: Piramerd started and managed various newspapers including "Zhian" and "Zhin," both Kurdish words for "life."

Where is Dr. Fuad, the honorable lion?  
 Where is Amin Zaki, the young historian?  
 Where is Sheikh Maroof, who owned wings?  
 One, wise in the visible, one wise in reality.  
 Where is Nali? Nari? Kurdi? Mawlawi?  
 Where is the Mullah of the Masnavi, of rhyming couplets?  
 Where is the Mullah of love in my Besaran?  
 Where is Hamdi, grandchild of he who owns money?  
 It is not as if this is Kurdistan's first time  
 To lose a poet, but!  
 Piramerd, the harm is heavy... (Lines 31-49)

Hamdi's catalog means to overwhelm. It is a catalog of overwhelming grief—but also of overwhelming accomplishment in Kurdish politics, arts and letters.

Hamdi, in grieving for Piramerd, intends to preserve a record of Kurdish accomplishment. Grief in this case is also hope: these great minds came from us—let them inspire us to uphold their legacy. Hamdi finishes by speaking directly to his pen, “Come. Hurry. / Write the history of the Kurd's teacher” (lines 57-58). And, as a model for future intellectuals, writers, and poets, the pen responds with alacrity, “The pen, heroically, appeared. / It poured itself out on the face of the paper, the gemstone. / With the alphabet's letters, it began to speak” (lines 59-61). Through the poem, the pen emerges as the final and lasting hero of the Kurds: able to speak through what could be insurmountable grief and loss.

Decades earlier, in “[The swordsman],” Koye mounts his most plain-spoken defense of Kurdish poets. In a precursor to Hamdi's catalog, he provides one of his own with the explicit purpose of agitating for Kurds to take pride in their own poets:

Enough, Kurdish people, have no shame  
 In our nation's couplets.  
 If the name is our own, or from Sna or Sulaimani,  
 We don't count it among the greats.  
 I say our gain comes from our  
 Silk worms and honey bees. (Lines 43-48)

He notes great poets who, like swordsmen and mounted cavalry, have taken what was Persian, the *ghazal*, and conquered it, making it Kurdish:

The swordsman of Kurdish eloquence,  
 The horseman of Baban clarity,  
 Mustafa<sup>26</sup> is Kurdi's savior.

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<sup>26</sup> Mustafa: a nickname for the Prophet Mohammed.

He turned the ghazal into a Kurdish lute.

The name Sahebqran<sup>27</sup> is dear to him:

On this ground, he shows himself, a steed. (Lines 1-6)

Nali, Koye continues, “was a good teacher to many, / A fountain of life, of meaning” (lines 9-10). He continues with his declarations: Salim, Mashwi, and Sheikh Raza are “remarkable poets” and “few poets” can compare to Wafai, “his handwriting, his couplets so skilled” (lines 11-14). Koye ends this list by contending, “All dwell in heaven’s highest places” (line 16). And these are just the beginning, Koye says, of the names he could list:

I could show you more than these

In an instant.

Kurdish poets, old and new,

Are untold. (Lines 19-22)

Several lines below, he revisits the same idea:

The fields of Kirkuk and mountains of Hawraman

Have limitless poets, poets without end.

If I wrote only their names,

There wouldn’t be book enough. (Lines 35-38)

In Kurdish, the word for comfort is a compound noun translating literally as “give back heart.” This is what Koye, sharp-tongued as he can be, attempts in these poems. He extends comfort to his Kurdish readership. He strives to wake Kurds; though the ruling Ottomans and Persians assert themselves as better than Kurds, Koye says, we are equal. He speaks directly to his Kurdish readership,

The Ottomans, we know,

Think us gorillas.

The Persians, as we know,

Have pleasure for a mother, fiction for a father. (Lines 41-44)

Whatever the Ottomans or the Persians know, Kurds can know, and so establish, their own reality, one in which Kurdish intellect is ungoverned, in which a simple list of Kurdish poets living in the fields of Kirkuk and the mountains of Hawraman is so long it could not be contained in any earthly book.

These poems, these poets provide a powerful alternative to the political reality of the nineteenth century: that Kurdish might is failing, that Kurdish independence is receding, that Kurdish life is curtailed and Kurds would be better to seek success in Turkish, Persian, or Arabic intellectual life. Perhaps these poets work so hard to create

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<sup>27</sup> Sahebqran: Salim’s family name.

this alternative precisely because it is in antithesis to the predominant world view of the day. Perhaps these poets are called to make these claims as counterclaims to the political changes of their century.

### *Direct Poetic Correspondence*

While Kurdish poets often refer to each other in their poems, they also enter into direct correspondence with one another. These correspondences are personal, though, written in verse, one might imagine them written to be overheard. Kurdish poets, as they spoke to each other, gave Kurdish readers the opportunity to listen in on an intimately Kurdish conversation. Bush calls “these personal missives” “eminently ‘public’ texts” (159). These letters in verse are one more way in which Kurdish poets reinforce the idea of their own family, their own community and sense of belonging, in contrast to the political exile they feel and one more way in which the literary tradition reveals how, for nineteenth-century Kurdish poets, separation existed almost as a pre-condition. If one is within one’s community, the need for letters fades; if one’s community fractures, if the community itself is sent piecemeal into exile, the need for correspondence rises, Bush suggests “letters are part of an effort to sustain proper intimate relations between Muslims,” concerned as he is in his thesis about how “written correspondence [can] sustain companionship and inspire Muslims to strive along the Sufi path” (ii, 152). Beautifully, he writes, “...poetic fragments, and poetic language more generally, are indispensable to the task of sustaining relationships under the threat of separation” (153). This is akin to my argument, but Bush busies himself with the pious correspondence of Mawlana Khalid, only briefly mentioning the letters Nali and Salim trade, “describing the tragedy of the Baban’s crushing loss to the Ottoman reforms of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century” (115). We both find the epistolary nature of Kurdish writing critical to the creation of their community, but I turn all my attention to the larger correspondence community of nineteenth-century Kurdish poets that comes from a need to sustain any kind of relationship in the sudden exile Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century experience. The letters the poets write each other establish that only in their love for each other do the poets find a sense of companionship through the

loneliness of exile. The most famous of these correspondences occurs between two pairs: (1) Nali and Salim and (2) Salim and Kurdi.

In “[I sacrifice myself],” Nali sends to Salim is addressed to the zephyr, the morning wind, the one free to travel between the exiled poet of the Babans and Salim, still resident in what was the capital city of the Babans, Sulaimani:

I sacrifice myself for the dust you leave behind, you fine breeze,  
You messenger entirely familiar with the city near Shahrazur.

Your kindness is hidden. The moving air is a friend.  
You, zephyr, carry good news. You are a corner of God’s presence.  
(Lines 1-4)

This beloved wind that moves between Nali, exiled in Persia, and his dear “city near Shahrazur” has two faces. “At one time,” Nali says, “fresh, you fan the heart. / At one time, a forge, you provoke the reign of pride” (lines 7-8). Between the fresh breezes that enliven his heart and the forge that provokes his pride, Nali says,

It’s all burned: the porch, my patience, my insides.  
Nothing is left except at the corner of prayer and Patience.

I am the sigh’s company, the fellow-traveler of tears.  
Have mercy on these sighs and tears. Stand. Do all you can.  
(Lines 11-14)

He continues to beg the wind, “Like my sighs, run to my lover’s land, to her front door” (line 15). He implores the wind, “Go through Sulaimani,”

It is the garden of gardens. Stay for a time.  
Bathe in the musk of young boys’ scalps, virgins’ hair.

Its land is amber, its trees agarwood,  
Its stones jewels, its streams light.

Its evenings all mornings, its seasons all spring,  
Its dust all rosewater, its steam all incense. (Lines 30-36)

He asks the wind to explore the city and take notes for him on what has changed, “Observe the stones and trees. / Ask questions, make inspections, high and low” (lines 41-42). In this request, he obliquely asks Salim. Nali’s questions of his city are many and detailed. Does this bridge still stand? Does this stream still run clear? Does this square still host gatherings of the devout? The list is heartbreaking in its specificity and length. The long list resolves with weeping, as explicating his exile, Nali succumbs to homesickness, and wonders aloud, as if to the wind, if he will be able to return:

Give my greetings, scented with rose-water, to my room.  
What is left? What is gone from the porch, the niche, the room?

Is that lovers' grotto now full of strangers?  
Still galloping with lovers? Or galloping now with snakes and ants?

My mouth is like the crescent moon. I am thin as imagination.  
Do I fall on anyone's tongue? Cross anyone's heart?

Explaining this exile, an illness,  
The heart might become water and cross through the eyes.

Will I have the chance, the permission, to return from the liminal[?]  
(Lines 75-83)

Salim responds in-kind, addressing not Nali, but the wind, "I sacrifice my body for your whisper, oh morning wind, / You, the messenger ready for every dangerous road" (lines 1-2). He praises the wind, again in terms traditional reserved for lovers or the divine-as-beloved, "From your breeze rains the honey of the tamarisk tree / Which swayed the bosom of the sugar cane" (lines 9-10). He confides in the wind: "The distress is so great, my heart has narrowed. / The clouds wear the smoke of my breath in the morning" (lines 19-20). And finally, he asks of the wind, "Go as a messenger and again come back as a messenger. // My letter goes to the state of Sham [Syria], toward Nali" (lines 22-23).

The message Salim asks the wind to convey to Nali is all of loss. The city's people "sigh and cry during these days of Ottomans: / I haven't seen people open their lips like that for happiness" (lines 33-34). As Nali's letter contained a list of places he hoped to hear of, Salim's letter does as well:

Saywan is full of the oppressed, high and low.  
I see only graves of depression anywhere I look.

This is the place of Ottoman Turks, in or out of the khanaqa.  
All disciples are unaware rather than alert.

The pool is full, same as his eyes, but  
The water has become chaotic, as have the hearts of heroes.

The field where he and his friends spent time  
Belongs now to the Ottomans, same as the inferno's depths.

My heart burns for Sarchinar Creek.  
Its source is muddied as eyes that have gone blind.

In early winter, the clothes of Sheikh Abbas became threadbare.  
Ottomans are such ill-fate, they harm people.

They brought sadness too the elderly tree of Pirmansur.  
Shivering consumes it, head to foot.

The Turks, brutes, took branches from its tree and bashed  
Every headstone, the fortresses of the dead.

Back then Kaniaskan belonged to the deer  
Now, full of Ottoman sounds and colors, it belongs to the asses.

Today, the place we played is clogged with looters  
From that field, from nowhere, someone sings, "Watch out." (Lines 35-54)  
The specific list ends with Salim's solemn conclusion, "The city is filled with injustice, a  
place filled with mourning. / A place full of uproar, a country full of fight" (lines 57-58). As  
dim a picture as Salim has painted up to now, he says, he must still say worse,

My heart won't let me tell you what has become of your room  
Spiders' webs make the only curtain, inside or out.

No voice comes from its window except the whine of an owl.  
The trails of ants are the only footsteps or paths. (Lines 61-64)  
Salim admits to the wind that he is "bone tired from being alone" (line 67). He petitions  
the wind, as if praying to God, "Let Nali not tire so. / I live this, but he shouldn't waste his  
blood in sadness" (lines 67-68). He makes one last request of the wind, "For God's  
sake, tell the majesty of Nali, I beg him, / When Sulaimani is so, walk past" (lines  
65-66). The poets have relied on the wind as their metaphorical mediator, but Salim, in  
his desperation, breaks the conceit to command Nali directly, "This land has no system  
without the proper owner. / If you intend to travel here, don't" (lines 69-70). Salim is  
clear: preserve your memories of a Kurdish-held Sulaimani, do not jeopardize the sweet  
nostalgia you have by coming to observe what the city has become under direct  
Ottoman rule. As history has it, Nali listens, never again entering the city he and his  
dear friend Salim loved so well.

Salim's correspondence with Nali pertained to a physical place: the home both  
poets had in the city of Sulaimani, the home they both mourned as the Ottomans, from

their point of view, desecrated it. Salim’s correspondence with Kurdi, on the other hand, centered around the metaphysical home he and Kurdi shared and gave to each other as poets and friends. The language in this exchange is the highly sentimental language of lovers. We cannot definitively say that Salim and Kurdi were not lovers, but the possibility is remote. Rumors circulated about widely about Kurdi’s love for Qadir, a subject we will turn to in following sections, but at no time was there speculation about Salim and Kurdi. Acknowledging alternate interpretations, we can examine this correspondence as one of intimate male friendship, bearing markers that to contemporary readers may seem romantic. Men from the nineteenth century, especially poets, considered these hyperbolic terms standard to a poem.

The correspondence as we know it today consists of six exchanges. While it is clear which poem responds to which, creating pairs of clear call-and-response, the overarching order—what order the pairs occurred in—is less clear. One of the exchanges is incomplete. Several editions remark on a response Salim crafted and sent to Kurdi, but the poem itself remains elusive. One of the poems exists only in fragments, preserved in our translations. For all the challenges with preservation and context, the correspondence is one of the lengthiest that lives on today from the nineteenth century.

The fragmented letter of Kurdi to Salim evokes the heights of the affection the two poets share. In “[My heart begins its longing],” Salim writes,

Oh, the glowing dust of [ ]  
Nights [ ]  
  
You know it well [ ]  
How it is the vow faith and friendship [ ]  
  
You have marked its heart and captive [ ]  
My eyes are on the wilds, searching for his arrival [ ]  
(Lines 7-12)

Kurdi, almost especially in these open reaches of the partial lines, shrouds the friendship he and Salim share in the classical terms of intimacy. Dust: a common symbol of how humble the lover is before his beloved, the student before his teacher, the disciple before the divine. Nights, Salim knows well, the vow of faith and friendship. Kurdi’s heart is marked, captive, his eyes search the wilds for Salim’s arrival, though “arrival” is also a common trope for a devotee to use describing his devotions: every

action of a devotee is one of waiting or preparing for the arrival of the beloved, God. While the poem's themes are fairly standard to the time period, the final couplet turns on some unique word play.

Most Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century had nicknames, a habit that carries on today. Often, they coined these names themselves to indicate to their readers what they valued. "Mashwi" (burned) and "Mahwi" (erased) are both nicknames a poet because as a devout Sufi, he hoped that in life and poetry, he would burn up, his ego erased. For a time, Salim's nickname was "Bimar" or "Wounded." The ghazal's form demands that Kurdi close his poem by naming himself, but Kurdi names, too, his poet-friend, "The beginning of Bimar's loving-kindness is lost to Kurdi. / So, the agile ages" (lines 13-14).

In another pair of letters exchanged, Salim plays with Kurdi's original text, "Brother, when do you have pity? When do you dispense justice" (line 10)? Kurdi, in his original poem, is asking for a reprieve from Salim's absence, implying that Salim has no pity in him, no sense of justice, that he would stay away from Kurdi for such a prolonged period. In his poem, Salim, in "[Beloved if you seek]" uses that same line for his own purposes. The poem opens with familiar imagery of the friend/lover/devotee in abject sadness:

Dearest, if you seek to know how this heart is  
It is busy with separation, mourning, like the *ney*.

My face before was a landscape of tulips.  
Now, in November, it takes the color of quince.

Your eyes flirt among the drunks.

They lose the joy of drunkenness, desiring you. (Lines 1-6)

But, Salim contends, Kurdi only writes the ache of longing where Salim lives it, "Salim proved this line of Kurdi, tell the beloved: / Brother, when do you have pity? When do you dispense justice" (lines 9-10)? Salim implies that while Kurdi has asked him for mercy, for justice, Salim lives desiring the same mercy and justice from Kurdi. The idea is akin to when a friend says, "How come you never visit me?" Only for his friend to respond, "How come *you* never visit *me*?" Again, in this final couplet, the form dictates that Salim name himself, but Salim names Kurdi alongside himself. The interplay between poems and the consistent and elective mention of each other in their own

verses reinforces the bond between the poets and the sense of a Kurdish community for a reader.

The poems also establish a mutual understanding and commitment. The love they bear one another causes them pain because they cannot share the same space; they will dedicate themselves to tending that pain because it is the totem of their love. Kurdi prays in “[If I take your will]:” “If, for one moment, I weaken under the sad burden of your love, / Darling, let me be opened, my body a window, by your sword” (lines 5-6). Lines later, he continues the prayer, “Oh, dear ones, just once let Kurdi be, in the forge of separation, / Pure, flawless, verified, smelted gold” (lines 13-14). Salim, in the response of “[If I leave],” vows,

If I leave the path to your love, I will be shamed come Doomsday.  
I am the writing under your feet. Erase that, and I’m gone from the book.

I won’t let even the thought of you inhabit my heart.  
The bouquet of your beauty must not wither in that fire.

If the reaper comes for your soul, a tax collector for his cash,  
I am content to share your pillow so he will seize me and leave you.

(Lines 1-6)

Both poets agree: they must cherish the sharp longing they feel to be in one another’s company as the most tangible experience of the affection they share. In “[My psyche],” Kurdi claims, “The neighbors have begun to pray for death, Kurdi moans so much” (line 15). The poet’s habit of sorrow suits the poem but disturbs the neighbors. Kurdi is not bothered by the neighbors’ prayers. Without Salim, the only thing he would add to his neighbors’ prayers is his own “Amen.”

These postures are common in the Sufi tradition where serving the absence of the divine is a form of remembering and cherishing the divine presence. For Kurdi and Salim, however, as Kurds, separated by earthly elements such as empires and their borders, this inherited idea takes on new meaning. In “[In a corner of hardship],” Kurdi expresses jealousy that Salim has escaped from “hardship’s city,” and promises, “When I get my chance, I will escape the darkness of my sweet city” (lines 7-8). He admits, “This illness belongs not to me, but to all” (line 5). Without exact time stamps for each poem, we cannot know which political event exactly has caused Kurdi to write these lines. Still, we can imagine rough causality as Salim leaves Baban areas and Kurdi is

left behind to watch as what was Kurdish, in perception if not in reality, is forced under direct Ottoman rule. Kurdi, having acknowledged his complex sorrow at remaining in “the darkness” of his “sweet city,” tells Salim,

They bring me a doctor. I am viciously ill, but only with distance.  
If I don't see you face to face, there can be no peace, no cure.

If I can't see you, when I die, consider this my will:  
Rather than my family, you must mourn over my grave.

I am love's martyr... (Lines 9-13)

The city is gone, so Kurdi clings to his dear friend's memory and the longing makes him ill. He rejects the company that lineage would provide and reaches across artistic understanding toward Salim. He instructs his friend of his final wishes: that rather than the family he was born into, he wishes the family he has chosen, the family of Kurdish poets, to mourn over his grave. Kurdi belongs to love and so should be mourned by love's family.

Though records are unclear about how, when, and why, we know from the poems of both Kurdi and Salim that at some point, Salim left Sulaimani and its surrounding areas, supposedly for Tehran. In many editions of his work, biographers claim that there, in Tehran, Salim was jailed. What his offense was, how long his sentence lasted, where he served his time: we don't know. We do, however, have “[In prison],” the poem he wrote to Kurdi. Whether Salim meant this prison as metaphor or actuality, the reality does not change: Kurdi's heart makes a home for Salim that transcends time and space.

In prison, I don't have anyone to share my sickness today.  
I'm imprisoned by beasts and the stone-hearted today.

In the far house of grief, it was the morning wind who  
Brought a letter from one who shares my mind today.

If at my feet, the door is locked, desire is open.

My heart is with yours, I am humble today. (Lines 1-6)

Their correspondence-poems are to Salim a friend who flies “like a bird” to “delight” him even when solitude “shackles” him (lines 11-12). Kurdi, for the exiled Salim, becomes “the sun” Salim “orbits” (line 18). Kurdi and Salim agree: they must cherish their pain as the negative presence of the joy they know and have in each other. Many cultures

embrace this model: the nursing of personal and political pain as a lost joy's only remaining presence. But it does live on today in the Kurdish imagination with remarkable strength.

### *Curse Correspondence*

Letters between these poets could take a turn for the raucous. Often poets who knew each other well would exchange curse poems—mostly playful, certainly provocative. Following all the formal rigor of a poem, these verses were one more way for Kurdish poets to build their own community, speaking to each other across great distances, great displacements, and within their own language. They challenged one another as artists through what could become decades-long grudge matches. The serious play that occurs in these poems demonstrates the Kurdish poets' prowess, but also their rebelliousness. These curse correspondences constitute one method of creating a Kurdish conversation of the arts, for artists—creating an artistic, Kurdish community that is, by its own performative terms, nonconforming. This alluring genre, conducted between two people, convokes a much larger Kurdish readership.

Addressing a man by the name of Mirza Sanandaj, in “[Every enraged hair].” Salim says he has “a Billy goat’s beard, camel’s knees, ostrich feet, and an ass’ mind” (line 6). He continues that Sanandaj has, “a mosquito’s power” and “elephant ankles” (line 9). But these insults are child’s play compared to what he unleashes as the poem draws to a close. Salim goes on to say, “I can’t measure your height. / The highest sycamores” can’t “reach your balls” (lines 10-11). What should be a compliment, Sanandaj’s height, Salim turns to his own insolent purposes, “You are so tall, you are vulnerable. When you sleep / they can fondle your ass in Baghdad, with your eyes closed in Sulaimani” (lines 14-15).

Salim’s language could be called tame in comparison to Sheikh Raza Talabani’s “[Even the merging waters].” Cursing his friend Jamil al-Zahawi, an Arabic-speaking Kurd, Sheikh Raza writes in Persian, “If you want a free fuck, go to the Mufti’s house. / There, heaps of pussy and ass are cheap as a wheat grain” (lines 5-6). He continues, cursing al-Zahawi by impugning his whole family—mothers, sisters, and father by

implication—“Between his sisters’ thighs is the jungle of jungles: / you can see bears and monkeys slumbering in multitudes” (lines 9-10). Sheikh Raza closes the poem by returning his attention to al-Zahawi himself, “When his itchy ass won’t be satisfied, even by a rhino horn, / What will Jamil do with his battered backside” (lines 15-16)? While these lines sound sharp, they contain affection and often respect. These correspondences spring up between equals, people who delight in sharpening their wits on one another.

A particularly infamous, and extended, correspondences grew between Sheikh Raza and Shukri Fazly. Dr. Nouri Talabani, a scholar of Sheikh Raza, a leader in the Kurdish academic community, and a distant relative of Sheikh Raza himself, relates a poets’ gathering in 1920’s Baghdad in which a man named Sadulla Efendi was asked to read a poem in Kurdish. Sadulla Efendi chose one of Sheikh Raza’s curses addressed to Shukri Fazli. What happens next confirms the great affection and friendship that was often the underbelly of these raunchy correspondences:

...as he started reading the verse, the person next to him asked him to stop. Among those seated [...], someone started to cry. This person asked him to continue reading the poem saying, ‘I wish Sheikh Reza were still here to curse me further!’ Sadulla Efendi said he hadn’t met Shukri Fazli until that day. (Talabani, April 8, 2014)

Even more revealing: in a story passed down through the Fazli family, Shukri wrote a

poem criticizing the Ottomans harshly. When the Vali learned of this poem, he ordered Fazli’s execution. When Sheikh Reza found out about the Vali’s order, he paid the Vali a visit in Baghdad. They talked and observed the Isha prayer. Sheikh Reza asked the Vali to dismiss his execution. The Vali told him that the order came from higher people in Istanbul, but said, ‘I will do my best to persuade them about Shukri’s case.’ (Talabani, April 8, 2014)

Sheikh Raza’s intervention saved Shukri Fazli’s life. The family was forever grateful. To this day, Shukri Fazli’s responses to Sheikh Raza’s poems are missing. The family keeps them hidden out of respect to Sheikh Raza, the man who saved their patriarch (Talabani, April 8, 2014). One could argue that the greater respect to Sheikh Raza, famous for his playfulness and insurrectionism, is to release the poems and let the correspondence once again be complete. The fact remains: the cursing between Shurki Fazli and Sheikh Raza was theater—creative in its pretense.

Even missing Shukri Fazli's poems, Sheikh Raza's speak volumes. In "[Enough, Auntie Shukri]," which does not seem to be the instigating poem, Sheikh Raza addresses Shurki Fazli directly, "Enough, Auntie Shukri. Don't make me rip your ass up / Don't send your mom, that cockgobbler, to my bald red head" (lines 1-2). He vacillates between the desire to take Shurki seriously and come destroy him and the temptation to ignore a man and a poet so obviously beneath him. A man like me should not listen, Sheikh Raza says to himself, every time "an ass brays" (line 4). Eventually, Sheikh Raza decides on direct confrontation:

Bitch, grab hold of yourself. I'm coming for you.  
I won't say another word until I breed you under your stones.

You old Baghdad bitch, poetry be forbidden to me  
If I don't crack your sister's cunt wide as Kasra's arch<sup>28</sup>. (Lines 9-12)  
Here, where we have chosen the translation, "Bitch," the poet used the word "حيز," translating most literally as "gay" or "bitch." This word historically had the singular connotation of insult, invoking, as I will examine in the next section, the idea that Shukri as a man fulfilled roles of womanhood in that he welcomed penetration, willingly giving up his power and virility, not any definition resonating with the modern word "homosexual." As the ghazal requires the poet to refer to himself in the penultimate line, Sheikh Raza makes a promise to himself, in honor of himself: "Blind Bear<sup>29</sup>, / I won't continue to your mother's lap until I'm limp against you" (lines 19-20). The homoerotic implications here are obvious—Sheikh Raza's manhood is so rapacious and inexhaustible that he will fuck his way through Shukri's meager capacity and go on to satiate himself with Shukri's mother. But, again, this kind of insult builds up Sheikh Raza's manliness rather than defines him as participating in or establishing his right to homosexuality, which is not a term that maps onto or describes the social realities of Sheikh Raza's and Shukri Fazli's era. Beyond thumping proudly on his own virility, Sheikh Raza's insult establishes Shukri as "the woman," traditionally defined as the

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<sup>28</sup> Kasra's arch: constructed, perhaps, under Khosrau or Kasra I, the arch articulated the open throne room in the royal quarters in the ancient city of Ctesiphon. To this day, it is the world's longest span of freestanding brick, with more than 35 meters in height, 25 meters in width, and 50 meters in length.

<sup>29</sup> Blind bear: a common insult. Along the lines of calling someone "an ass."

receiving and less powerful sex, and adds insult in that Shukri cannot defend his family from Sheikh Raza's depredations. We can only imagine how Shukri Fazli responded.

In Sheikh Raza's next rejoinder, "[Shukri, this year or two]," Sheikh Raza continues where he left off, with an interesting twist. Staying with the idea of a sexual partnership between the two of them, Sheikh Raza moves into the language of a spurned lover. He begins,

Shukri, this year or two, you sadden me.  
My cock is ill: heartsick, fallen.  
Just once, ask your faithful man how he is or isn't.  
Ask your old friend—it's amazing if he remains—is he dead?  
He'll die for your absence unless you heal him. (Lines 1-5)

Insult remains in the implication that Shukri Fazli has been the recipient of Sheikh Raza's sexual attention, but Sheikh Raza implicates himself in this: his cock is ill, heartsick, fallen. This tone almost betrays the joke, which is saved three lines later when Sheikh Raza delivers the next twist,

Intentionally, to save your feelings, I say he's sick.  
Really, he long ago gave his soul to heaven.  
Ask your mom if I lie.

That gracious lady buried him with her own hands... (Lines 7-10)  
With that nineteenth century "your mama" joke, the poem turns toward the defamation of Shukri Fazli's mother. "Even now," Sheikh Raza says, "her clothes are dirty, her crotch hairy. / Like a dwarf beard, her pubes span a hand's breadth" (lines 13-14). He continues, "That gracious lady, her anal avenue gives the army / parading ground, her alley cunt gives degenerates a bed" (lines 17-18). With Shukri's mother thoroughly disparaged, Sheikh Raza lingers for a moment on Shukri as a poet: "A poem you call good is manure. / A verse you recite is foul shit, / a sneaky fart whose essence emerges in a wind" (lines 19-21). The poem concludes as, poet to poet, Sheikh Raza assues Shukri Fazli: "With these lackluster words, you'll never become Sheikh Raza" (line 22). And this is the heart of the correspondence: to prove who is the better poet.

In "[Zephyr, from your servant]," this time in Persian, Sheikh Raza targets Shukri's manhood as his writerly ability. Shukri, Raza says, is the "wife of poets" who has gotten knocked up by one of the "penmen among the poets" (lines 2-4). Shukri is neither a man nor a poet. He can only be an empty vessel, hopeful that God will grant him a son from Sheikh Raza's semen (line 5). The child will be "of grand genes," "the

lion-slayer of poets,” given Sheikh Raza’s competence and Shukri Fazli can be proud of his “strong, tough waist / Which withstood the half-ton maces of poets” (lines 9-10). Artistic capacity equates to virility—and, Sheikh Raza says, Shukri Fazli has none. Shukri Fazli has only the womanly virtue that he can “withstand” the onslaught of these poets as they continually skewer him with their remarkable wits.

Sexual and bold as these poems are, they fulfill similar functions as the non-course correspondences: they put Kurdish poets in conversation with one another as Kurds, as poets, defiant in the face of the great political and economic losses of the era in which they lived. They create a community of letters that cannot be interrupted or torn apart by the ever-shifting political power structures around them, a community robust to the displacement each of its members experienced in some way, shape, or form.

### *Formalizing the Conversation: The Taghmis*

The poets’ correspondences often took on a particular poetic form built for poets to speak across time, distance, style, and tone: the taghmis. A taghmis is a form intended to put two poets in conversation: the poem must be a meditation on or evaluation of one poet on another. The poet who authors the poem chooses the poet he wishes to study, speak to, tease, or twist. Each five-line stanza opens with three lines of the examining poet’s and closes with a couplet of the examined poet. The stanzas can continue in this way as long as the examining poet desires. Primarily, the form gives emerging or contemporary poets a vehicle to contemplate and respond to established or classical poets. It puts writers into conversation regardless of the traditional human boundaries. In the concluding stanza, similar to in a ghazal, the examining poet will name himself in the first three lines of the stanza and will use a couplet of the examined poet to conclude in which he names himself.

Each poet uses this formal vehicle for his purposes. Sheikh Raza writes many taghmis, most of which are contemplations of Hafiz and Mesih, two major Persian poets. In one remarkable taghmis, however, Sheikh Raza twists the ghazals of Hafiz to his own purposes: attacking a contemporary whose book, *Beginning*, he found lacking. The mastery of twisting a master, Hafiz, to his own designs increases the humiliation

Sheikh Raza wishes to visit on Mullah Ma'roof, *Beginning's* author. Sheikh Raza demonstrates his prowess as a poet while decrying Ma'roof's poverty as a writer. In the first line of the poem, Sheikh Raza uses both Mullah Ma'roof's name and his book's title against him, "A big name<sup>30</sup> with no sense, you shat from the beginning." The humor of the poem resides partially in the boastful provocation and partially in the juxtaposition between the meditative verses of Hafiz, so traditional in tone, and the irreverent verses of Sheikh Raza.

Still speaking of Mullah Ma'roof, Sheikh Raza says, "Weeds sprouted around his asshole like hydra heads. / My balls wouldn't go. My dick has passed through a hundred / hazards, but got stuck in the wool behind his balls." Then, he quotes from Hafiz, imploring his own heart, "Don't search torture's lush hair, oh, heart. There, / you will see heads severed without accusation or crime." "Torture's lush hair," likely originally the hair of a beautiful woman, at least in metaphor, becomes the relentless, impeding pubic hair of Mullah Ma'roof. Sheikh Raza continues his narration of this imagined sexual encounter:

I turned my face to his hips, his ass, I mean the promised place:  
a completely filthy ground, a plain of carnal addiction.

I swerved left and right—that mare would accept no destination.

As I rode, on every side, horror increased.

Beware this endless desert, this endless path. (Lines 16-20)

Hafiz's "endless path," likely a spiritual metaphor in its original context, is, in Sheikh Raza's poem, either Mullah Ma'roof's anus or, more generally, anal sex. Sheikh Raza transforms Hafiz with his own context, creating a dialogue between himself and a weighty poetic influence of his. More, Sheikh Raza uses that dialogue to comment on and speak to a contemporary of his, Mullah Ma'roof.

While Sheikh Raza's taghmis on the ghazal's of Hafiz concerning Mullah Ma'roof is a remarkable example, the form repeats frequently throughout the work of many other Kurdish poets of that time period. Both the form itself and its consistent usage demonstrates the desire of Kurdish poets to be in conversation with one another.

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<sup>30</sup> Big name: in the original Kurdish, this word is "ma'roof," the name of the Mullah referred to in the title, but translated, it means roughly "big name." Sheikh Raza is playing with the insult Ma'roof's name can become in the first line of the first and second stanzas.

Though I have endeavored to present a representative selection of taghmis here in translation for our study, I should note there is a wealth of taghmis yet to be translated.

Table 2

Usage and Trends of the Taghmis in Nineteenth Century Kurdish Poetry

No. of Taghmis Written	Poet	Lifespan	Relevant Poets Examined
4	Salim	(1800/5-1856/69)	Hafiz, Nali
2	Mahwi	(1830/6-1904/9)	Saadi
4	Sheikh Raza	(1835/42-1898/1910)	Mufti Zahawi (in Arabic)
13	Wafai	(1838/44-1902/51)	Wafai (to examine himself), Hafiz
1	Piramerd	(1867-1950)	Sheikh Raza
6	Hamdi	(1876/8-1936)	Mahwi, Kurdi, Hamdi, Salim
2	Bekhod	(1878-1955/6)	Bekhod (to examine himself)
34	Qani'	(1900/1904-1975)	Hamdi, Bekas, Hafiz

This overwhelming use of the form between the poets demonstrates how powerfully these poets felt the need for Kurdish artistic conversation. It is interesting to note that at approximately the mid-century mark, right around the fall of the Babans, when Wafai would have been in his mid-teens or twenties, the form dramatically increases in popularity. The poets from the first half of the century, when the Babans still held Sulaimani, wrote a total of 10 taghmis. Poets from the second half of the century, when Kurds found themselves exiled in their own lands, wrote 56, almost six times the number of their predecessors.

Perhaps the form took on new importance for Kurdish poets in the nineteenth century who had to forge and reinforce their Kurdishness themselves. When Hamdi writes a taghmis on Mahwi, or Qani' writes a taghmis on Hamdi, they assert their own lineage as poets and, specifically, as Kurdish poets. In writing a taghmis on Mahwi, Hamdi emphasizes the family that Kurdish poets find with one another. In writing a taghmis on Hamdi, a poet in his own generation, Qani' confers honor on his peer and, once again, reinforces ideas of who the artistic masters are: Kurdish.

Exiled in their own lands, the poets build their own aesthetic and intellectual space. They respond to physical exile by establishing a sense of artistic and imagined place. In the final stanza of “[From my first lessons],” Hamdi’s taghmis on Mahwi, Hamdi laments, “One is drunk on the wine of egotism. Another is drunk on sorrow. / One’s perfection lacks. One’s lack is perfection. / On all sides, Hamdi’s earth is impossible” (lines 41-43). The couplet of Mahwi’s he uses as his final turn act as an echo to his own sentiments, “Thank God, Mahwi is aware: the world is a cesspool. / When people get drunk, why should I seize on the trespass” (lines 44-45)? Mahwi, having articulated similar sentiments just a generation earlier, gives Hamdi comfort: belonging. Hamdi is not alone. He stands with his literary brothers and forefathers.

This sense of family is only strengthened by an emerging sense of patriotism. “Taghmis on Hamdi,” Qani’ blends his nationalistic voice with Hamdi. Qani’ addresses Kurdistan directly, “If I imagine you, sorrow surges from my heart. / If I call your name, my mouth will flow with sweet nectar. / If I look across your plains, they heal the wounded liver” (lines 36-38). His quoted Hamdi concurs, “I speak of your fruit and my pen fruits./ My poems are the nation’s...” (lines 39-40). Qani’ continues:

Baled wheat and barley in burlap is silver and gold.  
 You are this world’s heaven, no embroidery, no lie.  
 The ice cold cup of *doh*<sup>31</sup> beats beer and whiskey.  
     The jewelry, the lovely golden belt of the Kurdish nation  
     Rustles and wraps around the stone waist of your mountains.

Your mountains are head to toe red with flowering pomegranate.  
 Your valleys and plains and woods run with pure water.  
 The only work of nightingales like me is to moan for the rose.  
     The plains and mountains and sky of your lands reveal  
     The Kurds’ house: yard, wall, and rooftop. (Lines 41-50)

Qani’ concludes, by imploring the Kurds, “Don’t sit with your hands on your knees, sighing heavily” (line 63), and his quoted Hamdi concurs, “The poems’ cursive lines, the high noses of the mountains, / All are ferociously for independence, ready at your command” (lines 64-65). What emerges from this artistic fraternity is a shared sense of Kurdishness, a shared desire especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to reach once more for corporeal nationhood.

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<sup>31</sup> Doh: known as *doogh* in Iran and *ayran* in Turkey, *doh* is a savory beverage of fresh yogurt and water whisked together.

## *The City and The Land*

As we have seen, examined in the Introduction (Chapter 1), nineteenth-century Kurdish poets established a community, a community of men with wide-ranging social relationships, by speaking to one other through direct and indirect correspondence—this was a community of men. Some women in nineteenth century Kurdish lands did hold power—Adila Khan of Halabja, an outstanding civic example; Mestura of the Ardalans, an exemplary poetic example—but overwhelmingly, public figures remained male. Society was gender-segregated and a woman’s honor and purity depended, with a few notable exceptions, on how many veils she lived behind. Men formed meaningful relationships with men in part because intimacy within their own gender was acceptable. Intimacy flourished where society’s pressures allowed. This is not to say homosexuality did not exist as a distinct identity in nineteenth-century Kurdistan, though it is also not to say that it did, only to establish the wide range of possible emotional stances men could and would take toward one another. The fluidity of nineteenth-century male sexual identity expanded the poetic territory men explored.

### *Homoeroticism: A Spectrum in Nineteenth-Century Kurdish Poetry*

Several Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century write verses that could be construed as or can be nothing other than homoerotic. Whether in saccharine high praise or insulting provocation, Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century certainly experiment with the homoerotic as a technique, one they inherit from generations of Arabic and Persian poets. Homoerotic verse existed across regional poetic traditions but had yet to arrive in Kurdish literature. Nineteenth-century Kurdish poets, trained in the poetic meters, forms, and tropes of other languages, begin moving these poets’ tools into Kurdish. Beginning with Nali, promoted by the Baban court, Sorani becomes an artistic language. Sorani poets begin using Arabic and Persian poetic tricks in a new language: their own.

This shift is simultaneously a homecoming and a reinvention of home: the Kurdish poet comes home to Kurdish, but he also brings with him foreign forms that

transform Kurdish poetry. No poet, however, writes like Sheikh Raza Talabani: across the spectrum of the homoerotic. Where the other poets dabble, Sheikh Raza specializes. He writes across the gamut: rhapsodic eulogies for men he held dear, panegyrics intended to elevate spiritual figures he knew to the position of the princes Kurdish society had lost, poems that express love for specific men he knew, sexual narratives that can be read as first-person encounters or as cloaked critiques of the poet's rivals, curse poems that were affectionate at heart if inflammatory on the surface. To study the spectrum, we can study Sheikh Raza.

Often, men admired each other to such a degree that it begins to sound like rapture. Sheikh Raza's "[Soldiers of despair]," for his cousin, Sheikh Star, thrashes with hyperbolic anguish:

Soldiers of despair, hammer-handed, surround me.  
At your arrival, they begin to beat me, but  
oh, God, your departure is the mercenary.  
Blood spills unnoticed, undue.  
Do not ask why I have not died from departure  
when I dog death and my heartless soul hangs on. (Lines 1-6)

A contemporary reader might struggle to hear anything but romantic love. That said, there is absolutely no evidence to support romantic love between Sheikh Raza and Sheikh Star and ample circumstantial evidence to support that this literary mode, one of high sentimentality, was often used to indicate extreme love and respect. This commonality of this mode becomes evident reading over Sheikh Raza's collected works. The anguish over Sheikh Star repeats many times. For Qadri Wasta Khadeer, in "[Why shouldn't the liver]," Sheikh Raza writes,

Why shouldn't the liver burn, why not skewer the heart?  
Why shouldn't the upright soul depart matter like a shooting star?  
Why shouldn't the headwaters behind the eyes roil in fine bloody mists?  
Why shouldn't the eyelid's miser-spigot let the water drip, drop by drop?  
For all its wailing, why won't my round throat become a hymn?  
For all its weeping, why won't the source of sources waver?  
He caused peace in my heart, day and night, the sorrow-remover.  
He is gone. Grief for him is my ocean of agony. (Lines 1-8)

These eulogies reach for the highest terms of grief, expressing the greatest depths of love. That said, this was the mode of the day. While this tone sounds startlingly emotional in today's context, more restrained verses would have sounded just as startling to nineteenth century readers for their remove.

The same effusive sentimentality pervades the panegyrics poets write. Formally, these poems used to serve the prince the poet served. Verses would be written to celebrate the prince's character, his accomplishments and victories, his gifts to his people, the elevated company he kept. When the courts fall, poets become their own princes or even nominate those they consider royalty. Raised in a religious setting, Sheikh Raza chose sheikhs and mullahs as his "princes." For Kak Ahmadi Sheikh, a famous teacher and writer in the Qadiri Order of Sufism and the founder of Sulaimani's central mosque, the main mosque in the city to this day, Sheikh Raza writes, "My soul pains after his hands, his cherished crutch. / I sacrifice myself for his staff, his shoes, his *sewak*" (lines 7-8). The poet lowers himself until he is below even Kak Ahmadi Sheikh's shoes, his toothbrush (*sewak*).

In "[When I departed]," a recounting his departure from Shahrazur, the lands around Sulaimani, on his way to "Ottoman lands," Sheikh Raza details how he stumbles on a tomb he feels to be holy, "As I topped the auspicious peak, / It appeared in the distance: a dome, a cosmic cloister" (lines 9-10). He describes the tomb further, "Like the bright gold disc of the sun / It shone from its roof to its doors, gleaming" (lines 13-14). As he reaches the tomb, revealed to be the burial place of Sheikh Nuri, a famous spiritual leader of the time, he says, "To meet him<sup>32</sup>, they come in regiments, regiments / From the sky, angels shaped as birds" (lines 19-20). For Sheikh Raza this praise of Sheikh Nuri is preface to prayer. The poet in this praise is not currying earthly favor, but is marking himself as a supplicant, writing this panegyric as an offering, praying for a safe and productive journey:

Oh, God, in reverence for this zenith of saints,  
Forgive Raza. You have said, "I am the Forgiver<sup>33</sup>."

Don't sustain agony and hardship in his journey.  
Bring him again to happiness and comfort and delight. (Lines 23-26)

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<sup>32</sup> To meet him: "in pilgrimage."

<sup>33</sup> Forgiver: a reference to the Quran, 15:49, "Tell My servants that I am indeed the Forgiving..." Interestingly, "Forgiver," is in Kurdish, "Ghafoor," the name of Sheikh Raza's uncle who promised him a position and a wife and rescinded both after Sheikh Raza served him for years.

Sheikh Nuri, like Kak Ahmadi Sheikh, takes on mythical proportions in Sheikh Raza's verses. The admiration in these poems and many others like them, declares a closeness between men. Sheikh Raza's religious teachers and his fellow students in the mosque, tekiye, and khanaqa—these men were beloved to him. There was no emotional distance. When Sheikh Raza lowers himself, names himself dust under Kak Ahmadi's feet, for example, he establishes physical disparity between himself and the men he admires that somehow managed to also establish emotional proximity. This nearness comes from one man treating another as a spiritual idea and guide, an advocate. Kak Ahmadi Skeikh, Sheikh Nuri, these men were for Sheikh Raza sources of inspiration, love and betterment that he could access anywhere, anytime, by turning to his innermost desires.

The eulogies and panegyrics inhabit similar territory. The poet exalts all the men he turns his attention to in this mode. The men the poems discuss are not *men*; they are figures. Other poems among Sheikh Raza's collected works name a specific man and seem more intimate in their intentions. The poems Sheikh Raza writes for Amin Faizy (1860-1923), "a brilliant intellectual and officer, and a poet in his own right, writing in Kurdish, Turkish and Persian" who published the "first edition of Anjumani Adibāni Kord (Council of Learned Kurds) [...] in 1920," could be in a similar vein to the eulogies and panegyrics (Blau *Written* loc. 930). The poems remain hyperbolic in their praise. As hyperbolic as the praise may be, the poems themselves are much more specific to the individual. Amin Faizy, throughout Sheikh Raza's handful of poems that praise him, is sometimes a figure, but more often a man. In "[When your pen leaks]," the poet contemplates what he has gained and lost over the course of his time in Ottoman lands. In the course of this contemplation, Raza writes of Amin more as an elevated figure, less as a man:

The page is a miracle as old as Mary  
Who took into her arms all birth with the breath of Jesus  
You have reached such heights in your work, Amin Faizy,  
that Gabriel, by comparison, is called Amin. (Lines 3-6)

The comparison of Faizy to the angel Gabriel is followed two lines later by comparisons to the prophets Elijah and Khizr. This is the kind of description we would expect from the

mode of hyperbolic admiration for a figure. More often, though, Sheikh Raza relates to Amin as more a man, less a figure.

In “[Your company],” Sheikh Raza says, “Your company is lovely and your cadence is sweet” (line 1). He continues, “Your virgin idea, between me and God, / is a tender girl, elegant” (lines 3-4). This purity, he implies, is a dowry that puts to shame the throne and shining carpets of the Queen of Sheba. Sheikh Raza, in one reading, sexualizes Faizy in these lines as a “tender girl” with the dowry of his “virgin idea.” He goes on to tease Faizy in a way a lover might. It is common knowledge, he says, that all exists for Amin. “Even as a proverb,” the poet maintains, “they say, / ‘Prayer is for the Amen<sup>34</sup>’” (lines 15-16). Even a man at prayer is only trying to get to “Amin.” He prays for Faizy’s state of being, “May your mind be cheerful, Amin Faizy: / You are the sea of knowledge and faith” (lines 17-18). He prays for Faizy’s protection, “May your enemy fall to the ground and roll over. / They deserve damnation and insult” (lines 19-20). In this poem, Sheikh Raza transforms the very verses he writes, saying, “This is not poetry; it is a thread of honey. / This is not verse; it is stringing the Pleiades” (lines 7-8). It is entirely possible that these threads of honey, this strung Pleiades embody only great admiration between these two men and poets. It is also possible these lines show Raza’s homoerotic affection, even romantic love, for Amin Faizy. Both interpretations are possible.

With similar tone, Kurdi writes his impeccably polished love poems. While many address or describe an unspecified beloved, who, given Kurdi’s religious education, could have been divine or corporeal, more than a dozen mention an individual named Qadir. There is great debate about the identity of this man. He could have been Kurdi’s dear nephew, close friend, or lover. To add complexity, Qadir shares his name with the founder of the Qadiri Order, one of the most influential Sufi brotherhoods in the region. Any poetic reference Kurdi made could also have been the poet calling on the great Sufi master and teacher, Abdul-Qadir Gaylani. Too, Islam uses “Qadir” as a synonym for God meaning “The Capable,” “The Helper,” or “Omnipotent.” Kurdi, deft poet that he was,

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<sup>34</sup> Amen: otherwise written “Amin,” the subject’s name. Sheikh Raza could be implying that all prayers are for Amin, or, given the meaning of Amin’s name, “amin” is “calm,” that all prayer is for the serenity prayer brings.

plays among these meanings. And, a final wrinkle, in Sorani, pronouns have no gender: when Kurdi writes to his beloved, the only clear gender is the one the reader brings to the text. The possible interpretations—and translations—proliferate.

With all this in mind, we can turn back to his poetry. In [There; from Sawa Spring], Kurdi observes “a bouquet of girls” coming down from the spring, “hair on parade,” this “harvest of girls comes to blind” the poet (lines 1-5). Kurdi surveys these anonymous, forgettably beautiful girls only to remark, “...my slim fawn isn’t among them” (line 6). “These beauties,” he continues, “what are they to me? My beauty isn’t among them. / Yes, they bring no peace to these unsettled insides” (lines 7-8). His insides, he maintains, are “murdered, captive, melancholy” (line 9). He wonders what has kept his love from meeting him: illness? A rival? Boredom? The penultimate line, most literally translated, reads, “Qadir is my Qadir. With my eyes, I worship my Qadir” (line 17). This line contains at least six possible meanings:

1. My love is Able. With my eyes, I worship my God.
2. My love is able. With my eyes, I worship him as the founder of my order.
3. My love is the order’s founder. With my eyes, I worship my founder.
4. God is Able. With my eyes, I worship my God.
5. The Order’s founder is capable. With my eyes, I worship that man.
6. The founder of the Qadiri Order is Qadir. With my eyes, I worship my founder.

While we chose the first option as our translation, the most important element of this line is its obsessive repetition of the name: Qadir. Kurdi is caught: he cannot stop looking everywhere for his beloved; he cannot stop failing to find him. “So,” the poem ends, “Kurdi will never escape this trap” (line 18). But whatever trap Kurdi stumbled into in love, he built intentionally into the poem: quite literally in line 17, Kurdi cannot escape Qadir. He writes a line in which Qadir is everywhere—and can be anything. That line demonstrates the allness of Qadir, and demonstrates, too, how deep the trap has set.

In [Oh, raw pearl], Kurdi plays once more with the many meanings of Qadir. He begins with an address to a beloved that evolves into a little conversation,

Hidden, famous, hundreds like me are in love with you.  
The bodies of the world ache with separation from you.

You asked if my heart is taken up or given away,  
If love, affection, and desire are on my mind.

Really, this is a sweet question, but it’s better

Addressed to a wise man who knows how things are.

My heart is bent on holding off my own concerns.

How can I untie the knots you bring me? (Lines 3-10)

“The knots” this lover brings Kurdi, the poem goes on to describe, are the reversals of the lover’s behavior. Some days, this man “of slim stature and middling height, under a tilted hat / fresh chested” says, “Pain to all lovers,” other times, “I sacrifice my eyes for you” (13-16). His step is quick and sure; his eyes drunk and languid. He is wicked, yet sweet-tongued (lines 17-18). After the catalogue of tangled signals, Kurdi gives up. “If you walk the path with Qadir, he will have your answers, / But Kurdi can’t even explain his own condition” (lines 21-22). The brilliance of these lines are, again, their ambiguity: Qadir can be Kurdi’s friend, lover, spiritual guide, or deity. Kurdi means Qadir to include all these options. And, if this Qadir is Kurdi’s lover, the compliment Kurdi implies is enormous.

Unlike Sheikh Raza’s poems to various men who inspired or taught him, unlike Sheikh Raza’s poems for Amin Faizy, which are tonally closest, Kurdi’s poems for Qadir resound with the specificity and maturity of love. The tendency toward hyperbole that characterizes most of Raza’s poetry for men he admires echoes the traditional poetic modes of praise, which are as elevated as they are impersonal. Kurdi’s poems, though they contain lines that emerge from the traditional modes, are far more personal not only in their detail (his slim fawn, his tilted hat), but in their devoted, singular repetition and word play. Without complete historical and biographical information, the debate about who exactly Qadir is will persist, but the love Kurdi demonstrates in these poems brings a new dimension to how we understand the relationships men sustained during this time period. Whether Kurdi’s love for Qadir was ever sexual, it was certainly intimate, offering a counterpoint to the grand adoration of Sheikh Raza’s poems.

Other poems contain unambiguously homoerotic content. Gelder states, “... homosexuality is an extremely common topic of *hijā’* since Abbasid times” (11). In *hejū*, women “are reduced to [...] holes to be filled or violated and wombs to be impregnated” and these holes are “inferior to those of men and male adolescents” (Sprachman xxxviii). Inferior or superior, everyone is reduced to their entrances. These poems follow a “hierarchy of orifices, the anus of a pathic boy (catamite = *gholam*; *amrad*) is preferred

to a woman's anus, which, in turn, is superior to her vagina" (Sprachman, xxxviii). Suzani of Samarkand writes, "No pomegranate-blossom is ruddier than the anus;/No bush is thornier than the cunt" (Sprachman, xxxviii). With the clear hierarchy in the background, the poets can play with power and insult. "Being the active partner is a reason for boastful poetry," but the active partner in boasting implicates himself in homoerotic activity; one friend can insult another in correspondence, remarking what healthy birthing hips his friend has, how easy it would be for a virile man like himself to impregnate his friend, but how unsatisfying that coupling would be (Lagrange 176). Just the act of being "attacked by a famous poet" could "delight" someone, encompassing them as it would in the moment of fame and recognition (Gelder 11). No matter how bald the homoeroticism is, however, the purpose of that content could be manifold.

To a contemporary western reader, there is no question that, for instance, Sheikh Raza's "[Last night, for a vital expulsion]" is homoerotic. The male narrator—let us remember not to perpetrate the autobiographical fallacy and assume that the narrator is the poet—describes an encounter in the bathhouse:

Last night, for a vital expulsion, I visited the Ghafoor Bathhouse.  
A smooth-faced boy stood there, ass and calves of crystal.  
Instantly, as if an engineer, my eyes measured him  
from the crown of his head to the tips of his toes.  
Like a wolf salivates over the fat-tailed sheep, desire-hungry,  
I grabbed an ass cheek with my eyes, I held him in my mind.  
So, the curtain, barrier to longing, blazed and tore.  
I sprang, as if mad, to follow him to his room. (Lines 1-8)

The narrative arc is clear: a man meets a man in a bathhouse, feels attraction to him, and follows him home. That "vital expulsion" could euphemistically reference the need for the toilet in the night, but could also imply ejaculation. That first line could mean the narrator knows that if he wants to meet a man, he might be well-served to visit the bathhouse. Whatever the "expulsion" is, the narrator's designs are obviously sexual as he follows the "smooth-faced boy" home. "We understood each other," the narrator says, "the chance the toilet gave. / I pounded, I gave and I took, until I put poison in him" (lines 11-12).

The narrative seems straightforward—a story of an older man's sexual conquest of a younger man. As strong as that possibility presents itself, there is another of equal weight. Sheikh Raza could mean this as a backhanded, humorous curse against the

people of Sna, also known as Sanandaj, in Iran. In the fifth and final couplets, Sheikh Raza calls out Sna, the city that was a seat of the Aradalans, rivals to the Babans who Sheikh Raza supported. The narrator and the boy have presumably reached the privacy of the boy's room. At this point, the boy says, "I'm from Sna and beloved" (line 9). It is only at that point, when the narrator knows that he is about to penetrate a beloved citizen of Sanandaj, that the narrator achieves erection, "[I]t rose, constant, as a colossal column<sup>35</sup>" (line 10). The insult, if we presume some narrator-poet conflation: men from Sna are women for men of Shahrazur, the Ardalans are women compared to the Babans. In the final couplet, Sheikh Raza praises the leader and descendants of the town, praying that they be always "plentiful and protected" (line 14). This line has ironic potential. Is it an honest good wish the poet harbors for the town that could produce such a succulent sexual partner? Or is it a double-tongued insult to the town that could produce such young men, willing to submit sexually to the real men of Shahrazur?

Another poem with many possible interpretations is Sheikh Raza's "[The day of Sunday]." As mentioned in the methodology, one of the intricacies of studying Kurdish poetry is understanding the materiality of the poems: how the poems have existed orally and textually, how the paper record of the poems was created and has endured over time. "[The day of Sunday]" is a perfect example of how the preservation of Kurdish poems affects how we can read them. The poem itself exists in three iterations. The first includes only the account of the seduction and following consequences. The second includes the seduction, the immediate consequences, and a panegyric for Ahmad Pasha Baban, a regional ruler who, the implication is, procures the money the narrator needs to pay a prostitute of whose services he has availed himself. The panegyric exists on its own, as well, creating three distinct poems—all of which have meaning unto themselves. Throughout this analysis, we will rely on the most expansive version of the poem, the manuscript that includes both the poet's account of the seduction and the poet's gratitude for the money Ahmad Pasha Baban provided to settle the poet's urgent debt.

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<sup>35</sup> Colossal column: this phrase originates from "Landahoor's Spear," Landahoor is a character in Persian epics or folktales known for his size, spear, and prowess.

The narrator relates the tale simply to begin. It is Sunday. He is chasing after a Bulgarian boy: “Boy, what a boy: his lips crimson as vibrant tulips. / Boy, what a boy: his eyes starlings, narcissus in full bloom” (lines 2-4). The narrator, overcome by the boy’s beauty and the desire the boy inspires, begins to switch from high poetic diction to low and back,

He had hefty, blushing cheeks,  
silky, delicate, fragile as hand-pressed gold.  
Pulvinate, infundibular, on axis, white and soft and split  
like packed snow cut by a saw<sup>36</sup>.

When I squinted at his cheek, his hips,  
my eyes fled into my head like a rabid dog’s. (Lines 7-12)

Finally, the narrator confronts the boy: “I grasped at his threads, saying, “Have mercy, my diamond” (line 13). The narrator gushes his praise, telling the boy his eyes are “black magic,” (line 15) “gazelles that hunt lions” (line 18), but the boy brushes him off. The narrator’s voice gives way to the boy’s. “Haji Baba,” the boy says, using two respectful forms of address, which in combination indicate that the boy is impishly insulting the narrator’s age. “Haji Baba,” the boy says, “be on your way. Don’t look at me. / There’s nothing in that belt<sup>37</sup>. Get a job” (lines 20-21). You are old and broke, the boy says, step off. But the narrator is not dissuaded. He continues making his case, but, the narrator tells us, “The point is: I lied. I had him spellbound. / He fell in behind me pitiful as a sheep trailing a wolf” (lines 27-28). The narrator brags: poor as he may be, his words make him rich, however temporarily. The narrator lets the reader know: he has no plan of paying this boy for his favors.

The narrator relates the sexual act briefly:

Summary is sweet speech: I took him to my humble house.  
I grabbed him and laid him down and pushed past and had four balls.  
I didn’t give him one moment that night til dawn.

My good works, I estimate, surpassed a thousand. (Lines 29-32)

But, “come morning, when the heavens hung so low they held the ocean,” the narrator’s reverie is broken (line 33). The boy, realizing the narrator will not pay him, becomes

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<sup>36</sup> Packed snow: references a common practice of the day of cutting packed snow and ice into blocks for air conditioning and food storage.

<sup>37</sup> Belt: in traditional Kurdish clothing, the man wears a sash, wrapped around his waist many times, often in a knotted pattern. This sash was traditionally a place for men to store money or other small valuables.

quite violent. The narrator, sounding almost pitiful in the face of the boy's onslaught, says, "his nails snag[ed] me like thorns. / With falcon's talons, he grabbed and held tight to my collar. / He began to tremble and groan and shout and shout" (lines 34-36). At the noise, police and neighbors descend. They ask the man what has happened. The man, counting on the boy's shame, plays the fool, saying, "Ask this Bulgarian boy what he wants / that he is thundering like clouds in spring" (lines 36-37). The boy, absent the shame the man had counted on to silence him, announces to the assembled townspeople, "He fucked me / and didn't pay up. Is this how the powerful honor the law" (lines 38-39)? The sin, the townspeople decide, is not with the boy for soliciting sex, but with the man who took the boy to bed and now refuses to pay. The townspeople scold the man roundly, even telling him he should have paid in advance. They give him three days to find the money and pay up or, they say, they will put him to death. For two days, the narrator wanders around "disheveled, in disarray" (line 44) when he realizes he can write to the "wali<sup>38</sup> of Grace," "Hazrat<sup>39</sup> Ahmad Pasha<sup>40</sup>" to beg for the money (lines 45-46). From here, the poem enters the familiar territory of the panegyric, calling Ahmad Pasha's palm "a wellspring of gold, a source of pearls and ingots, / an ocean without coast line or shore" (lines 50-51), declaring that "[m]unificence and generosity are his habit, as Qani'<sup>41</sup> says" (line 52). The reader is left to imagine that the panegyric worked, that the narrator received the money, that the boy was paid.

The poem is remarkable in itself and only becomes more so with added context. Two straightforward interpretations of this poem: (1) it describes a fictional homosexual encounter that satirizes the idea of virtue by finding the prostitute the upright figure, (2) it relates an actual homosexual encounter in which a high-spirited narrator sees the humor and irony in his own humiliation and failures. Other scholars, however, contend this is Sheikh Raza's extended critique of the posture that Kurds maintained toward foreigners in their own lands; this idea coming principally from the fact that though the

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<sup>38</sup> Wali: a political designation in the Ottoman Empire meaning "governor."

<sup>39</sup> Hazrat: a titled meaning "Honored," "Highness," and "Presence."

<sup>40</sup> Ahmad Pasha: the last of the independent Kurdish princes whose rule ended in 1847.

<sup>41</sup> Qa'ani: a famous Persian poet born in 1222.

prostitute is given the epithet of “the Bulgarian boy,” it is the corrupt man who the boy and the townspeople declare “foreign.” Still other scholars write that this is Sheikh Raza flexing his muscles as a Kurdish poet and rewriting a popular Persian tale of similar structure. The reality is that the poem could be any one of these things—and any number of combinations between them.

As often as Sheikh Raza celebrated or delighted in the homoerotic encounter, he also saw the homoerotic as a source of insult, a tendency to slur. In “[Hitting, slapping, punching],” he calls Hafiz Efendi “ass-partial” (line 2). He claims Hafiz is “such a sodomite that always, like the Baghdad Bridge, / Water runs beneath him and people fill his back<sup>42</sup>” (lines 3-4). He curses those who pushed and slapped and hit him, pressuring him into the same house as Hafiz and his “whore-wife” (lines 1-2). He concludes, “If this is being a Muslim, / The right answer is Judaism or Zoroastrianism” (lines 5-6). Here, Sheikh Raza wields homosexual activity not for humor, but offense. Taking Hafiz Efendi’s “ass-partial” behavior as representative of Muslims, Sheikh Raza contemplates his options, concluding that conversion might be best. The stance the poet takes in this poem is nearly humorless, save the sardonic edge to the last line, where the attitude of the poet in “[Last night]” or “[Sunday]” was almost entirely entertaining.

Sheikh Raza sustains a similar posture in “[I’m not an alcoholic].” The eventual target of this poem is a “servant of the prayer mat,” a man who would tend to a mosque’s objects of worship, keeping everything clean and ready for the congregation to assemble. We do not know whether this poem is mean as an insult to the position or a particular person who held the position. Like “[Last night]” and “[Sunday],” this poem uses the first-person pronoun and implicates the poet in its homoerotic activity.

The poet opens the poem by saying, “I’m not an alcoholic that you should bring me wine. / I worship the smooth. Bring a smooth-faced boy” (lines 1-2). From here, the narrator goes on to specify exactly which kind of smooth-faced boy he would prefer: “I don’t take much pleasure from a kid who gives up his ass,” so, the narrator continues,

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<sup>42</sup> These lines are a close paraphrase of Sa’di Shirazi’s lines in the third chapter of *Gulistan*, “For how long will he have, like the Baghdad Bridge, / Water underneath and people on his back?”

“If there’s one kid who hasn’t been fucked, bring him” (lines 3-4). The narrator quickly corrects himself, “No, no, I’m wrong,” only as a ploy to insult the city he is addressing, “There isn’t a kid un-fucked in this town / to be found” (lines 5-6). The narrator sighs and accepts the offering of “a child who’s given away his ass” (line 6). The narrator escalates: “Contentment cannot be made with a single, round ass. / By cable car [...] bring ass” (lines 7-8). And escalates further, “I have no patience to take his legs from his pants. / Tuck his hems in at the waist. Bring him ready” (lines 11-12). The narrator’s only desire, he confesses, is “to bank the fire of lust” (line 15). The poet concedes, if he cannot have a boy with a virgin ass, he will settle for anyone, “old or young, male or female,” (line 16). If no one else is available, after all the concessions the narrator has made, he will make do with the lowest of the low: “a feeble servant of the prayer mat” (line 20).

This poem, like Sheikh Raza’s curse of Hafiz Efendi, uses anal penetration as an insult to this “servant of the prayer mat.” Sheikh Raza lists the orifices in descending order of desire, perfectly echoing Sprachman’s ‘hierarchy of orifices:’ a virgin boy, an experienced boy, anyone else (male or female). As insulting as the penetration is for the “servant,” the narrator seems to be a character of strength—and this is common: to penetrate is to be strong, to be penetrated is to be weak. More, the narrator here clearly means, more than anything else, to put down the desirability of the “servant.” It is remarkable that the narrator openly espouses homoerotic tendencies, but he only does so as the build-up to the put-down in the final line: “the servant” would be the last person the narrator would ever use to slake his lust.

Sheikh Raza’s wide range of poems demonstrate that homoeroticism in the nineteenth century could be many things to one man: spiritual intimacy, intellectual and/or romantic intimacy, a sexual choice, a sexual identity, boast-worthy, hilarious, shameful, a weapon against other men. Sheikh Raza was married, with two wives by most historical accounts, so his relationship to these homoerotic tales is at best murky. We have no way of knowing if his marriages were emotionally and/or physically hollow, if boys were an option made appealing and acceptable by cultural mores at the time, or if men were his innate preference.

Even in the absence of biographical detail, we can note that the poet carries his sexuality, whatever it is, with confidence and fluidity. The poet played with his voice through these narrators, allowing the reader to implicate the poet by using the first-person pronoun. A less confident man would certainly have used any pronoun but “I,” giving himself more distance from the protagonist of the poem’s story. A man of less fluid sexuality, of more rigid heterosexuality, might have shied away from stories of such open homosexuality or at least sought to balance his collected works; as it is, Sheikh Raza never mentions the heterosexual sex act and only references female genitalia in order to impugn a man. Again, to give the counter-possibility: Sheikh Raza, in-step with the cultural norms of his time, would likely have been shocked to hear sex with boys described as “homosexual.” It is conceivable that these poems fit well within the accepted norms of male interaction in the nineteenth century and that the committing of these habits and conversations to paper was Sheikh Raza’s only scandal.

This scandal is specifically meaningful for a Kurd in the nineteenth century. As the Ottomans and Persians efface Kurdish government and circumscribe what Kurds can and cannot do in their own cities, their own land, the body becomes the last battle ground. Sheikh Raza’s ebullient use of the body in poetry demonstrates a personal, unique, and ungoverned relationship to the body. The immortalizing of that relationship in poems at the very least alerted his readers to the possibility. As a Kurdish university student said in a 2012 Translation Workshop, “He said what we cannot say.” He refused external governance. He crafted the poem as remembrance, the poem as rehearsal for truly independent life. His life and his poems were both a reaction against the rising imperial powers in his homeland and a vital example to the Kurdish people.

### *Kurdishness, Identity, and Nationalism*

As Hamdi says in “[So they know],” “the Kurds were “ancient and many,” “the eras [...] separated them” (line 3). “If the others hadn’t forbidden” the formation of Kurdish state, the poet continues, “this country / Would be independent, as Kurds still desire” (lines 31-32). In the absence of an independent Kurdish state, the Kurdish people’s relationship to themselves as a nation and their lands as a homeland evolves.

Precisely because the traditional modes of self-governance and independent citizenship dissipated in the nineteenth century, poets and their poems found new power among the public. Only in artistic expression, which until the twentieth century meant only in poems, could the Kurdish people see, understand, and discuss themselves as such. Only in poems could a Kurdish reader see his land as Kurdish homeland. The poems, then, became the nation's space to foment rebellion, advocate for or outright reclaim the land that had been lost to foreign powers. In poetry, land or independence can be taken simply with speech. The battle is begun or concluded without a single gun fired.

In "Summer," Piramerd says, "came to us like an oven's flame, / Pouring handfuls of smoke" across Kurdish lands (1-2). Plants and animals suffered, all beauty burned, smoke choked light. The poet mourns that this heat does not come from fires of love that should burn in the breasts of patriotic Kurds. Patriotism's fire, unlike earthly fire that desiccates the physical landscape, would have purified the internal landscape, purging people of their lesser impulses:

I wish I could name this flame love  
And that it had caught flame in the hearts of patriots.  
This elation would have beautified the heart  
And burned people's thornier desires. (Lines 9-12)

The poet prays to the "God of Life and Living," as he concludes the poem, to help the Kurdish people not "squander" available opportunities to support the cause of an independent nation. In the final couplet, Piramerd exhorts his readers to seize their independence in what ways they can: by, for instance, employing Kurdish workers and selling Kurdish products. The argument is clear: Kurds can create economies within economies to both seed and sustain the country they hope to see grow. Though independence might be a dream, Piramerd reminds his reader, each Kurd can reach for his or her sense of Kurdishness in his or her daily choices.

In "Nawroz," Piramerd extends this argument: he casts death for one's country as both noble and inevitable. Young patriots merge with their landscape in a bloody, beautiful, and immortal union. "The pale flower of new spring," Piramerd writes, "was only the blood of youth" (line 4). "Here," Piramerd explains of Kurdistan, "the sun rises from the state's high mountain. / It's the blood of martyrs shining in the twilight" (lines 9-10). In a description that is both historically nostalgic and fervently nationalistic,

Piramerd tells his readers that Kurdish “youth [go] lovingly toward old death” and “a girl’s breast is a battle shield” (lines 8 and 12). As an act of writing, and re-writing, even rescuing his history, Piramerd concludes the poem by contending, “There’s no need to moan and weep for our homeland’s martyrs. / They don’t die. They live in the hearts of the nation” (lines 13-14).

Hamdi, decades later, reinforces the internal ability each Kurd has to fight for Kurdishness. He begins “[So they know]” by asserting “So they know how loyal a Kurd is to his nation / The Kurd must define his own origins” (lines 1-2). He mourns that “the Kurd is jinxed, busy with misery and strategy” (line 22), but he reminds his people, “History, generally, proves: Kurds are resilient” (line 12). He reminds his readers, Kurds “spend courage to buy self-worth” (line 11) and that in the Kurdish “language, ‘birth’ meant ‘brave man’” (line 5). He resolves “in bravery, the Kurd is leader and sovereign” (line 8). Hamdi does not stop there. In praising Kurds, he states, “Even the lowest among Kurds eats excellence” (line 15). Finally, he maintains, “The land of Kurdistan is the place of perfect people” (line 29). Other peoples have their problems, the “Muslim clergy are bigoted” (line 27), but the Kurd “busies himself with repentance, devotion, and prayer” (line 28). Even when a Kurd falters, “drunk on drunkenness, pride’s wine or courage,” the “Kurd is wise and sober” (lines 33-34). That, Hamdi concludes, “is in his nature” (line 34). Hamdi clearly intends to strengthen the hearts of his Kurdish readers, to encourage the individual Kurd’s sense of pride and inviolable Kurdishness. “Examine each individual,” he invites his readers, “he is a free Kurd” (line 18). The world may not agree, but what does the world’s disagreement matter? The individual Kurd, within himself, makes the Kurdish nation each time he commits to it in his mind.

In “[Oh, land],” Hamdi defines his origins, as he compels Kurds to do in the poem above. Throughout the poem, Hamdi speaks to his land, to Kurdistan. The land is real, though the country is more idea than manifestation. Hamdi acknowledges that others objectify and covet the land—“the Turks and Persians long for you, Kurdistan” (line 1)—but spends the space of the poem delineating his personal relationship to what others see only as possession.

I speak of your fruit and my pen fruits.

My poems are the nation's, the heart's, your ecstasy's.  
So I don't step on you with a single foot, my thoughts  
Will walk your lands or on my head, I'll leave you. (Lines 15-18)

The intimate respect in these lines is palpable. The land is Hamdi's origin, the origin of any creation he manages. His fruits are the land's, his poems are the nation's. He cannot bear the disrespect that stepping on the land might imply, so he will traverse the land in his mind. If he fails and puts himself above his land, he will leave the land he loves so dearly, he swears, "on his head" (line 18). This land, Hamdi continues, is the Kurd's only home: "The plains and mountains and sky of your lands reveal / The Kurds' house: yard, wall, and rooftop" (lines 25-26). And this land supports the Kurd in his bid for independence: "The poems' cursive lines, the high noses of the mountains, / All are ferociously for independence, ready at your command" (lines 30-31). The Kurdish lands stand beside the Kurdish people: the land protects its people as its people fight for the land. The Kurd and his land are allies in the struggle toward independence.

In a taghmis on Hamdi's "[Oh, land]," Qani' celebrates the commonality they share: their love of the land. He revels in that love and in sharing it with a fellow Kurdish poet he elevates, just by using this poetic form. Speaking to his own nation, Qani' writes, "truth's light shines in you" (line 31). "[L]ike Mount Sinai," but more so, the poet says, "You have a thousand Moses, each a river of light" (lines 31-32). Qani' blends his voice with Hamdi's as he speaks to his homeland as one might a lover:

If I imagine you, sorrow surges from my heart.  
If I call your name, my mouth will flow with sweet nectar.  
If I look across your plains, they heal the wounded liver.  
"I speak of your fruit and my pen fruits.  
My poems are the nation's, the heart's, your ecstasy's." (Lines 36-40)

And, two stanzas later,

You mountains are head-to-toe red with flowering pomegranate.  
Your valleys and plains and woods run with pure water.  
The only work of nightingales like me is to moan for the rose.  
"The plains and mountains and sky of your lands reveal  
The Kurds' house: yard, wall, and rooftop." (Lines 46-50)

But Qani' strives to intensify Hamdi's more gentle expression. He creates a tonal shift between his writing and Hamdi's, which he then uses to demonstrate how he thinks national feeling should evolve: from love into action. Where Hamdi worries "the Turks and Persians long for you, Kurdistan," (line 1) Qani' writes, "The blood of your old

victims paints your doorways” (line 2). In the thirteenth stanza, Qani’ quotes Hamdi’s description, “The poems’ cursive lines, the high noses of the mountains, / All are ferociously for independence, ready at your command” (lines 69-70). But where Hamdi describes, Qani’ commands. In the same stanza as the “high noses of the mountains,” Qani’ writes: “Kurds, free from sorrow rise to your feet. Face joy and mind./ Your seedling has grown and fruited like the orchard’s trees. / Don’t sit with your hands on your knees, sighing heavily” (lines 66-68). The commands of Qani’ imbue Hamdi’s description with urgency and clear calls to action.

This more militarized nationalism characterizes Qani’s work and one major shift between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In his poem “In Prison,” Qani’ does not have Hamdi’s voice to temper him. More, incarceration, torture and the threat of death have radicalized him. Believing “this prison’s corner” to be his “life’s last home,” he rails against his jailers:

The enemy thinks imprisonment will strike me dumb, but  
Tell him: this prison’s corner is my education.  
In prison, my thoughts of freedom expand.  
He hoped prison would—but I throw mud at his head.  
Capturing, beating, and killing are all freedom’s agents.  
The bomb, gun, and handcuff are my fairy tales.  
I wait for a revolution that saves the world.  
I want a nation with that purpose, with lion-like action.  
I rebel through writing and thought. (Lines 7-15)

Poetry, once a tool of Kurdish governance, has become a vehicle for the Kurdish rebellion. Qani’ cannot support his princes; he must energize his readers for the revolution. “If I don’t live free,” the poet states, “death is a gift for my body” (line 17). In the world Qani’ knew, prison was the only place Qani’ could live free—and “damn those who serve the foreigners” (line 20).

“Annihilate the Enemy,” another poem of Qani’, equates the rising up of the Kurdish laboring classes (the farmer, the worker) with the awakening and success of Kurdish nationalist power. The reader recognizes the insistent voice as Qani’ urges his readers:

The *begs*, capitalists, *khans*, and princes  
Tie them together. Pull them toward nothingness.  
When a country survives, its men and women,  
old and young, shoulder to shoulder, attempt

To revive knowledge so that they may  
Share in the evolution of the universe. (Lines 35-40)  
Only as “the proletarian children of Kurds / [...] become the leaders in Kurdistan’s lands”  
can the Kurdish people realize the dream of their own nation (line 41). Explicitly, Qani’  
decries the influence of foreign powers: “You must choose your destiny yourself. / You  
must not wait for Iran<sup>43</sup> to do it for you” (lines 45-46). This poem demonstrates clearly  
how nationalist consciousness and communist sentiment took hold in the early decades  
of twentieth century Kurdish poetry. What began in the nineteenth century as the  
articulation of and exultation in Kurdish identity becomes institutionalized in the  
twentieth as nationalism and communism.

Qani’ was born in the last years of the nineteenth century, just a handful of years  
before the Abdulla Goran, commonly agreed by Kurds to be the father of modernity in  
Kurdish poetry. And his age shows. In contrast to poets situated squarely in the  
nineteenth century, Qani’ is remarkably angry. His poetry maintains a consistent edge of  
militarism. Qani’ and poets contemporary to him do not participate in the definition of the  
Kurdish identity as the Kurdish people respond to new exile, but rather in the  
politicization of statelessness. As the century progresses, the poets discuss less the  
formation of the Kurdish identity and more the formation of the Kurdish state, the  
conversation turns away from exile and toward the emerging sense of statelessness.

The power of a poem to make a state, however, finds its limits at the margins of  
the page and the mind. Whatever ownership can be crafted in a poem extends only to  
those territories. In some ways, the power of that ownership is bolstered by the counter-  
claims of the physical world made outside the page and the mind. As the sense of  
patriotism and nationalism take hold in Kurdish poetry, a related phenomenon arises:  
animals, constantly present in Kurdish poetry as possessions, measures of wealth,  
beasts to praise or blame for their behavior, attain a voice.

### *Voice, The Poet, The Animal*

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<sup>43</sup> Iran: the original poem references a specific village in Iran—Chahhondoran.

Even today, flocks of sheep and goats graze beside Sulaimani's eight-lane highways. Shepherds on their cell phones interrupt traffic to walk their animals from the shoulder to the median, where the grass is greener. The nomadic life of those who raised herd animals defined nineteenth-century Kurdistan where the two main measures of wealth and power were the number of animals you owned and the number of warriors you could summon in a crisis. These poems in which poets turn their voices over to animals, both wild and domestic, may have arisen from the poets' frustration that society depended on animals it often treated poorly.

The didactic element of these poems, though, is tempered by the poet taking on the voice of the animal, asking the animal to speak for himself—often at the poet's expense. The poet is purposely creating a voice where there was not one. It is possible that Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century, exiled and refused representation in the world's grinding diplomatic engine, saw animals as a visceral symbol for themselves. Animals, domestic and wild, are constantly subject to the whims, tantrums, desires, needs, and sport of man. Man, despite being an animal himself, does not consider either domestic or wild animals his equal, with distinct desires and needs. Even a benign owner is an owner. The social and legal development of an idea such as animal rights rests outside the scope of this dissertation; still, it is critical to note that as the nineteenth-century Kurdish poets look toward the voices of animals as extended metaphors, conceits, it is possible they are demonstrating the sort of proto-awareness required for the social and legal movements that become the contemporary struggle for animal rights. Further, as the nineteenth century gives way to the twentieth, populations like the Kurds, suborned to empirical governance, which became colonial rule, might have been seeking any way, even metaphorical, of giving the subaltern a way to speak.

Kurds of the nineteenth century may have felt a particular connection to this plight: as the Ardalans and Babans fell, the Ottoman, Persian, and Arab empires used Kurdish territory as buffer lands, manipulating Kurdish tribes into proxy battles, and promising support for independence that never materialized. Nali's poem, the most gentle of the four presented below, is also the century's earliest. Zahawi, Piramerd, and Qani' continue his early-century reflections, with intensifying frustration. The poems of Qani', the most violent of the four presented, are the centuries' latest. If the affinity that

Kurdish poets found with animals originated even in part with the sense of voicelessness, it would follow that the course of events over the century would only intensify, and perhaps embitter, that affinity.

It is this intentional giving voice to the animals, specifically giving over the poet's voice to the animals, that makes this body of literature a cousin to bestiary literature and not a bestiary itself. While the Islamic tradition of bestiary is rich, including seminal texts such as the ninth-century Arabic writer al-Jahiz's *The Book of Animals*, it is to the twelfth-century Persian writer Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* that these Kurdish poems of the nineteenth century bear closest resemblance. In Attar's *Conference*, each bird, able to take on a multiplicity of metaphorical meanings, speaks for itself and it is their speech and action that drive the narrative forward. In Attar's work, the birds' speech and agency, borne out through the journey they undertake, could be read as a metaphor for human speech, for various moral lessons imperative to Islam and Sufism in particular. The difference, slight, but pronounced, between Attar's project and the majority of these nineteenth-century Kurdish poems is that the animals of nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry speak out not on the moral imperatives of Islam or Sufism, but against human cruelty, the abuses of power present in human's domestic relationships with animals, and the terrifying imbalance of violence for which evolving technology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries allowed. These poets, these humans become animals, and they do so to criticize their fellow human beings, even to criticize themselves. The concerns of animals within nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry are, ironically, human.

Sheikh Raza, worth mentioning here for all his discussion of animals, rarely turns over his own poetic voice to animals. Alone among his nineteenth-century Kurdish poetic peers, animals for Sheikh Raza remain a source of wealth, status, or function. His writing, then, even in its entertaining and bawdy tone, is by far the closest to the Arabic bestiary literature of al-Jahiz. Still, his open poetic discussion of animals is remarkable for its banality; freed from the confines of royal edict, which drove the praise-and-blame style of court poetry, nineteenth-century Kurdish poets delighted in bringing all manner of "banal" and "unpoetic" subject matter to poetry. Sheikh Raza praised not a prince, but a beautiful donkey, cursing not a mortal enemy, but a bony and

emaciated horse. Sheikh Raza wrote friends beseeching them to send sheep or a fighting cock, describing the animals he hoped to receive, if God would move his friends to be generous. The poems below, other than perhaps Nali's "[I had a donkey]," which has some overlap in praising the animal before the animal speaks, are substantively different than Sheikh Raza's. The poems below do not praise or blame but consider the wider ideas of man and "beast," and how what we see as a beast may be more soulful than we understand: an idea Kurds of the nineteenth century would have held dear given their second-class political status in the empires that governed their lands.

"I had a donkey of such stature," Nali, one of the most important Kurdish poets across the centuries, a poet commonly referred to as one of the three pillars of the Babans, writes (line 1). "His mind is a wine glass full to spilling over" (line 5), the poet continues before bursting into rhapsodic terms:

Sweetly-saddled, thin-waisted, monkey-footed,  
Round-hoofed, hinny-tailed, enduring, sweating,  
Blue and turning blue like fresh cinder, and dusted.  
Glint and glinting like the holy, without a speck of dandruff,  
Hooves of jade lost in feathered wool

Eyes like rubies or two lanterns, gleaming into the night. (Lines 7-12)

A poet traditionally took this stance of high praise toward his prince or his God. Nali assumes this attitude toward his beast of burden. A mind like a wineglass full to overflowing, glinting like the holy, eyes like lanterns that light the night—it is no insult to Nali when the animal speaks, "in his own tongue," and says, "Oh, Nali, / We're both animals, you short-eared and I long-eared" (lines 21-22). Nali inverts the reader's expectations by not only praising a beast, but by reveling in the beast's assumption of equality. Because the reader knows this is a poem, the reader knows the donkey cannot say anything the poet does not allow. Nali has invited the donkey to raise himself up or take man down a notch.

Like Nali, Jamil al-Zahawi sees rationality in animals. In "Between the Hunter and Lion," Zahawi turns his gaze away from domesticated animals, to the wild. While hunting, a man and a lion meet. Osama, who begins their conversation as aggrieved ends as the aggressor. The lion, perceived by Osama as a monster, proves his wisdom. "Lion," Osama says, "tell me why you are so fond of killing / the herdsman and his cows as they nurse" (lines 5-6). The lion responds calmly, "Starvation tempts me to kill. / Ask

someone amused by bloodshed” (lines 7-8). A few lines later, the lion adds, “I may be compelled to kill in defense, / But there is no shame in the compulsory. / Killing carries life for me” (lines 11-13). The lion praises man’s might, saying, “The earth was ours before you descended / From monkeys” (lines 49-50). And yet, might seems a corruptive force. The lion continues,

Yes, I hurt when hungry, but            Do no harm when satiated.  
I do not kill for love of its beauty.    I kill in need, not by provocation.”  
(Lines 53-56)

The lion continues, “My eyes roam among the living. / I see nothing before me except evil” (lines 67-68). Man, the lion concludes, makes all life a battlefield, all strength a threat.

Qani’ takes a different approach. The animals of his poems are rational, but angry. Having worked in service of men who praise, but abuse them, when Qani’s animals get to talk, they let loose. Qani’ avoids placing the blame on others, putting himself into the narrative as the abuser. He begins one poem in his own voice, praising his donkey in registers formerly reserved for princes or prophets,

I had a donkey. What donkey? Like wind and storm.  
I had a donkey. What donkey? This era’s strongest porter.  
I had a donkey. What donkey? Like a car.  
I had a donkey. What donkey? Like a lion on the battlefield.  
He wasn’t Noah’s donkey, but that was his grandsire.

The donkeys of Jesus were his uncles and nephews. (Lines 1-6)  
But all this praise is only prelude. Qani’ needs the donkey, now that it is winter, to haul kindling. The donkey is not deceived, even for a moment. “Qani’!,” the donkey says, “For shame, where are your manners? / A man of conscience must have manners” (lines 21-22). The donkey goes on to reveal how Qani’ has mistreated him,

I swear by iron you failed to have me shod.  
I swear by barley that I haven’t chewed.  
I swear by the bite I have never taken,  
By the blacksmith’s hammer as it strikes. (Lines 29-32)

Having so poorly cared for him, the donkey says, Qani’ can expect “nothing but a whinny” from now on, even if Qani’ “shatters [his] bones with a stick” (lines 33-34). The donkey is done. One cannot ask where one has not given.

Qani’ takes the same idea further in his poem “With the Preening Staghound.” Again, the poet splits his poem between two voices: his own and his dog’s. In the first

section, the poet attempts to persuade his dog, old as he is, out to hunt. He switches from reason to bribery to flattery. Nothing works. The staghound responds with insults, “Qani’, no one knows you / better than I. You are always hungry” (lines 21-22). The staghound mourns his ill-luck of owner, a poet who, in this new age of exile, could not hope to provide for him: “Poetry busies you and poetry is cursed. / The life of poets is hard” (lines 31-32). The poet is never satisfied and the poet’s hound is never fed. The dog has had enough. The staghound, himself near starvation, concludes, “Instead of a rabbit, I may need to hunt your dick” (line 36). This violent and, even by today’s standards, shocking statement harnesses the anger Qani’s animals seem to consistently feel. Improperly cared for, they cannot care for others.

Piramerd, a mid-century poet and the founder of the first Kurdish literary magazine, “Life,” blends all these approaches together in his poem, “Nation.” The speaker of this poem is a fish. He remembers Jonah, the man he calls his prophet, angrily. Here is a holy man who spent weeks in the belly of a whale, his only company fish, and yet he did not speak for us among men. Instead, the fish says, we are prey. People filet us for the skillet and say, “What lean meat” (line 10)! The fish wonders why people do not know he has a soul? Why people do not know his soul is sweet. Similar to Qani’s animals, Piramerd’s fish cannot stand the abuse humans visit on him and his people. We both hold souls, Piramerd’s fish says, in an echo of Nali’s donkey, so why does one of us live in service of the other?

Piramerd’s fish misses the “old days,” when “only netting trapped us” (line 23). Now, the fish says, they use bombs and “we float to the surface” (line 26). The fish rages against mankind, “In their cravings and commotion, / Azrael remains merciful to them: / He gives them graves” even though they created the very bombs with which they kill each other (lines 27-29). The implication is clear: the angel of death is merciful to the perpetrators and merciless to the victims. Men get graves. Fish get the plate, the trash heap. “By God,” the fish swears, “you are only human in name, / Unconcerned with me and people like me” (lines 35-36). As Zahawi’s lion, Piramerd’s fish uses the word “human” against humanity. Human beings, the fish declares, are the least humane animals.

Kurds, disenfranchised within their own lands, see a connection with animals who can live, domesticated—enslaved—and exiled—negated—within land they have peacefully inhabited for generations. The tools of warfare that arrive with modernity only accentuate the disparity between the oppressor and the oppressed. As Kurdish poets look at the Ottomans, the Persians, even some of their fellow Kurds, they struggle to see the humanity each individual should possess. As they struggle with ideas of man and beast, they articulate the Kurdish identity in new terms and construct a voice where there was none.

These poems arise from misery and are fundamentally inventive. They are one example of what this chapter set out to show: that Kurds transform the exile the nineteenth century shoves upon them into a moment of artistic satisfaction and inventive articulation. This is not resolution. The Sufi binaries never do resolve. Ache for the beloved may also be one manifestation of the beloved's presence, a manifestation that remains ache. One can die before one dies, but that first death—of ego, into God—one must die many times before the second. The point is, these poets affirm by writing, to keep reimagining the ache, to keep on dying, until the ache yielded relief and death ushered in life. The poems of this dissertation, in all their difference, show individuals who could transform what happened around them and to them into what came from them and could cause transformation in others: their readers.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I set out to understand the origins of the diversity, individualism, and creativity I found as I translated nineteenth century Sorani Kurdish poetry. The variety and proliferation of poetic experiments across the nineteenth century intrigued me. Even more surprising was that these poets, often diametrically opposed to each other in intellectual or religious terms, were in constant poetic conversation with one another. I wondered what prompted and sustained these extensive poetic and curse correspondences. How did poets like Mahwi, Sheikh Raza, and Jamil al-Zahawi come from the same ten-year time period? And why would poets dedicate themselves to correspondences with poets whose impulses could only bedevil them? Looking up from the poems to their landscape, I began to piece together the socio-political circumstances these poets survived. What had such disparate poets shared? Religious and literary education, perhaps? How did the upheaval of the time contribute to the cohesion of these poets?

Upheaval was, indeed, the period's hallmark. The Ottoman and Persian empires, with Kurdistan as the borderland, remained in conflict. Both empires struggled to respond to foreign interest and influence, resulting for the Ottoman empire in the implementation and reversal of the Tanzimat, extensive policy reform that mandated the removal of Kurdish princes and the dismantling of the Kurdish principalities. The Qajars made no significant attempt to incorporate European-style governance, but still worked steadily to undermine the Ardalans who had been relatively reliable Kurdish allies to them and the Safavids before them. The Babans, inspired by the Ardalans' long-time success in establishing Gorani as a literary language, instantiated their own patronage system, encouraging Sorani and the poets who wrote in Sorani. Within a handful of decades of the Babans' launch of the project to elevate Sorani as a language of letters, after centuries of governance, both the Ardalans and Baban principalities fell. How did Kurds respond to living as exiles within their own ancestral lands and to the evaporation of a Kurdish patronage system? How did Kurdish poets move forward from this moment? Ottomans implemented direct rule in Sulaimani, the seat of Baban authority. Both Ottomans and Persian attempts at direct control coincided with suspicion of and

outright aggression at times toward the Kurdish identity: how did Kurdish poets tend to, safeguard, and build their concepts of Kurdishness during this time period? How did these poets harness the various fluencies they possessed to champion an embattled identity? And, amid the chaos, why did people turn to Islam, particularly Sufism in the form of the Qadiri and Naqshbandi Orders? Even more, how did the poets respond as, over the course of the century, the clergy gained political power and became more enmeshed with tribal leadership? As corruption within the orders became more frequent and what began as a revival became, for many disciples, a bitter disappointment?

The poets in this dissertation, an embryonic Kurdish ‘republic of letters,’ keenly mourning the loss of Kurdish government, were also impoverished. Maintained richly for centuries in first Persian and then Kurdish courts, poets could not get paid. The poets did not turn themselves over to the loss and confusion of this moment. Instead, perhaps drawing on their common education and training in Islam and Sufism, they lived only deeper in the loss, deeper and deeper until they could experience loss as gain.

They transformed what had begun as their prince’s pleasure into theirs. Though unwillingly, they had been unshackled from the propagandist purposes of court poetry. They renovated the courtly forms that served only the prince into intimate forms that served their own purposes, whether grandiose or mundane. They began to build each other up as heroes, the literary giants readers should revere—no one else would. They experimented with adoration in its many manifestations, transgressive and not. They made verse the way they explored, defined, asserted, and fought for their Kurdish identity absent the shelter of Baban patronage, under antagonistic Ottoman rule. Their voices expanded to include the voiceless, arguing for the rights of women, the rights of animals. Their exile, all the upheaval of the nineteenth century, arguably created the artistic freedom, however painful, they had. The abundant creativity and individuality I had seen as I translated these poets came from their remaking of exile as arrival.

Kurdish literary scholarship treats this time period and its poets, as I mentioned in the methodologies section, mostly individually. The schools that Kurdish scholars do discuss in Kurdish poetry are Romanticism, defined quite differently than European or American Romanticism, and Classical, the period preceding Romanticism. Romanticism, by traditional Kurdish definition, begins in the early twentieth century and

peaks from 1920-1930. What is “Classical,” however, could date from anytime in or before the nineteenth century. When an artistic period or school sprawls over such lengths of time, time that includes historical, political, economic, and religious shifts, it inevitably collapses whatever meaningful artistic evolutions and interactions occurred.

One Kurdish scholar, Khurshid, declares the second half of the nineteenth century “a standing river” “absent renewal” (74). The poets in the latter decades of the century, he says, only “ate the same food the poets before them served” (74). As the twentieth century dawned and “Kurds moved against feudalism,” Khurshid says, they were also hungry for newness. They found it in Turkish poetry, which found a strong advocate in Sheikh Nuri Sheikh Sali, influenced the early twentieth century Kurdish poets (68). Social consciousness, concerns about the working class, and agitation for the future of the Kurdish state surfaced as central in this poetic time period (78; 111). Formally, this group of poets broke with the classical meters and structures in favor of syllabic construction. This included a move away from forms like the ghazal that lent themselves to contemplation and lyricism in favor of more narrative progressions in single-subject poems (111). The preoccupation was primarily communication to a wide, working, nationalist public; in addition to forms and narratives, language simplified. Usage of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish decreases to increase accessibility and encourage the development and status of Kurdish. Kurdish becomes the only, not just the dominant, language of poetry. Traditional Kurdish literary scholars call this period Romanticism, which by their definitions reaches its peak between 1920-1930 with the poet Abdulla Goran as its paragon (68).

Khurshid’s assessment of Kurdish poetry in the latter half of the nineteenth century puzzles me. He does not define who he sees as the poets who prepared and served the food that the later poets only ate, which obscures who in his mind are the driving creative forces versus the tag-alongs in the nineteenth century. By the dates, Kurdi, Nali, and Salim—the only poets within Classical Kurdish poetry who receive a separate designator “The Three Pillars of the Babans”—dominate the first half of the century. All three are born around 1800 and stop writing by roughly mid-century. Haji Qadir Koye, though he represents different geographical territory than Kurdi, Nali, and Salim, could be considered a member of an “early century” group, but born around

1815, he writes until the close of the century, sometime in the 1890s. Though he is an early-century presence, he remains relevant and active until the mid- to late-century. Perhaps these are Khurshid's chefs.

Mahwi, Sheikh Raza Talabani, and Wafai, all born in the 1830s or 40s, cannot be considered anything other than strong mid-century poets. While they carry clear markers of the poets, Kurdish and Persian, who precede them, all succeed in fashioning innovations from the traditions they receive; none of them sink to imitation. In the 1860s and 70s, Piramerd, Jamil al-Zahawi, Nari, Hamdi, and Bekhod appear. Perhaps Khurshid and other Kurdish literary critics would classify their poetry as twentieth century given that all five of those poets live and write until the mid-twentieth century. But chronologically, they are solidly rooted in the last decades nineteenth century and, again, all demonstrate awareness of and yet transform the traditions they receive. The century closes with Qani', a poet who lives until 1975 and stands out as a point of transition between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets. Perhaps these are Khurshid's dinner guests.

Of all the mid- and late-century poets, even Mahwi and Nari, who write mostly in the devotional Sufi mode made arguably stagnantly familiar by centuries of Arabic and Persian poetry, advance invention in Kurdish poetry and remain startlingly fresh for contemporary readers of poetry throughout the world. Though this dissertation has made no arguments about new possible divisions or schools within Kurdish poetry of the nineteenth century, it has, I hope, prepared the ground for scholars to think more sensitively about all that happens across that vast designation of "Classical Kurdish Poetry."

Considering the poets of the latter half of the nineteenth century more deeply could, for instance, show the stirrings of modernity—including ideas as disparate and imperative as nationalism, what might be the first stirrings of animal rights, what might be early attempts at unloosing the subaltern's voice—begin far earlier than the opening decades of the twentieth century. Examining the nineteenth century more closely, potential schools of thought or poetry will arise. One could delineate poets by how the changes in Kurdish governance impacted them: some lived most of their lives in a Kurdish court, some have only vague childhood or inherited memories of a Kurdish

court, and some never knew that Kurdish court, but actively long for a Kurdish state. One could cluster poets according to their stance is toward the Sufi ideas of reality and metaphor, on the body and transgression. In doing so, one might find that while Sheikh Raza is more explicit than Nali, he is also far more apologetic for himself, almost schizophrenic in his switch between transgression and repentance. Nali spends little time in self-rebuke and lives more at the conflation of the divine and corporeal. Adjustments like this might help make sense of a poet so purely devotional as Mahwi born to the same time period as a poet so indiscreet as Sheikh Raza. One could narrow the approach to these poets and their poems from the yawning “Classical” in such productive ways. Ghaderi, too, has worked on periodization, summarizing several solutions Kurdish scholars have offered most recently and, in doing so, she demonstrates what remains to be done in Kurdish literature on classification and periodization, which will, given the nature of Kurdish identity and the competing external pressures on the concept itself, always require evaluation (*Challenges* 20-22). Just the simple act of breaking down the sprawling “Classical” could bring to the fore poets who are currently under-studied, refine our understanding of how poetry and its hypotheses evolve, and develop our ideas of how Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century act as the advance guard for the twentieth.

Also interesting to consider, looking beyond the bounds of this dissertation to what scholarship it may enable, are the comparative aspects that echo in the familiar term “Romanticism.” As Andrews and Kalpakli gently push against the accepted limits of Ottomanist scholarship to “suggest a framework (or a number of possible frameworks) in which early-modern and European literatures and their social contexts can be thought about and talked about together,” they intentionally encourage not just comparative, but “cooperative” studies (28). They consciously look not only eastward from Istanbul, to Arabic and Persian literatures—the traditional comparisons for Ottoman (and Kurdish) literature, but also westward, to Europe, to the “informative and interesting commonalities to social and intellectual life in the Mediterranean world that extend far into Europe and the Middle East and transcend perceived cultural and religious boundaries” (Andrews and Kalpakli 30). As I read the poems of this dissertation and pieced together the historical setting from which they emerged, I had the same impulse

as Andrews and Kalpakli: to look not only eastward, toward the known Arabic and Persian influences on these poets, but westward to understand why, at the same point in time, across physical distance, religious difference, in the absence of any contemporary translation, these nineteenth-century Kurdish poets, as individuals and as a community, bore such resemblance to their global contemporaries: poets like Walt Whitman, William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats and others of the Romantic generations between America and Europe.

Any kind of “cooperative” studies around nineteenth-century Kurdish poetry can get convoluted given the current periodization Kurdish literary scholars use: the term “Romantic” designates a school of Kurdish poets who lived during what Western literary scholars see as the advent of Modernity. More than a temporal coincidence, the Kurdish poets of Kurdish-defined “Romanticism” shared similar aesthetic aims with the western poets of Modernity in Europe and America. These terms and their usage become particularly confusing in any comparative work because so much of the “Classical” nineteenth century in Kurdish poetry resembles what Westerners call Romanticism.

That said, Kurdish literary critics are aware of and demonstrate varying understandings of European Romanticism. Some sources, like eleventh- and twelfth-grade literature textbooks used in public schools under the aegis the Kurdish Regional Government, offer surprisingly complete renditions of European Romanticism’s causes and characteristics. Other sources draw more partial pictures, such as Khurshid’s, in which a few of the causes and characteristics that a Western scholar like Marilyn Butler would identify, come to define the entire movement. For Khurshid, the defining characteristic of Western Romanticism is nostalgia (75). Without looking more fully at the Western definition of Romanticism, Khurshid misses critical points of comparison between Kurdish poetry and the European and American Romantics. The Kurdish poets who begin the twentieth century, Khurshid’s Romantics, bear little comparison with European and American Romantic poets. More detailed work on the nineteenth century Kurdish poets, working past the vague “Classical,” reveals rich comparative ground with European and American Romantics.

Dorothy Butler opens her book *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760-1830* with questions very similar to the central questions of this dissertation:

...no other period has yielded so many poets, novelists, essayists and critics of true importance and individuality, writers who are not followers of greater names no part of a school, but themselves distinctive voices. But why do they coincide? If they do not follow one another, what common factors caused them to develop so richly and variously at the same time? By what historical logic did Coleridge breathe the same air and read the same newspapers as Jane Austen? (Butler, 1)

As this dissertation does, Butler turns to history, documenting the “shockwaves” that hit Europe, including the turn toward charismatic practices of Christianity, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and constitute the central “tensions, conflicts, and signs of transition reflected in the arts” (Butler 128; 4).

Advancing technology constitutes one of these shockwaves. At the time, printing, among other types of artistic distribution, had developed such that books had become “commodities on an unprecedented scale,” even finding international distribution. This trend disrupted the model of the “rich patron.” Artists responded with “a new conception of a public” that was less personal, but much more global (Butler 30). Similarly, nineteenth century Kurdish poets experienced disruption of their patrons and the ensuing isolation, not from technological advances in printing, but from the feudal system’s collapse. Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century, too, had to redefine who “their public” was; European and American Romantics may have claimed the world as their new audience, but they lived within established nations. Kurds, under similar artistic pressures, but stateless, claimed Kurds. Printing technology in Europe, as the end of the feudal system in Kurdistan, was only one shockwave among so many. Butler asks, “Is the great literature of the Age of Revolution a literature, at the profoundest level, in reaction” (Butler 5)? The historical analysis that begins this dissertation parallels Butler’s, preparing readers to ask the same question.

The characteristics of European Romanticism that Butler provides could also be tracked through nineteenth century Kurdish poetry. Individuality and creativity define the time period. Butler writes, “A.O. Lovejoy, indeed, argued in the 1920’s that we should accept an almost infinite diversity as the leading principle of Romanticism,” a diversity of

individuals that can “seem mutually contradictory” (Butler 6). Almost a by-product of individuality is Romanticism’s “concern with the private and domestic” (Butler 37). During the nineteenth century, Kurdish poets evidence individuality and, in that extreme individuation, expand what poetry can address, including the Scientific Method, a much-needed fighting cock or fat-tailed sheep, even erectile dysfunction. The subject matter in Kurdish poetry becomes delightfully idiosyncratic.

Butler continues, “Romanticism is inchoate because it is not a single intellectual movement but a complex of responses” (Butler, 184). “For it is,” she states, “when all is said, a splendid and a splendidly varied body of literature. The pressure of ideas upon the entire social fabric made it that...” (Butler, 186). Butler’s appreciation for the challenging beauty of the European Romantic canon sheds new light on the Kurdish literary critic’s tendency to analyze Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century only unto themselves. Perhaps Kurdish literary criticism has consistently examined poets of the nineteenth century individually because the school itself is defined by individuality.

All these similarities beg the question: what, other than chance, caused European and American Romanticism to share so much with nineteenth century Kurdish poetry? None of the Western Romantics had been translated into Kurdish. Educated Kurds of the time period were often fluent in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, languages into which more Western literature had been translated. While this have afforded them better access to the world’s literature, it still cannot account for a nearly concurrent phenomenon. Translation cannot keep an instantaneous pace. Given translation’s delay, what common source or cause can we point to? The mystical Islamic poets that the Romantics and the nineteenth century Kurdish poets revered.

Goethe, known as the father of German Romanticism, which preceded and informed British, French, and eventually American Romanticism, wrote an entire book of original poetry, the *West-East Divan*, that is “full of more or less concealed literary allusions” (Goethe *Selected* xxxii). In his *Divan*, Goethe “adopts with sympathetic ease [...] an oriental style and setting particularly appropriate to the expression [...] of the dissolving boundary between earthly love and the love of God, as well as of the manifestation of the divine beauty in nature generally” (Goethe *Selected* xxxii). He divided his *Divan* into books with titles that display an intimate knowledge and love of

what Luke, his translator, calls “oriental” poetry: “Hafis Nameh,” or “The Book of Hafiz,” “Ushk Nameh,” or “The Book of Love,” “Suleika Nameh,” or “The Book of Zuleika,” and “Saki Nameh,” or “The Book of the Cupbearer” (Goethe *West-East* x). He knew the literary history. He could describe the political, religious history.

In an explanatory note at the back of the *Divan*, Goethe discusses “Firdusi” and the *Shah Nameh*, Nizami and the stories of “Mejnun and Laila,” of “Khusrau and Shirin.” “These materials and their treatment,” he said, “arouse an ideal longing. Nowhere do we find satisfaction. Grace is abundant, multiplicity infinite” (Goethe *West-East* 200). He knew “Jalaloddin Rumi,” Saadi, Hafiz, and Jami. He tells his readers that “the name Allah is exalted with ninety-nine qualities [and the] worshipper marvels and resignedly reassures himself” (Goethe *West-East* 201). Schwab writes,

One could not expect that Goethe would have been interested in Hindu matters to the point where they would vie with the Greek, nor that he would be the most steadfast of his countrymen toward them. And yet even Goethe, hesitating even in the *West-Ostliche Divan* between sensuality and profundity, transmitted and endorsed the very lessons of oriental wisdom that rejected and dissolved the limits of life. (208)

Where Luke and Schwab use the labels “oriental” and “Hindu,” I would discuss mystical Islamic poetry, but our differing terms describe the same phenomenon: Goethe, the father of European Romanticism, cherished the same Sufi poets as the nineteenth century Kurdish poets.

Across the Atlantic and ten years after Goethe’s death, Emerson, a leading figure in Transcendentalism, which “was on the whole, the American form of Romanticism” and “one of the mysticisms turned up by the wake of the German Romantics,” wrote a poem, titled “Saadi” and first published in *The Dial* (1842), in which the apparent hero is the historical Saadi (Schwab 200; 197). “In a journal entry of 1843,” however, Emerson wonders if “this poem [was] really about Saadi, or [...] about me” (Horton 1). Other poems of Emerson’s bore so much similarity to Emerson’s own translations of Hafiz that his editors did not actually consider them his poems (Yohannan 6). Not fluent in Persian, Emerson worked from German translations of Persian poetry, “though his command of the German language was imperfect,” translating “about 700 lines of Persian poetry” (Yohannan 3). Hafiz and Saadi “appear on Emerson’s 1841 reading list and frequently thereafter in his journals and notebooks” (Yohannan 2). Schwab notes that

Emerson's "attested reading between 1836 and 1861 includes English versions of Anquetil's *Zend Avesta*, the *Rig Veda*, the *Shah Namah*, and the Upanishads..." (Schwab 200). Trying to establish the importance of these poets on Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes counted the references, finding twenty-five to Hafiz and thirty to Saadi, "the former as often as Aristotle or Wordsworth, the latter as frequently as Montaigne" (Yohannan 2).

Looking to both Emerson and German Romantics, including, of course, Goethe, the young Walt Whitman took on their influences. Thoreau "had been struck by [‘the great oriental mysteries’ in Whitman’s work] as early as 1856; but when he remarked on it, Whitman reacted like a man who had never heard of such things" (Schwab 202). Whitman, who could artistically speaking be Sheikh Raza Talabani’s cousin, cultivated himself as a uniquely American voice and may have been rejecting even the idea of his writing in reference to or a product of anything but himself and the country he loved. Still, he eventually "confessed that he had read Hindu poetry in preparation for his own; when he was quite young he soaked himself in it..." (Schwab 202). Emerson and Whitman were formed by the same poets of the Sufi tradition who were the foundation for nineteenth century Kurdish poets. Schwab, having observed and described the magnitude of the influence of these Sufi poets, finally asks, "... was Romanticism itself anything other than an oriental irruption of the intellect" (Schwab 482)?

The reception of Sufi poetry throughout European and American Romanticism is not new, but this dissertation allows for the formation of a more complete picture of how and when Sufi poetry has affected other literatures. As well, this dissertation constitutes a platform from which one could elaborate on ideas of Romanticism outside of its traditional territory. The work this dissertation opens onto is immense and exciting.