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Embodied Elders: Space and Subjectivity in the Music of Metin-Kemal Kahraman

LEYLA NEYZI

Tracking the hunters
My image that I am trying to catch up with
Is always on the road, telling tales non-stop.
Revelling in the difference between myself and I
It tells...tells...
Don't I know; my fault was resisting the chaos. – Kemal Kahraman'

Gesang ist Dasein

- Rainer Maria Rilke

Today more than half the population of Tunceli, a province in eastern Turkey formerly known as Dersim, lives in large cities in Turkey or in the diaspora as a result of migration, which escalated during the 1990s because of the conflict between the Turkish State and the PKK.² Kemal Kahraman, a musician from Tunceli in his early 30s, lives in a one-room apartment in Berlin, not in but near Kreuzberg, the neighbourhood where the diasporic populations from Turkey live. Unable to enter Turkey, Kemal does not have German citizenship either, living in the in-between legal status of refugees. In his small and spare room, certain features stand out. Several cura, an Anatolian stringed instrument, hang on the walls. A framed black-and-white photograph depicts a famous elderly cura player, Zeynel Kahraman, performing. A painting by a German artist who visited Turkey is illuminated by a small lamp, highlighting the deep hues of the stone houses and mountains of Dersim. On a raised shelf on one wall, like a sacred niche, numerous audio and video cassettes are piled. Kemal Kahraman spends a great deal of time in this room, listening repeatedly to tapes of elderly men and women from Dersim performing oral poetry and singing. In conversation, he often quotes directly from these virtual elders, as if reciting prayer or incantation. In contrast to Kemal, his elder brother and musical collaborator Metin is constantly on the move between the global cities of Berlin and Istanbul. It is Metin who transports their compositions, recorded in a Berlin studio, to Istanbul for reproduction and distribution, and who visits elderly performers in Turkey and Germany, carrying the recordings he makes back to the one-room apartment in Berlin.

Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.38, No.1, January 2002, pp.89–109 PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON In this article, I link the revival of Alevism as an ethnic/religious identity in Turkey to the crisis of national identity on the one hand, and to the emergence of a diaspora in Europe on the other. Both processes are linked to globalization. Much of the recent literature in the social sciences acknowledges that both the way in which we experience life in the present and our ways of studying how ourselves and others experience life have been undergoing profound changes in the last decades. This transformation, associated with a restructuring of the world economy, involves dizzying flows of persons, goods and images.³ At the same time, this period of heady change has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the past, particularly through memory, which joins space and time in the body of the deterritorialized subject.⁴

The concept of time-space compression associated with globalization has spearheaded a renewed interest in theorizing spatiality.⁵ Arjun Appadurai has noted the increasing disjuncture between territory, subjectivity and collective social movements as a result of globalization.⁶ Recent studies of space underscore the need to study space as process, emphasizing performativity and the expression of subjectivities within spatialized structures and histories of domination – 'thirdspace' or 'lived space' where the real, the imaginary and the hyper-real coexist.⁷

Increasingly, language, narrative and performance have become spaces in which diasporic identities are being explored as ways of producing locality.8 According to Somers and Gibson, social life is storied, narrative being an ontological condition of life. A narrativist perspective can avoid a categorical approach to identity by including in the conception of identity/self the dimensions of time, space and relationality.9 Particularly useful are Homi Bhabha's notion of interstitial culture as transnational and translational and the argument that by reinscribing the past, those located in liminal spaces in between designations of identity can become cultural interpreters, subjects of their own history and experience.10

Musicians tend to occupy a liminal position in society, a place appropriate to the act of cultural translation and interpretation. The professional mobility of musicians has been enhanced by the emergence of a new global public sphere of popular culture. A study of professional musicians emerging from a position of relative powerlessness *vis-à-vis* national culture makes it possible to investigate the complex relationship between cultural identity, individual creativity and the emerging transnational sphere of cultural production and consumption.

In this article, I show that music was central to the construction of national identity in Turkey, and that it also played a significant role in the Alevi revival of the 1990s. I argue that a legacy of oral poetry and music linked the assimilationist generation of the early Republic, the leftist

generation of the 1970s, and the contemporary generation rediscovering Alevism as an ethnic/religious identity in transnational space. Through the life history narratives of the musicians Metin and Kemal Kahraman, I show how individuals perform national identity in the public sphere. Viewing subjectivity as process, as becoming through performing and narrating multiple selves, I argue that Metin and Kemal Kahraman achieve reterritorialization in the diaspora by 'embodying the elders': forging a link with the imagined pre-nationalist past and the sacred geography of Dersim in and through the act of musical performance. Metin and Kemal's reappropriation of Dersim represents not a singular counter identity, but rather the experience of fractured and multiple selves in the modern present. The case of Metin and Kemal Kahraman shows that it is difficult to analyze national identity in Turkey without reference to these splintered and hybrid identities and subjectivities which cast doubt on all presumably originary and single identities in Turkey, whether national or counter-national. Dersim, as Kemal Kahraman discovered in the diaspora of late-modernity, embodies the multicultural heritage of Anatolia prior to the rise of nationalism. 'Turkishness', as this case shows, is as much an imagined and constructed identity as any 'other' identity in Turkey, perhaps even more so, since it is performed by all who aspire to 'insider' status.

The Turkish Republic was established in 1923 upon the remains of a multireligious, multiethnic and multilingual empire reduced to the space of Anatolia. Turkey's nation-building project has been described as the experience of a State 'in search of its nation'. Turkey's experience is intriguing because the country was not colonized except by its own elites, who imagined a national identity to be assumed by subjects by speaking Turkish and professing allegiance to the localized Enlightenment vision of the Republic. Education (and military service) played a central role in the Turkish social engineering project aimed at creating a homogeneous population with a single shared identity.

Through an analysis of the immigration policy of the Republican regime, Kemal Kirişçi shows the discrepancy between the discourse and practice of Turkish nationalism.¹⁵ In its attempt to distance itself from the Ottoman monarchy, Kemalist discourse focused on 'Turkishness' (and secularism) rather than Islam as the core of Republican national identity. However, in practice, 'Turk' still meant persons of Sunni Muslim origin (of the Hanefi school) – preferably Turkish-speaking, and preferably from the Balkans. Despite their ethnic heterogeneity, these peoples were considered fitting candidates for a constructed national identity. The insistence on a single national identity made it impossible to acknowledge the fact that

individuals within the majority Muslim population descended from a variety of ethnic (and religious) origins.

Histories of Republican Turkey have paid insufficient attention to perspectives from within: individual and communal discourse and practice in response to State policy. Despite the existence of collectivities in Anatolia with historically established relations with one another, it is difficult today to demarcate clear boundaries between different identities, because of long-standing assimilationist policies and a history of dissimulation, denial, forgetting and intermarriage. Thus the rediscovery and reinvention of identity in the present includes a great deal of choice, divisiveness, debate and conflict. This makes the concept of performance particularly useful in understanding national identity in Turkey. Performing 'Turkishness' in the public sphere, each individual may embody a rich ethnic/religious heritage, which may be expressed in particular contexts or remain unknown or denied altogether. National identity in Turkey may thus be characterized as a prosthetic identity coeval with other, fractured identities. From this perspective, there are no rigid barriers to assuming national identity, although the distance 'travelled' to reach it requires different degrees of unclothing, as it were, and therefore different degrees of ease or conflict, for different persons or collectivities. Thus performing national identity is as much a function of taking up an identity as giving up or seeming to give up others, particularly in the public sphere. Kemal Kahraman puts it this way: 'The Dersimli [the people of Dersim] have a way of identifying with whomever claims them.'

The Alevi of Turkey are an endogamous minority group whose identity has been historically defined in opposition to Sunni identity, stemming from the conflict between the Ottoman and the Safavid Empires in the sixteenth century. Alevism is a syncretic religion which incorporates aspects of Shiite Islam with heterodox monotheistic traditions and pantheistic beliefs. Although ten to 25 per cent of the population of Turkey are estimated to be Alevi, they project a nominally Muslim identity and use Turkish names, fearing denigration and/or discrimination. It is not uncommon for individuals of Alevi (or Kurdish) background in Turkey to be raised without knowledge of their heritage.

Historically, the Alevi supported the Republican People's Party, the party established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, as the discourse of secularism made them feel protected. The generation of Alevis raised in the early Republican period tended to embrace an assimilationist stance as a way of ensuring upward mobility and cultural acceptance of community members in the public sphere. Over time, as the Turkish State moved increasingly to

the right, towards a more openly Sunni identity notwithstanding its secularist discourse, the Alevi have moved to the political Left.

Beginning in the 1950s, migration transformed Turkish society. In the following decades, poor rural Alevi migrated in large numbers to cities in Turkey as well as to Europe. During the 1960s and 1970s, opposition to the political regime took the form of Left-Right politics, leading to near civil war. During this period, the historical division between Sunni and Alevi often formed the basis for the division between 'leftists' and 'rightists'. Historically identified with the underdog, Alevis turned in large numbers to the Left. Individuals from Tunceli played a key role in extreme-left organizations, and this community suffered greatly subsequent to the military coup of 1980.¹⁸

Both the assimilationist generation of the early Republican period and the leftist generation of the 1970s were inclined to reject Alevism as a belief system and practice. The left in particular played a key role in weakening historical Alevi institutions such as hereditary religious leadership (dede). Modernity, it seemed for a while, was wiping out Alevism as a way of life. However, following the military coup of 1980, Turkey entered an era of political repression accompanied by economic and cultural liberalism. New social movements and identity politics challenged Republican national identity. Islamism,19 Kurdish nationalism20 and Alevism emerged as new identities in the public sphere. The emergence of a diaspora in Europe played a key role in the use of the language of democracy, human rights and citizenship in achieving political mobilization through the use of new media and communication technologies transcending national boundaries. Debates in the diaspora became instrumental in setting the agenda in Turkey itself. Within Turkey, the media became an important new actor in the public sphere in the 1990s. The emergence of private television and radio for the first time in Republican history, as well as the proliferation of newspapers, magazines and the internet have resulted in the emergence of a new class of transnational cultural brokers including media personalities and pop musicians.21

From the silence of the pre-1980s, the Alevi community emerged noisily into the era of communication technologies. It was with the break-up of the Soviet bloc, the urbanization of the Alevi community, the creation of a diaspora, attacks on Alevi communities in Turkey, the turn of the state towards a 'Turkish–Islamic synthesis', and the rise of Islamism and Kurdish nationalism that Alevi identity emerged as a new social movement in the public sphere.²²

The Alevi revival has been accompanied by significant divisions within the community. The Alevi remain highly divided *vis-à-vis* their political stance, definition of Alevism and prescriptions for the future, the main

problem being how to reinvent a primarily rural, endogamous and inward-looking cultural heritage based on hereditary religious leadership and the oral transmission of values.²³

The Alevi have historically been divided on the basis of linguistic and ethnic affiliation. The identity of the 'Kurdish Alevi' is particularly complex because both Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms have been eager to declare them variously as 'really Turkish' or 'really Kurdish'.²⁴ At critical junctures, the Turkish government will declare the 'Turkishness' of the Alevi. The secularist Alevi, who use the Turkish language in their rituals, are seen as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism and Kurdish nationalism.²⁵ In ironic response to claims about the 'Turkic' origins of the Alevi, Kemal Kahraman refers to an elderly man from Tunceli: 'The man says, "We are the real Turks." In saying this, he does not consider the Turks as Turkish. For the Turks of today are the Ottomans of yesterday.'²⁶ On the other hand, the 'Kurdish Alevi' remain distinct from the majority Kurdish population of southeastern Turkey who are primarily Kurmanci-speaking Sunnis of the Şafi'i school – and who played a significant role in crushing Alevi uprisings in the past.²⁷

In this article, Kurdish Alevi identity will be analyzed from the vantage point of a regional identity: the geographic and symbolic domain represented by Dersim, centred in the province of Tunceli in eastern Turkey. Studies of ethnic and religious identity in Turkey have paid insufficient attention to regional differences, which necessitate awareness of the particular contextualization and interweaving of different identities within localities, which remain significant, even for individuals in the diaspora.

A unifying feature of the identity of the *Dersimli* (the people of Dersim) is '1938': the history of uprisings against the Ottoman and Republican states, culminating in the massacre of thousands of Alevis in 1938. Homi Bhabha has shown that for the postcolonial, modernity is experienced as colonization, *is* colonization.²⁸ Similarly, the *Dersimli* experienced modernity through 1938, when local outbursts against the intrusion of the new Turkish state was countered by violence followed by forced migration.²⁹

Alevism is the basis of identity in Dersim, where the majority of the population speaks Zaza, a Northern Iranian language often glossed as a Kurdish dialect. Alevism takes different forms in different regions of Anatolia, and the heterodox belief systems of the Alevi of Dersim have been noted in particular. A key feature is metempsychosis (tenasüh) or transmigration of souls and the centrality of the sun and the moon in the belief system. The Alevism of Dersim has also been influenced by Christianity, as Armenians lived in Dersim until relatively recently. A fascinating tale told to me by Metin Kahraman, found also in missionary

accounts, represents the origins of the people of Dersim as a product of an immaculate conception involving the daughter of an Armenian priest and the decapitated head of Imam Hüseyin, to whom the Shiite tradition is traced.³¹

Although the population of Dersim largely returned to the region which was renamed Tunceli after 1938, it has become depopulated in recent decades owing to economic migration to Turkish cities and Europe and to forced migration caused by the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK. In reimagining their identity in the diaspora, the Alevi of Tunceli have revived local terminology. Historically, the Zaza-speaking Alevi of Dersim referred to themselves as Kırmanc, which signified a primarily Alevi identity within the geography of Dersim, whose people differentiated amongst themselves on the basis of named descent groups (asiret), some of which were associated with a priestly caste (ocak). Although often referred to as a Kurdish dialect, the Zaza (Kirmancki) language, a Northern Iranian language, and Kurmanci are not mutually intelligible, which has led some analysts to argue that Zaza is a separate language.³² There is a growing movement among some groups from Tunceli, particularly in the diaspora, to reimagine themselves ethnically as Zaza, claiming to descend from a distinct group originating in Iran, although the division of the Zazaspeaking population into Alevi and Sunni mitigates against a unified identity. Non-nationalist Zaza-speaking Alevi in the diaspora such as Kemal Kahraman prefer to use the umbrella term Dersimli, which, though centred on a core Alevi identity, acknowledges the multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious heritage of a geography conceptualized as sacred space.33

I would like to argue that Dersim constitutes a particularly useful space from which to gaze at issues of identity and difference in Turkey, but not because Dersim is the 'other' in an opposition constructed between centre and periphery. Questioning such binarisms common to Turkish modernist discourse, I would argue that Dersimlilik (being from Dersim) is interesting exactly because it shows up the ways in which presumably marginal identities are implicated in the history of the forging of a national narrative in Turkey, challenging its authority by showing that 'self' and 'other' are inseparable - they are conjoined in the bodies of positioned subjects in search today of a third space in which to express their non-nationalist (or postnationalist) longings, a space in which it may be possible to 'breathe'.34 It is difficult to analyze Turkish national identity without reference to these splintered and hybrid identities which highlight the imaginary nature of all presumably originary and single identities in Turkey, whether national or counter-national. As Bhabha argues, part cultures (for whom the boundary is both outside and inside) question the self containedness of national cultures through their internal liminality and ambivalent positioning within nations.³⁵ 'Turkishness' is as much an imagined and constructed identity as any 'other' identity in Turkey, perhaps even more so, since it is performed by all who aspire to 'insider' status, though the inside of this inside might be quite varied indeed.

Just as modernization began in the Ottoman Empire with the military, Western music entered Turkish society largely through military bands. ³⁶ The 'revolution in music' (*musiki devrimi*) was central to the cultural policies of the early Kemalist State aimed at creating a new, Westernized identity. ³⁷ Just as the population of Anatolia was to constitute one nation made up of one people, one language, one religion, so would there be an official 'Turkish' music. ³⁸ 'Ottoman' music was banned from the state radio, while a new and 'civilized' music was commissioned which would use Anatolian folk melodies as a source for compositions based on Western techniques. ³⁹ The Turkish experiment with music has been referred to as 'the heaven of unsuccessful projects'. ⁴⁰ As many studies have shown, these top-down policies largely backfired, leading to unexpected but highly popular hybrids such as *arabesk* music and contemporary Turkish pop. ⁴¹

During the highly politicized 1960 and 1970s, one's politics were expressed as much by one's dress and moustache as by the kind of music one listened to. Anatolian folk music, and Alevi music and poetry in particular, were an important source for 'leftist' music, which was popular among university students. In the 1990s, folk music would be rediscovered in the context of identity politics, though its audience would increasingly become urban youth of rural origin rather than middle class university students. As it became commercialized, this music developed pop strains, as well as rightist and Islamist versions.⁴²

Although a record industry had started much earlier, the commercialization of the music industry proceeded apace in the 1980s with the emergence of a local cassette industry. The 1990s constituted an important threshold because of the entry into the market of private TV and radio stations, including those controlled by groups in the diaspora. During this period, the technology needed for hi-tech studio systems was imported, and foreign firms began to invest in the Turkish market. Today, the music industry in Turkey is dominated by a small number of large firms which promote Turkish pop music. In time, commercial music has become increasingly standardized, cannibalizing different musical traditions to create seemingly new, but similar sounding, products known as Turkish pop. On the other hand, half of the market share is still held by a large number of small firms, which produce mostly regional folk music that finds

its audience despite its lack of representation in the media.⁴⁶ While some writers decry the commercialization and standardization of Turkish popular music today, others argue that there is a growing audience for more innovative and hybrid sounds.⁴⁷ According to Zeki Coşkun, as folk music has become less important in the daily lives of the rural population, its attraction for urban consumers looking for new products has increased – although the large firms are yet to exploit this niche.⁴⁸

Although the Left tended to reject Alevism as a religious and cultural system, it embraced Alevi musical traditions, reinterpreting them to fit a leftist worldview. Studies show that urbanization and commercialization affected non-Alevi musical traditions sooner, whereas Alevi music, central to everyday life (including weddings and funerals), ritual practice and the transmission of culture in Alevi communities, continued to flourish.⁴⁹ Alevi music continues to live, albeit in a commercialized and standardized form, in a burgeoning cassette industry and the new 'türkü bar' or folk song bars along the backstreets of Istiklal Avenue, a historically cosmopolitan avenue in Istanbul which became the capital of the hybrid culture of this global city in the 1990s.

Music is intimately connected with the Alevi revival of the 1990s. In the diaspora as well as in Turkey, the *ayin-i cem* ritual, the central ritual of Alevi communities which includes recitation, song and dance, is in the process of being reinvented as a staged performance – what Levent Soysal has called 'spectacles of identity'. ⁵⁰ At a time when hereditary religious leaders are on the wane, contemporary musicians can play an important role in redefining Alevi identity: Ayhan Kaya has described the young musicians creating rap songs in Germany as 'contemporary minstrels'. ⁵¹

Relying on multi-sited ethnography and a reflexivity which acknowledges the similarity between the positioning of the ethnographer and the creative individual in border zones, I interviewed Metin Kahraman in Istanbul⁵² and Kemal Kahraman in Berlin,⁵³ using life history narratives as well as the group's own cultural products as a source.⁵⁴ My dialogue with Metin and Kemal is both personal and political in so far as our conversations cover the terrain of what it means to be 'Turkish', or the nature of identity and difference in Turkey. This is hardly an 'academic' matter; while I come from a background which Metin and Kemal characterize as *devşirme* ('assimilated') while acknowledging its positioning as a source of power (and thus its appeal to those seeking social mobility, who 'choose' to perform 'Turkishness'), they view their own creative work as a matter of sheer personal necessity and a very real alternative to violence (against themselves or others) as a form of self-expression.

Metin and Kemal Kahraman were raised in the 1970s, and their youth was marked by the leftist politics of the period. Metin and Kemal's fractured identity is not new, however, being rooted in their earliest experiences in the Tunceli-Erzincan border zone of their childhood. Metin and Kemal Kahraman were born, in 1963 and 1966 respectively, into a named group known as the Balabanlı who inhabit the Tunceli-Erzincan border area in eastern Turkey. The Balabanlı, living in a border zone, had close ties with 'Turkish' Alevi, with whom they shared religious leaders (*pir*), and seem to have survived 1938 on the whole with fewer losses in comparison with other groups in the heart of Dersim.

From their childhood, Metin and Kemal Kahraman lived between places and identities. Their father being an employee of the state railways, the family spent winters in the city of Erzincan and summers in Tunceli in the small settlement of Hanolar, high in the mountains. While the Zaza language was spoken and Alevi rituals celebrated in the village and in their own peripheral neighbourhood of Vaver in Erzincan, Metin and Kemal were taught to hide their identity outside the neighbourhood, particularly in school, and to project a Turkish identity as a form of protection. Not only was life within their own home and neighbourhood sharply differentiated from behaviour (and performance) in the public sphere, but Metin and Kemal recall that their dress, language and behaviour changed as they moved seasonally from country to city and back again. Metin says:

When we went to school, we were warned, 'Dear child, if they ask if you are Muslim, say, "Praise be to God". If they ask you what you are, say "Turkish". Speak Turkish well, my child.'

Kemal recalls feeling strange at each transition, what Bhabha refers to as 'unhomeliness'. 56 He was always self-conscious, gazing at his different selves, one step ahead of each identity. Kemal says:

There were things we had to hide, especially having to do with being Alevi. Knowing Zaza was also like that. I spoke Turkish to my mother, and she replied in Zaza. When we came to Erzincan from the village, our tongue changed even while speaking Turkish. We threw out village expressions one by one. Going to the village from Erzincan, I asked myself, am I a stranger or was this our village?

Irony, distance and ambivalence characterize Kemal's attitude towards his fractured identity. He refers to himself in different contexts in the same life history interview as variously 'Kurdish', 'Turkish', 'Zaza', 'Alevi', 'Kırmanc', or 'Dersimli'. He also recalls consciously performing different identities in different settings. In narrating an anecdote about a fellow student in Istanbul who remarked that Kemal 'didn't "look" Kurdish',

Kemal makes an aside – 'You know, I was "Kurdish" at the time'. Similarly, on speaking about his arrival in Germany, he says: 'I said to myself, let's be "Kurdish" for a while.' While the Dersimli tend to become 'Kurdish' in opposition to 'Turkishness', when faced with 'Kurdishness' they become 'Alevi' or 'Zaza'. Kemal says:

We went from Turkishness to Kurdishness and from there we moved towards Zaza, thinking in Turkish. The *Dersimli* is called Zaza in Turkish. But when we think in the Zaza language, we distinguish the Zaza from the *Dersimli*. Then we see the Kurd in Dersim, but he is called *Kırdaş*. My name is not Zaza, but *Kırmanc*. We also hear of the Armenians. We are from Dersim. Underneath that identity are different sub-identities. None of these groups have a problem with one another.

This was the beginning of a realization despite the historical opposition between Alevi and Sunni, 'Turkishness' and what may be termed 'Dersimliness' were to become so intertwined and interpenetrating so as to be practically inseparable in the core of the subjectivity of Metin and Kemal. This is why the possibility of a single counter-identity seems impossible for Metin and Kemal, whose experience of identity is always contingent and relational.

Metin and Kemal both speak of the key role of their parents' generation, who were, according to them, the children of the 'vanquished', the older generation devastated by the events of 1938. Metin says:

They wanted their children to survive. 'We are the real Turks! Hello!' The Dersimli make such an emphasis. This is because they have an identity problem. You are lost when you lose your roots. Our people experienced such violence that they said, 'Our own loins are our enemy'. It was the same in Kerbela.⁵⁷ Our people always said they could live side by side with different truths. That is why they became a target.

According to Kemal, his father acted as a 'shield', both protecting and oppressing his family by enforcing an assimilationist façade:

Wherever my father built a house, he raised a wall like that of a prison. He made himself a shield, for they were a generation who were forced to make a choice, and spoke Turkish. He didn't want us to speak Zaza because he didn't want to see what he had destroyed in himself come alive.

Metin and Kemal Kahraman's generation wholeheartedly embraced leftist politics, rejecting both the ambivalent Kemalism of their parents and the

Alevi heritage of their grandparents, although they would later acknowledge the similarity between the modernism of Kemalism and that of the Left.⁵⁸ Kemal says:

All of Dersim became leftist, and as leftists, turned against their own families. Usually it is the older generation that is in power. But we were in power as youth. The elderly were on the retreat. But it was they who had told us to go to school. We studied and studied and realized that they had the truest word.

Kemal recounted an incident in which leftist youth made fun of a religious leader (*pir*) charged with maintaining Alevi traditions, who then proceeded to show his authority (*keramet*) by 'eating fire' during the Alevi ritual known as *cem*:

I was in high school. I had never seen the village in winter. I was curious. During February, the *pir* came to the village. A *cem* ceremony was to be held. The young men of the village were saying, 'Who is the *pir*, why did he come? These people are exploiters.' They spread negative energy throughout the village and the *pir* realized this. Before the *cem* began, he said, 'Build a large fire.' During the ceremony, he took a burning log off the fire and licked it with relish. Whirling, whirling, he came in front of the youth who had criticized him. He took the charcoal which he had extinguished in his mouth and put it into the mouth of the boy. The boy's mouth turned black.

The music group Metin-Kemal Kahraman, which includes other musicians such as Serdar Keskin from Istanbul and Dorothea Marien⁵⁹ from Berlin, was formed in 1991. Metin Kahraman had made his name as a musician as a member of Grup Yorum, a music group known for its leftist interpretation of Anatolian folk music. Metin was the first in his family to become involved in politics. Spending months in prison after the military coup of 1980, he moved to Istanbul upon his release. It was at university that he and several friends formed Grup Yorum. In the late 1980s, affected by a newspaper story about the death of a young person in eastern Turkey, Metin wrote his first song in the Zaza language. This was the beginning of a parting of ways with both Grup Yorum and the organized Left.

Kemal Kahraman, who came to Ankara to attend university, joined an illegal leftist group in 1987, following in the footsteps of his brother. After a demonstration protesting against the treatment of Palestinian youth in Israel, he was arrested. Unlike Metin, Kemal experienced extensive torture, spending several years in prison. Upon his release in 1991, he decided to

leave for Europe, initially in the hopes of attending university. Kemal Kahraman's experience as a refugee in Germany and his involvement in debates on the Kurdish and Zaza languages and identities in the diaspora have marked the group's music, which moved from a largely leftist sensibility to one centred on a reimagined *Dersimli* identity in the 1990s.

Metin-Kemal Kahraman have produced five albums to date. Three of these albums (*Deniz Koydum Adını*⁶⁰ (1993), *Renklerde Yaşamak*⁶¹ (1995) and *Ferfecir*⁶² (1999) the musical style of which may be characterized as truly hybrid, are based on original compositions and lyrics. Metin-Kemal's third album, *Yaşlılar Dersim Türküleri Söylüyor*, ⁶³ is a documentary effort, being a collection of poetry and songs performed by elderly men and women from Tunceli. In their last album *Sürela*⁶⁴ (2000), Metin-Kemal Kahraman perform together with Zeynel Kahraman and Yusuf Yıldız, elderly musicians from Dersim, to interpret traditional songs of Dersim. Metin says that their music, particularly in the third album, 'Reminds people of their old photographs'.

Familiar with Alevi oral poetry and music as well as the 'political' music of the 1970s, Metin and Kemal Kahraman learned to play the *saz* (a stringed instrument central to the folk music of Anatolia) by ear at an early age. Metin remembers playing while hiding out from the police in mountain villages at the age of 16:

I would learn a new song wherever I went. While staying with Emedi Qıl [an elderly man] I played shyly. He said to me, 'All the sparrows gather in the window as you play'. I couldn't tell if he was teasing me or saying that I played well.

Both Metin and Kemal express the compulsion they felt about making music. Kemal said:

I would spend four, five hours a day with the *saz* and the guitar in prison. I thought of nothing but music. Walking up and down, I would arrange melodies. Earlier too, walking along the street, or going to see to the animals in the village, I sang, made up words.

Musical influences include Anatolian folk music, particularly Alevi poetry and music, Turkish and international folk and protest music and contemporary interpretations of folk music such as the work of Erkan Oğur. Although Metin-Kemal's music is primarily based on their own compositions and lyrics, Kemal says that he finds himself returning to old Alevi songs: 'My relationship to Alevi songs has changed. I am now singing those songs as if they are my own.' According to Kemal, oral traditions enhance the creativity of the performer:

There is no song sung in a uniform manner in our region. Each elder sings the same song differently, since there is no written text. He takes his cura and sings in order to tell a story. Why a man was born, why he died, what happened, and whether it was good or ill. Our people make music in circumcision ceremonies, weddings and funerals. There are professional mourners. The songs do not start and end with the same rhythm – what matters most of all is the story.

In writing about place lore, Dhomnaill argues that to speak and to hear is to remember and that dependence on writing impairs memory. According to Dhomnaill, the centre of Irish communities are stories; the same can be said for the Alevi, who expressly reject having a 'book'. Metin says: 'I have always been influenced by stories. Our people teach by way of stories. They don't preach that the truth lies in a book.'

Despite their leftist past, Metin and Kemal are critical today of attempts to use music to convey a message. Kemal says:

You cannot generate more than five original sentences when claiming to sing in the name of others. The goal should be for everyone to listen to the voice of his heart and to express his own difference. There is no name that we give to our music. A German who heard our music ten years ago would call it 'Oriental'. Now he says, 'world music'. But this 'world music' has turned into a scorpion which poisons itself. Because my identity, my personality, my experiences in Berlin and Istanbul, all these nuances are gone. 'Multiculturalism' is just a label now.

Metin-Kemal's albums need to be viewed as part of a continuing process of experimentation, rather than as expressing a clearly articulated and defined style. Metin says:

We realized that we are singing about ourselves. The place we come from, ourselves, our relationships, both in Turkish and in Zaza. We have a history. [The neighbourhood of] Vaver is part of it. So is that train station in Erzincan, and the settlement in Dersim made up of three households. We also go back and forth to Germany.

The songs in Metin-Kemal's first two albums tend to fall into two types. One type of song, usually in Turkish, takes off from their own experiences in the city, often making reference to political events. The second type of song, in the Zaza language, uses the persona of an elderly person from Tunceli to tell a local tale or express a local sensibility. In their albums, Metin and Kemal play both the *saz* and the guitar, accompanied by Dorothea Annelis on the violin and Serdar Keskin on the guitar, along with

other musicians. Local and Western instruments are combined, with local melodies often being arranged using Western-style harmonies. Realizing that authenticity has more to do with being true to one's own experience, Kemal says, 'All instruments needed to express our own reality belong to us.' The violin, for example, is hardly new to the music of Dersim, being used by Armenian musicians in the past. Recently, Kemal has also begun to play the *cura*, a smaller version of the *saz*: 'The *cura* is in the hands of the elders. No one from the younger generation plays *cura*. In *Ferfecir*, we brought it into the foreground.'

Metin-Kemal's fourth album is somewhat different from the first two albums, although it is also based on songs composed by Metin and Kemal. *Ferfecir* is mostly instrumental, and the separate pieces are woven together so that the album expresses a unity of feeling not found in the previous albums. Fewer instruments are used, and the album has a more sparse and lean sound and what feels like a more local or 'eastern' sensibility. It evokes in particular a sense of pathos, of the suffering Metin and Kemal Kahraman have experienced. Kemal says:

You don't need a crowded group of instruments to express a certain depth of feeling. In preparing the album for the elders, we became aware of what could be achieved using just the cura and vocals. Ferfecir is built around the guitar, saz, cura and violin. We tried to focus on whichever felt like the central melody, and wove the rest around it

The song 'Dewreso'in *Ferfecir* is a highly sophisticated attempt to express the sensibility of Dersim, telling the tale of sages who enter the bodies of individuals in order to comment on the state of the modern world and to remind the living of the presence of the past in the present.

Metin-Kemal Kahraman's audience includes youth, often university students, in cities in Turkey as well as in Europe. Youth from Tunceli, Alevi youth and those politically engaged on the Left are more likely to listen to this music. Metin-Kemal have moved from creating their albums wholly in Istanbul to recording in a Berlin studio, producing and distributing their albums in Istanbul. Metin-Kemal Kahraman also interact with their audience through concerts they perform in Western Europe and Turkey, as well as through their website.

Although Metin and Kemal Kahraman's disillusionment with the Left began earlier, it was from the vantage point of displacement and diaspora that Kemal in particular began to embrace a vision of a *Dersimli* identity, associated with a new relationship to his grandparents' generation, and

through them, to the reimagined sacred space of Dersim. In the Alevism of Dersim, landmarks such as mountains and springs tend to be sacralized and associated with mythic figures, such as Düzgün Baba, whose exploits are told in tales which constitute a rich oral tradition. As Dhomnaill notes, this mythic dimension largely lost to modernity can be an important source of personal creativity. Metin and Kemal, who in their previous incarnations as educated 'Turks' and leftists had rejected their grandparents' generation as 'backward' and 'primitive', gradually found themselves turning towards the past. While challenging the singular identity associated with Turkish nationalism, Kemal admits that his reappraisal of the elders as a model for pluralism in the present required the mediation of education, and in that sense is fully modern.

Although Metin-Kemal first began to record the performances of elders with the idea of creating a musical archive, they soon found that the tales they heard spoke to their own existential dilemmas in the present. Kemal says:

The elders are the best source because they speak from experience. Culture always changes, always becomes renewed. But it always rests upon a source. The elders tell a story, but I live in Berlin, and I have to find room for that sentence in Berlin. A sentence gets hung up in the air. You have to fill the space of that sentence by yourself. Once you find room for that sentence, you arrive at this hardness. What I mean by hardness is simplicity. It is what is, and the fact that we exist.

Metin and Kemal Kahraman realized that as survivors of 1938, the elderly constitute key historical witnesses of an event suppressed in official history. But the elderly play ultimately a more positive or agentic role for Metin-Kemal. They have become a model for an alternative intersubjectivity and pluralism which is expressed in their stories about the past which speak directly to the present. In his narrative, Kemal Kahraman emphasizes the role of language, image and performance in constituting the space of this *Dersimli* identity as process. Not surprisingly, Kemal is obsessed with language and naming, which is an identity constituting performance. In using any word, he is always aware of how that word 'looks' from the vantage point of another language, which is a way of describing how his own subjectivity works as well:

The advantage of being here is that it enabled me to concentrate on language. My Turkish poems are really translations reflected in the mirror of the Zaza language. My writing always imitates the spoken word. The spoken belongs to the country. The written belongs to the city. We belong to both city and country.

In conclusion, I would like to argue that the musicians Metin and Kemal Kahraman are able momentarily to reconcile their split and fractured identities at the moment of musical performance, when they believe – and feel – themselves to be in communication, through their performing bodies, with living and imagined or virtual elders. Metin says:

I believe that song was given to me by Düzgün Baba.⁶⁹ It is as if someone is visiting me. Just like in the *cem* ritual. While singing, I am always sitting at Düzgün Baba, looking from there. Hasan Baba [an elder] sits in front of the fire, people mill around, the stars are dark, the moon is bright. My creativity has to do with those places.

It is at this moment that Metin and Kemal become *Dersimli*, experiencing their historicity through memory inscribed onto their bodies through the mediation of elders. Kemal says:

For me, seeing is being. I realized that this is the feeling we are looking for. The sense of expansion you experience in your own body. Looking at the sun setting in the direction of Erzincan. Sometimes I can catch that feeling of the village while singing. But it is sad. As if something is dying and you are mourning for it. But there is also anger inside of me because it is alive. That place is still alive, but it is in pain.

This performance is both modern, and an interrogation of the modern. As Kemal says:

The twentieth century is over. The century to which humankind attributed great values, great utopias. The West is bankrupt. It is destroying its own references. Previously, there was Turkey, and there was Germany. With the Kosovo events, this has ended. It is the same both here and there. I see the danger now at my door. They are the same. It is we who do not fit. What we need to do is to stand up for our own existence, our own longings. It is one thing to speak in terms of particular references and another to speak by yourself at a time when all referents have been destroyed. Then you look for a source. The mirror for this is the elders. I saw the place where water sprang from the soil. We knew that place to be sacred.

Simon Frith argues that music should be viewed as a narrative which produces selves and meanings through the experience of performance. By saying that music is 'a participant-observer's comment on the process of living together', Frith underlines the structural similarity between the process of musical performance and ethnography, as both are based on experiential knowledge and relationality.

In this article, I used the case of the music group Metin-Kemal Kahraman to address the revival of Alevi identity in Turkey. I have argued that a legacy of oral poetry and music acted as a link between the assimilationist generation of the early Republic, the leftist generation of the 1970s, and the contemporary generation rediscovering Alevism as an ethnic/religious identity in the context of neo-liberal globalization. I have argued that performing in transnational space, Metin and Kemal Kahraman achieve a link to the multicultural space of Dersim in eastern Turkey in their imaginary, challenging singular nationalisms in the process. *Dersimli* identity is interesting exactly because it shows up the ways in which presumably marginal identities are implicated in the history of the forging of a national narrative in Turkey, challenging its authority by showing that 'self' and 'other' are conjoined in the bodies of positioned subjects in search of a third space in which to express their non-nationalist (or postnationalist) longings.

The Alevi revival raises intriguing questions about the oral transmission of knowledge and praxis in the era of new communication technologies. As Metin and Kemal Kahraman discovered, what linked them to previous generations was the oral poetry and music they shared, despite the gap in experience and political affiliation. The Alevi revival at the millennium promises a new period of cultural production through music, using the past as a means of expressing the concerns of the present. Most recently, Kemal Kahraman composed a song in collaboration with a hip-hop group based in Germany. Called 'Zazaname', the song is performed by youth raised in the diaspora who call themselves K.W.B. (Kanacks With Brain). It is these youth who will tell the tune of the future.

For Metin-Kemal to become *Dersimli*, then, they had to go to Berlin (while Tunceli itself is denuded due to migration and civil war), moving across the bodies of their parents' generation in their imaginary, to reach their grandparents who experienced the birth of the Turkish Republic as 'losers', but traces of whose experience are embodied in Metin and Kemal as the 'what might have been' of a silent, unlived alternative history waiting to break into song.

NOTES

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 Avcıların İzinde (Tracking the Hunters), 'Yetişmeğe çalıştığım imgem/hep yoldadır, durmadan anlatır/Kendimle aramdaki fark cümbüşü/anlatır ... anlatır ... anlatır/Bilmez miyim, kargaşaya direnmekti suçum', Gece Ölünce Herkes Ölür ('Everyone Dies When the Night Dies'). Unpublished book of poetry, 1998 (translation mine).

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- 52. I recorded interviews with Metin Kahraman on 18 and 23 Nov. 1997 and 2 Jan. 1999 in Istanbul.
- 53. I recorded interviews with Kemal Kahraman between 8 and 12 April 1999 in Berlin.
- 54. The term 'interview' does not do justice to the dialogue, confrontation and friendship which developed as a result of our meeting. Each recorded conversation took many hours, including segments where Metin and Kemal played the guitar or cura, and harrowing descriptions of emotional and intellectual turmoil during and after periods spent in Turkish prisons and/or in a camp for asylum-seekers in Germany. These hours of recorded interview were supplemented by days spent in unrecorded conversation, visits to friends and relatives, and attendance at musical sessions.
- 55. When I asked Metin what they were called, meaning their family or group name, he either misunderstood or wanted to make a point by replying, 'We were called "The Kurds with tails".' Kuyruklu Kürt is a derogatory term often used as an insult, particularly among children.
- 56. Ibid.
- 57. The killing of Imam Hüseyin, which marks the historical split between Sunni and Shiite in Islam.
- 58. For a poignant account of the experience of the *Dersimli* with the left, see S. Çiya, 'Palavra Meydanı', *Dersim*, Vol.5 (1997), pp.7–8.
- 59. I interviewed Dorothea Marien in Berlin on 10 April 1999. Marien belongs to the generation

who grew up with silences concerning Germany's Nazi past. Both Dorothea Marien and Metin Kahraman expressed the recognition they felt, coming from different yet similar histories of taboos and silences about the past. For them, making music together is a way of sharing and communicating this experience, as well as a form of healing.

- 60. 'I Named You Sea'.
- 61. 'Living in Colour'.
- 62. 'Ferfecir', which refers to the first light of day, is composed of the words 'fer' and 'fecir,' which are the same in the Zaza, Kurmanci and Turkish languages.
- 63. The Elders Sing the Songs of Dersim.
- 64. 'Sürela' means 'bright red' in the Zaza language.
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- 66. A. Kemali, Erzincan (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1992).
- 67. Dhomnaill, 'Dinnshanchas'.
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- 69. A sacred site of pilgrimage in Tunceli associated with a mythical figure known as Düzgün
- 70. S. Frith, 'Music and Identity', in S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds.), Questions of Cultural Identity (New York: Sage), pp.108-27.
- 71. V. Crapanzano, 'Some Thoughts on Hermeneutics and Psychoanalytic Anthropology', in T. Schwartz et al. (eds.), New Directions in Psychological Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.294–307.
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- 73. Kanack is a derogatory term for 'foreigner' in Germany.