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## Captivating State: Youthful Dreams and Uncertain Futures in Kurdistan

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CAPTIVATING STATE:  
YOUTHFUL DREAMS AND UNCERTAIN FUTURES IN KURDISTAN

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DISSERTATION

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

By  
Diana P. Hatchett

Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2021

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### CAPTIVATING STATE: YOUTHFUL DREAMS AND UNCERTAIN FUTURES IN KURDISTAN

This dissertation examines how Kurdistan young people experience contests of values in a state shaped by sectarian political cultures during a time of trial and transition for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The dissertation is based on approximately 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork (September 2015 - June 2017) spent among Kurdistan youth, broadly defined as 12 to 30 years old, in secondary schools and fitness centers. The ethnography presents interlocutors as co-theorists in conceptualizing the society and state in which they live, through the use of descriptive vignettes, transcripts of discussions, and lengthy interview quotes. Kurdistan interlocutors describe the push and pull of living suspended in a “captivating state” in two senses of the phrase: One sense refers to a state of feeling trapped for a variety of reasons, including displacement or lacking resources to emigrate. The other sense of “captivating state” refers to the Iraqi and Kurdistan states and the power they hold over the imaginations and affections of their citizens. Throughout the ethnography, Kurdistan people negotiate the ethics of staying or emigrating; debate descriptions of and prescriptions for state and civic order; and express doubts and hopes for uncertain futures. By attending to interlocutors’ assessments of the “state of things” and strategies for generating hope, the ethnography provides a view of ethical life in Kurdistan that centers young people and their moral striving at the intersections of “sectarianism,” the “state,” and “values.”

KEYWORDS: Cultural Anthropology, Kurdistan, Iraq, Ethics, Youth, the State

Diana P. Hatchett

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CAPTIVATING STATE:  
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## Preface

*“Brother, don’t build your city of dreams. Help the people of this city to escape even more sadness. We fantasise to forget our suffering. Imagination acts as a shield in this city.” – Bakhtiyar Ali, I Stared at the Night of the City*

In many ways, the Kurdistan Region Iraq (KRI) has a dreamlike quality about it. It is not an independent state, but is, rather, an autonomous region subject to federal Iraq. And yet it very much behaves like a state, increasingly so in the past couple decades. Many people have desired an independent Kurdistan state, especially in the period which this dissertation covers. And yet some of my interlocutors observed that an independent Kurdistan state would be untenable because it would require more resources than the Kurdistan Region could marshal. Some said independence would necessitate more transparent and democratic governance than the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is prepared, or willing, to undertake. For those skeptical of the KRG’s integrity or political ambitions, Kurdish nationalism and talk of independence are illusions with which the Kurdistan government continually captivates its subjects. Thus, the Kurdistan Region is both always becoming and never becoming an independent state.

It is not enough to dream of statehood. To be received into the international fold of states, that is, to receive the international political and financial support it would need to survive as an independent state, the Kurdistan Region must demonstrate before an international audience that it is “deserving” of statehood by Western or neoliberal standards. When I first visited Kurdistan in 2012, it already had many markers of a “successful” state. Cultural signs of the state, like a national anthem and flag, had existed in Kurdistan since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. More recent developments included political



stability, increased sovereignty over its land and resources, and economic growth. In 2012, people pointed out to me all the new homes, schools, and businesses dotting the landscape. In the Kurdistan capital city of Erbil, also called Hewlêr, people talked about luxury residential communities like “Dream City,” shopping malls, and restaurants, all made possible by political stability and the flow of international capital into and out of the KRI. For people with resources, this interwar period (2011 – 2014) in the Kurdistan Region was a dream come true. The dream evaporated in 2014 when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or IS, also known as “Daesh” after the Arabic acronym) invaded territories across Iraq and Syria, plunging the country into another cycle of war and economic stagnation. It was during this difficult time that I carried out 20 months of fieldwork in Kurdistan, from September 2015 to July 2017.

Although the conflict with the Islamic State devastated much of Iraq, it presented the Kurdistan Region with further opportunities for enacting statehood. It temporarily brought rival Kurdistan political parties together in a unified effort against the enemy Islamic State. The Islamic State represented all the ways a majority Muslim polity could go wrong, but which the Kurdistan Regional Government could make right. Whereas ISIS was condemned for its massacres of minorities, the Kurdistan Regional Government welcomed minorities and was praised as their protector. The KRI absorbed hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Iraqis and refugees from Syria and supported them at great expense. As Iraqi military forces fled, the Kurdish military, or *peshmerga*, occupied territories long disputed by the Iraqi and Kurdistan governments. At the height of Kurdish nationalistic fervor, approximately 92% of voters in a September 2017 government referendum supported Kurdistan independence.

For many of my interlocutors, however, dreams of Kurdistan statehood were met with dread. Some of my closest acquaintances were neither Kurdish nor Muslim, but rather members of minority populations, like Assyrian or Chaldean Christians. Many were born and raised in Kurdistan, where their families had lived for generations. Others had settled recently in the KRI, after they were displaced by violence elsewhere in Iraq or in Syria. Some had led prosperous lives in urban centers with rich cultural and intellectual heritages, like Baghdad or Damascus; they found Kurdistan stifling. While many displaced people expressed gratitude for their refuge in the KRI, they also worried about their minority status and lack of opportunities. How would the Kurdistan government and the majority Kurdish society treat non-Kurdish and non-Muslim residents?

A common topic of discussion among minority or displaced people I knew was how to make sense of their lives in Kurdistan. Renewed violence had crushed many individual dreams about possible futures, as well as hopes for a unified and peaceful Iraq. For some, their sense of belonging and purpose owed much to a shared Iraqi national identity. An independent Kurdistan state, however, would be the last nail in the coffin of a unified Iraq. Exiled interlocutors often compared their present hardships with their past ones. Their observations were tinged with nostalgia and sadness. They lamented the loss of stability and national unity of the old Iraq that fell with former President Saddam Hussein and his Baath regime. Although war and sanctions led to economic shortages, displaced interlocutors recalled no shortage of good neighbors and friends in their former homes. In the past, they enjoyed relationships enriched by ethnic and religious difference and dignified by a shared Iraqi national identity. Their present interactions in Kurdistan,

however, were thin in comparison. There was tolerance of diversity, but not flourishing. Although some people recounted warm interactions and friendships formed across ethnic or religious lines, others described microaggressions or humiliations in the allegedly “pluralistic” environments in which they worked or lived. The prospect of an independent Kurdistan state did not excite them, as it was not likely to be qualitatively better than their present lives in the Kurdistan Region.

The people appearing in this dissertation are suspended in a “captivating state” in two senses of the phrase. One sense refers to a state of feeling trapped for a variety of reasons, including displacement or lacking resources to emigrate. The other sense of “captivating state” refers to the Iraqi and Kurdistan states and the power they hold over the imaginations and affections of their citizens. Whether interlocutors consider their “country” to be “Kurdistan” or “Iraq,” many described a sense of feeling both pulled away and drawn back into their country. Some people who expressed a desire to leave simply did not have the resources or the ability to emigrate. Other interlocutors possessed the resources but not the will; they chose to remain in their country and to work for a better life for themselves and their families. Many people, however, inhabited a space between, desiring to leave and desiring to stay. They speak of forces which constrain and compel. They talk about dashed dreams, fragile hopes, and uncertain futures.

My interlocutors comprise two groups, or cohorts. The first cohort includes teenagers, most of whom I knew through my research in their schools. The second cohort includes young adults, people in their 20s and early 30s, ambitious “emerging adults” who held university degrees and were focused on building their careers, and in some cases delaying marriage. Members of both cohorts are positioned well-enough by wealth

and status to entertain hopes of pursuing their dreams in Kurdistan, like opening a business, or becoming a doctor or an engineer. But they also are experienced enough – having lived variously through the First Gulf War, the sanctions era, the 2003 – 2011 war, and now the conflict with the Islamic State – to know that realizing their dreams depends upon many factors beyond their control. War and politics foreclose many possibilities, and social and family pressures pull people in different directions. In contemporary Kurdistan, young people are presented with competing “ethical positions,” with future-oriented narratives that instruct people to live in accordance with certain values and goals. The cross-pressuring of different ethical positions is greater upon some people than upon others. Many of my interlocutors were engaged in a struggle to meet the demands of various ethical regimes while also pursuing individual dreams. Some lost hope in dreaming altogether.

I use the language of “dreaming” when discussing both personal and national or state aspirations because “dreaming” reflects the imaginative and ephemeral nature of envisioning a future amid violence, precarity, and uncertainty. Dreams that occur while sleeping and dreams formulated as conscious goals have much in common in present-day Kurdistan. In waking life, just as in dream life, people find that they have little control over the directions their dream takes. Although I am describing people who are engaged to some extent in self-cultivation through envisioning futures, their ability to act can be quite limited due to factors beyond their control. Because so much lies beyond the individual’s control, there is a melding of the “fantasy” and the “real” in narratives about nationalism, religion, or modernization.

My discussion of “dreams” also takes inspiration from the magical realism of Kurdish writer Bakhtiyar Ali, whose novel *Ghezelnus u Baxekani Xeyal* (*Ghazalrus and the Gardens of Imagination*) I quote at the beginning of each chapter. Quotes are drawn from Kareem Abdulrahman’s (2016) English language translation of the novel with a different title, *I Stared at the Night of the City*. In his novel, Ali describes an expensive neighborhood called “*Nwemiran*” (literally “New Princes” or “New Royalty”), which resembles many of the luxury residential communities in Kurdistan, most famously one called “Dream City.” The novel takes place in an unnamed city in the Kurdistan Region that is dusty, crowded, violent, and morally corrupt. His protagonists – hardened politicians, conniving middlemen, abused women, lovestruck poets, and naïve teachers – wander the city in search of relief from material and existential hardships. Those who find some peace do so through the imagination and enter a parallel dream world. Although this dream world has profound effects on individual lives, the novelist suggests that dreamers have little impact on the “real” world, whose politicians and city planners can build only soulless approximations of the dream.

Like the characters of Ali’s novel, some people I knew in Kurdistan imagined possible futures others criticized as “fantasy.” Many of my adult interlocutors had the resources to emigrate and leave Iraq behind them, though few of them did so during the time of my fieldwork. Some of my teenage interlocutors anticipated pursuing higher education abroad and perhaps staying after finishing their degree, while others indicated that they would probably return to Kurdistan. There was a sense of determination, even desperation, not to give up on their country entirely. For some people, the “futures” promoted by nationalist, religious, or secular ideologies turned out to be illusory, perhaps

impossible. Nevertheless, people still desire “liveable” lives, to find what “good” remains and to be “good” people. To skeptics, the efforts of many of my interlocutors may seem like escapism, or living in privileged, parallel worlds: privileged to live one kind of life in spaces like the university or the gym, and to live another with their family or religious community. I suggest, however, that the sense of “living between” is a condition of living in a transitional moment in Kurdistan, fraught with dreams and dread about possible futures. It is also a condition of living in an increasingly value pluralistic society, as war and displacement, migration, and diaspora returnees have exploded the diversity already present in Kurdistan. By “value pluralism,” I refer to a context in which multiple values circulate and compete; some values may be equally “moral,” but impossible to realize at the same time. Political philosopher Isaiah Berlin refers to the moral dilemmas that result from the fragmentation and incommensurability of values as “tragic” choices. We might say they are “doubly tragic” in a time of war and deprivation when such choices are painfully limited.

In this dissertation, I focus on interactions between Kurdistan people with different orientations toward religion, nationalism, and modernization. These interactions occur in the context of what is often described as “sectarian cultures” within a “failed” or “failing” state. However, to attribute to “sectarianism” the myriad “failures” and disappointments people suffer does not account for the other domains of life with considerable power to shape individual values. I am referring to the “ethical” dimensions of daily life, the mundane ways in which people respond to failure and disappointment. In the encounters with state and sect described in this dissertation, we see a messy web of

belief and doubt. We also witness interlocutors' gradations of assent or dissent to identity categories assigned by the state and by society.

I argue that we need a way of interpreting these kinds of encounters that focuses, not on "sectarianism" as it has been conceptualized within anthropology of the Middle East, but on the contests of values that occur when people desire different kinds of political institutions and cultures that push back against the "sectarian" state. When people pursue different "goods," they bump up against not mere "ethnic" or "religious" difference but "ethical difference," signifying different values and value systems. Contested "goods" are not merely theoretical, but, as anthropologists of "the good" contend, central to many people's lives. Throughout this dissertation, interlocutors grapple with finding an acceptable, or one might say "ethical," way of realizing certain values and attaining certain goods despite enormous pressures toward other values and other goods.

At the same time, anthropologists have critiqued the limits of concepts like "the good" and "ethics," especially in contexts of conflict and state collapse (Das et al. 2015). It is true that one response to outward failures and disappointments is a turning inward, or "cultivation of the self," (Schielke 2010a; Al-Mohammad and Peluso 2012) which Samuli Scheilke argues has dominated the study of Muslim worlds since the "ethical turn" exemplified by Saba Mahmood's (2005) work on "piety." In striving to understand moral life beyond the "grand schemes of Islam" (Schielke 2010a) and the "trope" of "self-cultivation," I center interlocutors' own words, their articulations of the many problems plaguing contemporary Iraq. People appearing in this dissertation are very reflective about the failures of state and sect and about the power these institutions exert

over their lives. I have organized the chapters according to repeated sayings I heard throughout my field work. Unsurprisingly, the sayings reflect the generally negative commentary so pervasive in Kurdistan at the time. They include phrases like “*ma’sh nîya*,” (“there is no salary”), a reference not only to the Kurdistan Regional Government’s freeze on salaries owed to some 60% of the population, but also to the general dysfunction of state and society.

One might ask, as some interlocutors do, what people are “going to do” or “should do” about said dysfunction. Throughout the ethnography, interlocutors discuss this problem, and I center their conversations as they are insightful co-theorists observing themselves, their society, and their state. Failures, of course, do not obligate everyone to act, as if people must “resist” in readily discernable, and romanticized, ways. Rather, this dissertation is largely about “listening” to people speak about their disappointments, and sometimes their hopes, while they wait for an uncertain “future,” or tragically, for “no future”. My closest interlocutors at times expressed something like hopefulness that resided in what might be called an “inner life,” whose content they shared only with their closest friends and family, if they shared it at all. It would be “romanticizing resistance” (Abu-Lughod 1990) for me to assert that these “inner lives,” in so far as they were shared with me in fragments and moments, were “rich” in the sense of consciously formulating alternatives to ineffective and oppressive systems of power. For this reason, I direct the reader’s attention to my interlocutors’ words, often in the form of lengthy quotes or transcripts of conversations, because it their own assessments about the state, hope, and futures that comprise the ethical life with which this dissertation is concerned.



As in Bakhtiyar Ali's magical realist novel, some people effectively draw upon the imagination, enabling them to be "hopeful." Certainly, people with more material resources and political connections seemed more optimistic about their future. They responded to failures and disappointments by working with charitable organizations, or they joined communities organized around self-improvement, like gym-goers and bodybuilders. Some dreamed about improving their country, while others were looking for temporary escape. But, for the many people lacking resources, it appears they are "resigned" to doing "nothing." Their "resignation" comprises much of the dialogue appearing in this dissertation. Occasionally, through dialogue, study, and self-reflection, people discover "bits of hope that nobody thought of," as one thoughtful teenager named Ashur observes at the end of his academic year.

Initially, I thought "alternative" practices and spaces, such as the private schools and fitness centers in which I conducted research, were "pluralistic," especially when their founders or participants said so, often glossed in speech as "modern." Rather, they are spaces in which people were living "as if" – as if they could eliminate, or at least minimize, the powers of state, sect, or family. Although contests of values occurred in "pluralistic" spaces and influenced individual value-formation, the "winner" of such contests was predetermined. In these allegedly pluralistic spaces, the hegemonic values of a majority-Muslim society tended to prevail over attempts to introduce alternative values or practices. For example, an attempt to teach a religious text in a more "neutral" way that was deemed appropriate for a religiously diverse student body nevertheless reinforced Islamic majoritarian values. Or a "modern" gym in which men and women exercised together, and in which political party, ethnoreligious identity, or gender "didn't

matter,” nevertheless policed behaviors in the gym in familiar ways. To be clear, I am not questioning sincerity of motives or evaluating the “success” or “failure” of anyone or anything; I leave those assessments to my interlocutors.

In the following chapters, the degree to which individuals participate in ethical self-formation and subscribe to any particular vision for a future Kurdistan varies greatly: Some people find personal satisfaction through advancing a cause, while others suffer failure and disillusionment. My interlocutors have faced incredible difficulties, and it is remarkable that many of them have summoned the strength and courage to continue striving for a good life for themselves, their families, and their country. Considering their example, the dissertation’s conclusion contemplates how the cultivation of hope also may benefit anthropologists. In her most recent “state of the discipline” article, Sherry Ortner characterizes the anthropological work of the past couple decades as “dark anthropology” due to its focus on “the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality, and oppression)” (2016:47). An unintended result of hyperattention to dark themes is that anthropologists have neglected other aspects of human experience, such as the formation and contestation of values, or conceptualizing and pursuing the “good” life. Even in contexts of violence and suffering, such as “war-torn” Iraq, we find people engaged in the daily, and often mundane, tasks which comprise “ethical life.” We even find people cultivating hope. In an era of deepening inequalities and injustices and our preoccupation with them, an anthropology of hope may guide us back to one of the central commitments of our discipline: “the moral obligation to hope” (Geertz 2000) that our efforts can contribute to better understanding, and thus, to a better world.

## **Ch. 1: Ethical life in Iraqi Kurdistan**

*“If there is a dream city on this planet, it’s the one we are travelling towards, but will never reach.” - Bakhtiyar Ali, I Stared at the Night of the City*

### *In the shadow of Dream City*

In the city of Erbil, also known as “Hewlêr,” the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, there is a gated luxury residential community called “Dream City.” Many Dream City homes, with their palatial structures and eccentric architecture, are visible from the adjacent, busy streets. Each new house strives to outdo the rest, with hodge-podge styles ranging from terracotta Italian villas, to stark modernist mansions, to the extravagant “White House,” which, as its name suggests, boasts a facade modeled after the official residence of the President of the United States. Nearby, four- and five-star hotels tower over the flat, arid city. These hotels host foreign dignitaries, international conferences, and regional beauty pageants. People enjoy novelties available only in the newest, most expensive establishments in Erbil, such as sushi, cocktails, and co-ed pool parties.

Across the street from these hotels, the sprawling Sami Abdulrahman Park offers a cool, green escape from the dusty city. In Sami Park, men and women jog together on the running paths, picnic in the gardens, and play sports. Anyone who visited Kurdistan in its boom years (2011-2014) might have believed the hype: Erbil would be the “next Dubai,” a phrase I first heard in 2012 when I visited the Kurdistan Region to conduct preliminary dissertation fieldwork. And Erbil might have become the “next Dubai” had the Islamic State (IS) not invaded Mosul in June 2014 and plunged Iraq into another cycle of conflict, halting Erbil’s building frenzy.

The many unfinished construction sites around Erbil remind people of what Erbil might have been. Their skeletal frames and sun-faded signs with architects' mockups also bitterly remind people of the ways the Iraqi and Kurdistan governments have failed them, as Umut Kuruüzüm (2018) has documented. Just around the corner from the luxury hotels is one such abandoned construction site. Large signs announcing the project cover the entire perimeter fence, hiding the site itself from view. Perhaps it was this privacy which appealed to the displaced Yezidi families who lived inside the perimeter.

Yezidi people are among Iraq's dwindling ethnoreligious minority populations. Throughout their history, Yezidi people have been maligned for their little-understood religious practices. By their own count, Yezidis have suffered 74 genocides, including the most recent one perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). When the Islamic State attacked Sinjar in 2014, tens of thousands of Yezidis fled north to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. While thousands of families settled in camps, other families settled in the host community. Some of the Yezidis who fled to Erbil ended up in the abandoned building site, squatting illegally in lean-to shelters made of construction litter. Their camp lay in the shadow of an unfinished building.

"They need to know that there is someone caring about them, someone that loves them," Sara said to me as we drove to visit the Yezidi camp in June 2017. "Sara" was an Iraqi Christian woman in her early twenties, displaced from the Christian village of Qaraqosh. At university in Mosul, Sara had majored in English and aspired to earn a master's degree in English Literature. When the Islamic State invaded in 2014, Sara and her extended family escaped to Erbil, taking only what they could fit in their vehicles.

They lost their homes, land, and livelihood. The expensive agricultural equipment which the family used in large-scale farming was destroyed by ISIS.

In Erbil, Sara was overworked. She taught all day at a private school, and in the evenings, she earned extra money giving private lessons. She also responded to text requests from her students when they wanted help with their homework, even late at night. Sara helped her family with household chores whenever she could. She often worried about her younger sister, who was pregnant with her second child. Sara, her mother, father, sister, brother-in-law and their children rented a house together in the increasingly crowded Ainkawa township. Ainkawa is home to generations of indigenous Iraqi Christians, as well as recently arrived refugees and internally displaced people. Sara and her father, also a teacher, supported their family with meagre salaries. When she heard about the Yezidi camp, she asked herself, “How could I turn this opportunity down?”

Despite being exhausted, Sara visited the Yezidi squatters camp on Fridays, the first day of the weekend in Kurdistan (and in many other Muslim majority countries). In a lengthy interview toward the end of my fieldwork, Sara told me,

I go [to the camp] and try my best, because I understand what it is to be in their situation - not really, fully, because I did not lose family members, which is the most important thing. I was thinking I would not be able to see them and not cry. But when I went there, God gave me strength, and I felt joy. It is amazing how they have these pure hearts. Being with them makes you feel more human. I try, I try to treat them well and make sure they know I love them so much.

Along with a couple other volunteers, including her father, Sara taught the camp children English and Arabic. (Yezidi people typically speak a variety of Kurmanji Kurdish, which was not a language of instruction in any Erbil school.) Most of the children had missed

multiple school years, and the volunteers hoped the students could learn enough to be admitted to a government school for displaced youth.

Friday lessons were held in a large tent inside the camp. When we opened the tent flap to enter, the escaping air felt hotter than the summer air outside. A lone *mubarida* (water cooler) gurgled and spurted on generator power. Volunteers divided the students into groups based on their abilities. A couple easels were used for teaching. One easel displayed a hand-drawn map of Iraq, on which someone had located and written “Sinjar,” the homeland these displaced families left behind. The territory is disputed, claimed at times by both the central Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. On the hand-drawn map, the territory encompassing Sinjar was labeled “Kurdistan.”

Despite their best efforts, 16 out of 18 Yezidi students failed their government school exams. Sara explained that her volunteer work was not just about helping students continue with their education. “We want them to be socialized,” she said. Some of the Yezidi camp youth told Sara they were upset by their treatment in government schools:

They told me when they had religion class, [the teachers] made them stay. I told them if this happens again, let me know. I would talk to the person in charge of the program. So it did not happen again. The rule is “Anyone who is not Muslim go out” [from the Islam religion class] but [the teachers] did not let them out. The problem about people here is they don’t have respect, especially about Yezidis because they have misconceptions about what they believe in. But they are people just like you, so treat them well.

Although a male volunteer sometimes took the male youth on excursions to Sami Park, the girls rarely left the camp. “They are kind of buried in here,” Sara observed. She complained that the teenagers, especially girls, married too young. “I want them to know they can do something,” Sara told me. “It’s not only get married and that’s it. Also education is important. Even if they get married, you have to teach your kids, you have to

know things. I think they have been accepting the idea more.” Sara herself was reluctant to marry because she did not want marriage responsibilities to interfere with her volunteer work and teaching job.

While Sara felt comfortable encouraging the Yezidi youth about education, she made it clear that she did not go to the camp to convert anyone to her religion. One day, a Yezidi teenage boy wore a cross necklace to Friday lessons. Sara said to me,

Maybe they think that we are teaching them to change them, you know what I mean? I would never do that. I will show them God’s love, and they can choose. One of the Kurdish Muslim volunteers asked the boy, “Where did you get this? Why are you wearing this? This is for Christians.” The boy said, “I know. I bought it because I love Christians.” And we told him, “We love you too.” I think we are both peaceful people who don’t want a fight. Even the other day they were talking about marriage. If a Yezidi boy married a Muslim girl, his punishment is death. But there is a possibility of marrying a Christian.

Sara said that the Kurdish male volunteer then offered to share an Islamic view of Christianity with the Yezidi boy. She surmised that, while both Christians and Muslims recognize Jesus as an important religious figure, perhaps Yezidis are not respected because they do not have enough religious beliefs or practices in common with neighboring religious communities. The most important thing for her was that the displaced Yezidis knew they were loved. Her large, expressive eyes brimming with tears, Sara concluded that her volunteer work had become central to her life:

They have struggled a lot and been through a lot. And this is the only thing I can give: my love to them. And I think they appreciate it. They love me back, and I feel like they are now an important part of my life. I don’t know how I will survive without them now. Seeing them gives me hope.

When I last talked with Sara in 2017, she was struggling to hold onto hope: Her family visited their hometown for the first time in almost three years. Seeing the rubble of homes and churches pained Sara and her family, and they decided they could not bear resettling

there. She also unsuccessfully applied for a scholarship to study in the United States. Meanwhile, many of her foreign friends, myself included, returned to their home countries. Her best friend and fellow teacher, Shams, moved to Turkey to earn a master's degree, leaving Sara feeling abandoned.

Eventually, Sara left her teaching job and joined a non-governmental organization working with internally displaced Iraqis living in the Mosul area. She rarely shares anything on social media, and her infrequent posts typically consist of inspirational quotes like, "Don't be afraid to fail at things that mean something. Be afraid to succeed at things that mean nothing." Or she posts about her NGO work: photos of Sara laughing and running with a pack of children; videos of the countryside rushing past as she travels between work sites; a photo of ruined buildings from the recent conflict with the Islamic State; a photo of street scene in her home town - no people, just a lonely, wooden cross with a small Iraqi flag attached.

### *Cultivating hope amid chaos*

In the following chapters, I introduce the reader to many Kurdistan people, who, like Sara, are striving to cultivate hope through practices of ethical self-formation during a chaotic, transitional era for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In this section, I offer a brief review of recent Iraqi history, particularly the events which have made cultivating hope so difficult. Cyclical violence, tenuous political alliances, betrayals, and failed uprisings characterize Kurdistan history of the past 50 years (and the past couple centuries, but events of the past 50 years occurred within living memory of my older interlocutors). Former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime (1979-2003) destroyed



thousands of villages, displacing tens of thousands of Kurdish people, and resettled those villages with ethnic Arabs as part of an Iraqi Arabization campaign. Near the end of a grueling eight-year war between Iraq and Iran (1980-1988), the Iraqi government also waged war internally against its citizens: Tens of thousands of Kurdistan people were killed in the Anfal (Spoils of War) genocide, most infamously in the chemical attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja.

In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, prompting an international coalition, led by the United States, to attack Iraqi forces in Kuwait and in Iraq (the 1991 Gulf War). For Kurdistan people, an important outcome of this conflict was the coalition's establishment of a no-fly zone (NFZ) that banned Iraqi aircraft from entering the airspace over the Kurdistan Region. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the NFZ protected the Kurdistan Region from Iraqi forces (though not from internal conflict, as rival Kurdistan political parties waged civil war in the mid-1990s and involved the Iraqi military at the height of the conflict). Also in response to the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the United Nations Security Council imposed economic sanctions on Iraq, which remained in place (in various forms) until the 2003 invasion.

Many Kurdistan people welcomed the 2003 United States-led invasion, as it deposed their enemy, Saddam Hussein, and dismantled the Baath Party. While the 2003-2011 Iraq War destroyed much of the country, the Kurdistan Region emerged from the war in a stronger position, largely due to its Coalition allyship and protection. From 2011 to 2014, the KRI enjoyed a period of stability and rapid economic growth and anticipated becoming "the next Dubai." I first visited Iraqi Kurdistan in 2012 during this hopeful boom era, when construction sites for new businesses, schools, shopping centers, and

residential communities multiplied like mushrooms popping up across the landscape. People spoke optimistically about their future plans, not imagining that the country would soon be devastated by yet another war.

In June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria invaded the city of Mosul and surrounding territory of Nineveh province. Tens of thousands of people fled, including Iraqi military forces. Many of the displaced people went to the north, to the Kurdistan Region. In August, Daesh attacked the Sinjar area, home to a large Yezidi community, an ethnoreligious minority whom Daesh branded “devil worshippers.” ISIS killed thousands of civilians and abducted hundreds of Yezidi women, forcing them into marriages and sex slavery. Thousands of people fled into the nearby mountains, where they were besieged for days without food or water before U.S. airstrikes and various Kurdish militia forces helped most of the stranded escape.

Kurdistani military forces (peshmerga) remobilized against Daesh and occupied long-disputed territories claimed by both the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Iraqi government. With territorial expansion came hundreds of thousands of Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as thousands of refugees from the war in neighboring Syria. Before the conflict with Daesh, the population of the Kurdistan Region was around 5 million people. During my fieldwork, that number increased to 7 million. Water and electricity shortages intensified. A protracted sovereignty dispute over oil sales between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal Iraqi government in Baghdad led to the cessation of government salaries which supported an estimated 60% of its residents (Joseph and Sümer 2019). Economic stagnation followed, and a widespread sense of despair settled over the KRI. Since the war against Daesh

ended in late 2017, economic hardship and political disputes between the KRG and Iraq have continued to plague the country.



Figure 1. Retired members of the Kurdish peshmerga at an informal reunion. Photo by the author. 2012.

I carried out 20 months of fieldwork during this difficult and uncertain time. In my last months in the field, I witnessed the buildup of anticipation for a Kurdistan independence referendum. Political leaders said the referendum's purpose was to gauge support for establishing an independent Kurdistan. In September 2017, an overwhelming majority of Kurdistan residents voted in favor of independence from Iraq, but the international community did not support the referendum. In October 2017, Iraqi forces invaded the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, retaking it and other disputed territories the Kurdish peshmerga had gained during the war. Due to political infighting, the Kurdish forces withdrew from the city. Days later, the Iraqi government announced it had reclaimed all territories it held before 2014. The lack of international support for the Kurdistan independence referendum, the subsequent invasion, and the loss of territory, particularly

Kirkuk, humiliated the Kurdistan Region. One of my Kurdistan friends posted on Facebook that she was glad that her father, who had died a few months prior, did not live to see these events.

Some of the most disappointed Kurdistan people I met were youth, broadly defined as ages 12 to 30. The generations born in the 1990s and 2000s were born into conflict. Their childhoods were impacted by the First Gulf War (1990 - 1991); the sanctions era (1990 - 2003); civil conflict between Kurdish political parties (1994 -1996); and the Second Gulf War (2003 - 2011). It seemed that the recent period of stability (2011 - 2014) had inspired hope in many people. When it all came crashing down in June 2014, some people's lives were devastated suddenly, like Sara's family or the Yezidi squatters described earlier in the chapter. Others felt their hope slowly burning out.

### *Sites, methods, and positions*

Before proceeding, I should explain further about my research sites, methods, and positionality in the field. I spent almost two years living in the Kurdistan Region, from September 2015 to July 2017, with the exception of five weeks in the summer of 2016, during which time I traveled to Europe and took a "break" from fieldwork. Those five weeks coincided with the month of Ramadan. Based on my previous experience, I did not anticipate getting much research done during the long, hot days of fasting, and many of my key interlocutors also traveled. During my "break," I presented my preliminary findings at two anthropology conferences in Europe, which proved helpful in rethinking my research plan for the second half of my field work. In Kurdistan, I conducted field work for approximately 20 months, including four months focused on learning Sorani

Kurdish. My field work during these 20 months was challenging largely for two reasons: The first is that I had less access to certain schools than I anticipated before going to the field, which ultimately prompted me to reframe my research project. The second reason is that my data collection occurred in fits and starts because I was sick frequently throughout my fieldwork, with a (then) undiagnosed chronic health condition, in addition to the usual illnesses one might expect during international field work.

Additional difficulties during fieldwork often concerned my researcher status and my gender. When my husband and I moved to Kurdistan, we found housing with a Kurdish family interested in renting out the top floor of their two-story home in “Kaysha Nîya,” a poor urban neighborhood allegedly settled by illegal squatters. Kaysha Nîya seemed like a traditional Kurdish village dropped into the middle of a city, with chickens and children roaming the streets and tins of chunky, homemade yogurt for sale in an elderly couple’s corner shop. To celebrate *Jezhnî Qurban* (the Feast of Sacrifice, *‘Eid al-Adha* in Arabic), our neighbors slaughtered a cow in front of their house. An endless stream of visitors and reciprocal visits to see neighbors grounded me in the cultural practices shared by many people in my field site: Intense socializing characterized by hospitality, warmth, and humor. It seemed like an ideal place for language learning.

Nevertheless, one local university I sought a research affiliation with did not approve of our decision to live in this area, perhaps owing to its “low” reputation. Taxi drivers and new acquaintances reacted with surprise or laughter upon hearing where I was living. The Kurdish security police (*asayîsh*) seemed very reluctant to allow two American citizens to live in this “backward” area. When we met with local security officials to register our new residence, people questioned whether my husband and I

might have ulterior motives. They expressed disbelief that my husband had “followed” me to Kurdistan because I was pursuing a Ph.D. (and not the other way around). After our meeting with the security police, our landlords confronted us about being “spies,” saying they feared getting into trouble with the government. Why did I ask so many questions? What did my husband “really” do? And how did I already know some Kurdish? It was unusual for people to hear a foreigner like me conversant in Kurdish (at a basic conversational level, acquired through an intense summer language program), which says more about the paucity of Kurdish language learning resources in the United States than my linguistic abilities. Instead, Kurdistan people were accustomed to foreigners who worked in oil or natural resources industries or did humanitarian work, and who lived in wealthier areas and did not interact much with local people. They rarely learned more Kurdish or Arabic than a few greetings and basic phrases for transportation and shopping.

In Kaysha Nîya, our neighbors worried aloud about my being “alone” in the house when my husband was away at his job teaching English. They asked me often about my daily activities and who was present in the house. People also expressed disapproval about my going to and from home unaccompanied and using taxis, especially in the evenings when I worked at a fitness center across the city. I understood these were concerns not just about my safety, but also about the potentially illicit relationships that people feared our (male) landlords might form with me, which would scandalize the extended family and the neighborhood. After two difficult months of disputes with landlords and neighbors and some sexual harassment, it became clear to me that these concerns were not unfounded; we decided to move to another area.

For a few months, we shared a house and living expenses with an Assyrian Christian Iraqi family in a newly constructed, gated residential community called “International Village.” It was at the far outskirts of the city, where sections of the roadway still had not been paved. International Village introduced me to another side of life in Iraq: experiences of religious minorities, some of whom were native to the Kurdistan Region and others who moved there after being displaced by war. We knew little about our new neighbors, a diverse mix of busy professionals from inside and outside Iraq, who lived quietly in their spacious homes removed from urban noise and crowding. Some walked pet dogs, a novelty in an Islamic society in which dogs were considered *haram* (forbidden). A small grocery store and cafe within the compound offered imported foods and the convenience of not having to drive back into the city. Residents of our new neighborhood did not socialize like in Kaysha Nîya; living in International Village was lonely compared to Kaysha Nîya.

For the latter half of my fieldwork, we lived in an area called “Rapareen,” closer to the city center. We rented the upstairs floor of an organization whose operations had slowed as the conflict with the Islamic State deepened and foreign organizations recalled their employees. Rapareen represented an older era, as some of my interlocutors commented approvingly upon hearing that I had moved there. Rapareen’s population had grown in the past decade through rural to urban migration and as people displaced from elsewhere in Iraq resettled in the Kurdistan Region. A new, multi-story shopping mall reflected the area’s development. Our neighbors were a mix of Kurdish Muslims, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, an Azeri Iranian family, and a Turkmani family; they could attend a church or a mosque, both of which were located on our street.

In Rapareen, Christian and Muslim neighbors visited during each other's religious holidays. Neighbors demonstrated necessary skills like washing debris and litter along the gutter, how to (re)connect our home's electrical wires to the giant pole we all shared, and how to pay our water, electricity, and generator bills. People occasionally invited us into their homes for a meal or party; they seemed to understand that our social visits were limited because of our jobs and American lifestyle. At the risk of romanticizing, I consider Rapareen and its residents as representative of the "pluralistic" and "tolerant" Kurdistan I and many other people appearing in this dissertation wanted to see.

Living in three different types of areas in Kurdistan made encounters with "pluralism" central to my research. Like many of my interlocutors, I daily crossed "boundaries" between different frameworks for living in Kurdistan. Toward the end of my fieldwork, when I thought I finally had a working map of the city and its possibilities, a new acquaintance would invite me into their world, uncharted territory where the field was suddenly new again. Anyone who has conducted fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan, or any place with a high degree of sociality, knows how an ethnographer's best-laid plans can be redirected by others' hospitality, sometimes fortuitously and sometimes frustratingly. While moving frequently between wildly different spaces felt disorienting at times, my specific research project would not have emerged without a willingness to be carried along. The resulting project reflects my being carried along and encountering different visions for the future of the Kurdistan Region and of Iraq. As the project took shape, I focused on a narrower category of people defined by their common interest in ethical self-formation and encounters with "ethical difference."



Before I discuss “ethical difference” and my theoretical framework, I need to explain my research permissions, how my research unfolded, what data it yielded, and what limitations it presented. My approved research protocol with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Kentucky permitted me to collect data according to the following conditions: I was allowed to observe, informally converse with, and conduct formal interviews with children aged 12 and older. Obtaining informed consent with children involved reading an approved script and obtaining their verbal assent. The script made clear that I would not share information they provided me with anyone else, including their teachers and parents, unless that information concerned their safety (e.g., self-harm); thankfully, the need to alert an adult to such a situation never arose. Interviews with children typically occurred in their schools, where I also already had research permission. I was careful not to allow my research to interfere with educational lessons and objectives, requesting to interview students and teachers when they had “free” time.

In my IRB protocol, I had a specific category of adults called “officials, inside and outside Iraq,” that the IRB required me to obtain informed consent via a signed approved form. This category included school principals or government officials, for example. The majority of the adults who participated in my research did not belong in the “officials” category, and with these adults, I had IRB permission to obtain informed consent verbally with an approved IRB script. I requested of the IRB that I be allowed to obtain informed consent verbally in most cases because many people in Kurdistan and Iraq are hesitant to sign “official” documents that might identify them. I believe this is largely owing to histories of state-sponsored violence against certain populations.

After my initial four months in the field focused on language learning, I approached a private school I call “Kurdistan Civilizational School,” or “KCS,” which has multiple campuses across Kurdistan. I met with the school’s principal to request permission to conduct observation and interviews for a semester, as I had planned in my dissertation research proposal. The principal stated her concerns about the potentially sensitive nature of my research interest in religious, ethnic, and national identities. The school had received some negative publicity after an incident on one of the school campuses a few years prior, which some people said resulted from an alleged religious “conversion.” The religious nature of KCS is unique compared to other schools in Kurdistan: Although the majority of KCS students identified as Muslim and Kurdish, many of the schools’ founders and teachers were Christians. KCS was founded to provide Kurdistan youth with an education based in “classical Christian education,” which takes inspiration from the classical Trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, taught under the umbrella of a “Christian ethic.”

Because of the incident and negative publicity, the principal would not grant access to anyone who might write an “exposé” about the school. I assured her that was not my intention. Rather, I explained that, as a practicing or “believing” Christian, I shared some interest in the religious nature of KCS. Second, I was familiar with the curriculum, and I was known to the American NGO that provided some of the textbooks and teaching staff. Furthermore, although I might not agree with everything in the school (in fact, I was uncomfortable with many things I observed), as an anthropologist, I

assured the principal that I was trained and committed to being careful to protect the identities of research participants.

Undoubtedly, my shared religious identity and sympathetic attitude toward the school helped me gain access, and not only through the principal's official permission. I told anyone who asked about my religious identity, which is a common question in Kurdistan, that I was a "practicing" Christian, or a "believer." Other Americans who identified as Christian had worked in KCS over the years, and initially people thought I was a newly arrived teacher. Students and teachers seemed pleased to meet me. Many told me about their American friends or teachers who had worked at the school, and how I reminded them of their beloved former coworkers or teachers. It was clear to me that many of these American teachers had been well-liked and that they were missed. Due to my open religious identity, my being an American, and my shared enthusiasm about education, I developed a closeness with many teachers and students that I might not have enjoyed if my identity and positionality had been otherwise. While English was the lingua franca and the language of instruction for most courses at KCS, I understood enough Sorani Kurdish to observe classes taught in Kurdish, such as *komalayati* (social studies). Relative to another of my research sites, a government school for Kurdish speakers in the town of "Betala," collecting data at KCS was easier linguistically and relationally. There were far more instructional hours at KCS than at government schools, allowing me more time to develop rapport with teachers and students.

In KCS, I formally interviewed 7 teachers and had countless conversations with teachers in their break room. I conducted numerous individual and group interviews with an estimated 100 students. This number is an estimation because group interviews with

students were open to any student and were fluid as students joined and left throughout an interview. I selected Grade 10 as the cohort I would focus on while at KCS. Grade 10 included about 25 students, and I interacted with them daily by attending their classes, socializing with them on the school bus and during breaks, and occasionally joining social outings. My inclusion in social events and some confidences was significant because teachers typically were not invited to student-organized gatherings. I, however, inhabited a liminal position between adult authority figure and peer. At the time of my fieldwork, I was in my late 20s, but with my smaller stature, blue jeans, and ponytail, I regularly passed as much younger: On my first day in KCS, for example, a Kurdish language teacher mistook me for a new international high school student and called on me while I sat in a student desk at the back of the classroom. As someone still occupying the “student” subject position, some administrators and teachers treated me as their subordinate, even when we were close in age. Not wanting to be perceived as pushy or uppity, I readily deferred to their authority. Other adults, especially the younger teachers, seemed to consider me a peer.

My fieldwork in KCS followed the rhythms of the school day: riding the bus in the morning, attending classes, eating lunch in the small cafeteria, attending more classes or hanging out with teachers in their break room, and wrapping up the day around 3pm. At that time, tired students, teachers, and staff quickly dispersed, and rarely did anyone invite me to join them after the school day. Occasionally, a student’s parent or driver might offer to drive me to my next location, which usually was the gym where I taught an evening fitness class. Although I felt that I enjoyed generally good rapport while on the school campus, I also perceived that students and teachers kept me at arm’s length and

mostly out of their domestic lives by using the physical and temporal boundaries of the school campus and the official end of the school day.

Although many students and some teachers were willing, even eager, to talk with me about certain subjects, rapport only went so far. After “letting their guard down” by saying something that might get them into trouble, students would suddenly remember I was there and ask me not to say anything to their teachers. Despite my frequent reassurances that I did not share information about students with their parents or teachers and vice versa, I found that people assumed I did anyway. I did not attempt to collect any data via surveys or questionnaires, although I wanted to do so, because I worried that systematically recording potentially sensitive data (like ethnic and religious demographics) might be perceived as threatening. I once asked to see the school’s demographic data about students, but the evasive and uncomfortable response I received convinced me that I had better not push my luck. To that end, I also did not interview the school principal, most administrators, and certain teachers, for fear of asking “too many” or the “wrong” questions that might compromise my research permission. Additionally, earning students’ and some teachers’ confidences necessitated distancing myself from the school’s administration.

As we neared the end of my semester in KCS, students asked if I could stay and be their teacher. One faculty member suggested I remain at KCS and work (voluntarily) as a “college counselor” while continuing my research there. The school needed someone to help students navigate the college application and decision-making process. I seriously considered changing my research plan. Rather than proceeding to a government school, I could produce a more in-depth exploration of KCS, resulting in a dissertation

that would more closely resemble a classic school ethnography. After weighing my options, I decided that I would proceed with my original plan of carrying out research in three types of schools in Kurdistan. When the semester ended, I was sad to leave all the people I had come to know at KCS. Some I stayed in touch with during the rest of my field work and after I returned to the United States. Dozens of students and teachers connected with me on social media, and I have followed their lives at a distance. It has been bittersweet for me to see KCS students grow up, and to see my friends who were teachers leave the school for other opportunities.

Gaining access to a government school proved more difficult than I anticipated. My Sorani language tutor and key interlocutor, Ashti, suggested I carry out research in her school. She agreed that it was important that I observe a “typical” government high school to have a more holistic understanding of education and youth in Kurdistan. Ashti taught English language and literature to Kurdish high school girls in “Betala,” a rural area about a 30-minute drive outside the city. Ashti and I could ride together to and from the school, giving us more time together to discuss my observations or to speak as friends. This plan was acceptable to the school’s principal, so I began visiting Betala with Ashti and observing classes. Not many days had passed when a government official happened to visit the school and spotted me in the courtyard – a pale, blonde wearing blue jeans in a sea of Kurdish girls with dark hair and uniformly wearing white, long sleeve shirts and ankle length, dark blue skirts.

Summoned to the principal’s office, I felt every bit the guilty student while this apoplectic official lectured the school’s principal, who meekly explained why I was in the school. With a scathing glance in my direction, she declared I could not be much older

than the high school students, and that there was no way I was a Ph.D. student. Hearing this, I offered her my business card and started to explain my research. Perhaps alarmed that I had understood her Kurdish words not intended for my ears, she turned back to the principal and continued her tirade: It was not enough that he had granted me permission; I had to go to the Ministry of Education. I was not to return to the school until I had a signed letter. I spent the next couple weeks going from one government office to another, where each official insisted that some other official was the correct person to provide a letter of permission.

Ashti taught lessons only certain days of the week, so if I wanted to travel to Betala on those days, I had to find other transportation. Taking public transportation – a taxi to the bus station, waiting until the bus filled up, arriving at another bus station, then taking another taxi to the school – took hours. Paying a private taxi was expedient but costly. Ashti also was suffering from stomach ulcers, causing her to miss her lessons. I spent weeks sporadically attempting to carry out fieldwork in Betala, but it was often fruitless: I arrived to learn that it was a government holiday. Or, the schedule had changed unexpectedly, and classes had been in the morning and not the afternoon as usual, and they forgot to tell me. At that time, the Kurdistan government was not paying salaries, so some days there were no lessons, and I sat in the break room sipping tea awkwardly with teachers I barely knew. Then, we entered the month-long exam preparation period, in which the girls I had been trying to get to know were allowed to stay home and study. The little data I gathered in Betala appears in Chapter 5 in which I describe Ashti and other adults who had become deeply discouraged with the situation in Kurdistan and Iraq and were reflecting on emigrating in the face of uncertain futures.

I began seeking permission to carry out fieldwork in a third school. The schools for displaced Arabic speaking youth, I was told, fell under another jurisdiction, not the Erbil Governorate. What about a school for Kurdish speakers displaced from Syria, now living in Iraqi Kurdistan? I asked. In Chapter 2, I describe my attempt to access one of these schools inside a refugee camp. With shortened fieldwork in the Betala school, and no forthcoming permission to observe a Syrian Kurdish refugee school, I realized my original research plan would not work. Although my limited time spent in the Betala school was disappointing, I experienced some significant exchanges there, which I recount in Chapter 5. I have described my struggles accessing and collecting data at Betala and in the refugee camp because they exemplify the bureaucracy and state-making processes that I encountered throughout my field work. It was not just bureaucracy and reluctance that sent me from one government office to another, or that barred my access to certain spaces; it was also a manifestation of the unclear and shifting relationship between the Iraqi and Kurdistan governments. I explore that relationship more in Chapter 2.

With the Betala school behind me, I turned my attention to the one site I had enjoyed consistent access and good rapport since the beginning of my time in the field: the gym where I worked a part-time job teaching indoor cycling group fitness classes. The global fitness industry had come to Kurdistan only in the past decade, and many fitness centers were seeking instructors and personal trainers. Initially, I approached a gym manager about teaching indoor cycling simply as a source of income to support my field expenses and to give me access to a space for exercising and socializing. Gradually, I realized that the schools and the gym shared an overlapping population sharing an



interest in ethical self-formation. I began considering my place of employment as a site for data collection, not just a part time gig. The gym manager, staff, and members all knew that I was conducting research, and with the rapport I had established already, obtaining informed consent went smoothly. I went to the gym most evenings, where I spent at least 2 hours, and sometimes as many as 5 hours. I conducted 16 formal semi-structured interviews with my gym acquaintances, including the gym manager, personal trainers and instructors, and gym members. I conducted many of the interviews in the gym lobby during quiet hours, or if it was during a busy period, I asked the gym management if I could use one of their offices for interviewing. In other cases, interviewees asked that I visit them in their home, a café, or their workplace, so they would not be overheard and could speak more freely.

The gym where I taught cycling classes was divided into three spaces: a “mixed” gender space, for men and women to exercise together; a women’s only section; and a group fitness studio that was used for both “mixed gender” and “women-only” (female-presenting socially) classes. I had countless informal conversations with gym staff and members, especially in the women’s only section of the gym. The gym was busiest during the 6pm to 9pm window. During those hours, I typically joined in group discussions in the lobby or the women’s section and attended group fitness classes. During the slower times of the day, such as the early or midafternoon, few women would use the women’s section. One useful strategy I developed was to hop onto the treadmill or elliptical beside a woman and ask if I could talk with her while we exercised. Often, it was during these off-peak hours that women who did not speak English visited the gym, so many of my conversations with this subset of women were entirely in Sorani Kurdish.

I also used the off-peak hours at the gym to type up field notes or interview notes. People became accustomed to seeing me sitting in the gym lobby and typing notes, and the regulars would stop by “my” table in the lobby to talk. I would shut my laptop while we chatted, and resume typing when they left, sometimes immediately typing up what I had just learned from our exchange. Staff and regular gym members knew me as both a researcher and as a fitness instructor. Some of the gym regulars knew me from their university, where I had a research affiliation and visited once or twice a week for university-related events or to work in my office (generously provided by the university).

At my gym, I cultivated friendships with a diverse group of university-educated and career-driven women in their 20s and early 30s, and my similar focus on education and career made connecting with them easier. My cycling classes also attracted a small group of regular attendees, including a young Kurdish university professor who shared my research interests and became a key interlocutor. I also persuaded the gym manager to permit me to create a new female-only cycling class, through which I grew to know women who did not participate in mixed-gender group fitness, were often shy, and typically spoke little English.

Issues of class permeated the gym in which I worked. Membership in private, urban gyms was expensive, anywhere from 50 to 200 US dollars per month. Membership fees were on the higher end at the gym where I worked, so the members typically were wealthy, socially and politically well-connected elites. Once I was chatting with one of the gym staff members, a middle-class university student, who complained that some gym members treated the staff poorly because they were rich and from important families. When I asked how he knew this, the staff member explained that the

demographic information the gym collects on new members' forms, such as family name or occupation, reveals a lot in a society that is intensely interested in ascertaining and "ranking" one's kinship, class, or status. "And you can just look out the window there," he said, "and see all the [luxury] cars." Indeed, most nights luxury vehicles and sportscars occupied the prime parking spots outside the gym.

I also encountered class and political tensions in the gym, which I discuss in Chapter 4. For example, when I asked a young man to dismount from the stationary bicycle he was using because I needed the bike to teach my class, he refused. I tried another approach, introducing myself in a pleasant tone. He curtly told me his name, revealing he was probably related to some of the highest political leaders in the country. I barely concealed my irritation, saying, "Nice to meet you Kak Sirwan,<sup>1</sup> but I still need that bicycle." My gym acquaintances tended to express assumptions that I also must be wealthy and thus had plenty of disposable income. As I mentioned before, Kurdistan people had become accustomed to foreigners from Europe and the United States who held high paying and high-status jobs in the Kurdistan Region. It was in the company of these ambitious and affluent women that I visited some of the chic restaurants and cafes I described in the opening of this chapter.

When I decided to expand my research concerning the fitness industry, the relationships I had formed at my gym helped me make connections with other gym owners, managers, and trainers. In the last couple months in the field, I visited 5 other fitness centers, and I conducted formal interviews with 6 individuals who taught classes or worked at the gym. My work experience as a group fitness instructor in the U.S. and in

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym. "Kak" or "kaka" is generally used as a term of respect for men, akin to "sir" in English.

Kurdistan usually interested people, especially when I visited other fitness centers. During our conversations, people often asked how much membership cost at my gym, what “type” of people the gym attracted, and if men and women exercised together (*tékala*). Women in my gym and some I met outside my gym seemed to regard me as an expert in fitness and nutrition. I explained, usually to no avail, that I merely coached indoor cycling classes as a hobby. Often people did not accept this answer, pointing out that my slender and toned body evidenced otherwise. Although I sometimes attempted to explain that I owed much of that to genetics and not necessarily to diet and exercise, genetic inheritance did not seem to interest many people. It seemed to me that, for my interlocutors, I embodied “global fitness culture” (Andreasson and Johansson 2014) and was thus regarded as its emissary. In the words of some of my interlocutors, my body was an “ideal” type of female fit body that circulates through global fitness culture. Although I found it uncomfortable to have my body discussed so frequently, frankly, and openly, it did help my research, as women often approached me eagerly rather than me having to approach them and inquire hesitantly if they were interested to talk.

The result of my revised research plan was that I left the field with two data sets (schools and fitness centers) concerning two cohorts (teenagers and young adults). I also had taken other opportunities, especially when invited, such as visiting refugee and IDP camps, touring the Kurdistan region, and attending events like conferences and lectures. Data from those events, interviews, and conversations appears throughout the dissertation, but the majority of the text concerns people in schools and fitness centers. Over 20 months, I had traversed a variety of spaces and conversed with a remarkable range of people. My daily schedules varied, sometimes drastically: I might spend the

morning in a poor, rural school and share a meager meal with a local family; accompany NGO acquaintances during an afternoon visit to a refugee camp; and in the evening find myself chatting with one of my gym friends at a chic restaurant in a wealthy quarter of Erbil. Moving between vastly different spaces and with different cohorts throughout my field work brought encounters with pluralism to the fore in my analysis.

### *Ethnography of value pluralism*

In this section, I outline how this dissertation proceeds analytically from my ethnographic data. My theoretical framework is grounded in an observation about value pluralism in Kurdistan: The contests of values recounted in this dissertation run deeper than “identity politics” or “sectarianism,” although these forces and their various conceptualizations are at play in my interlocutors’ experiences. Their encounters with value pluralism are not determined by or limited to familiar analytical categories within anthropologies of the Middle East and Muslim worlds, such as tribe, kinship, Islam, sect, or nation. Rather, these same analytical categories are in flux as interlocutors conceptualize and reconceptualize them through their everyday, moral negotiations with people “belonging” to different identity categories. Ontologically speaking, what does it “mean” to be identified as “Kurdish” or “Iraqi”? As “Muslim” or “Christian”? What obligations do these categories entail, and for whom? What are the ethical ramifications for realizing, or not realizing, one’s identity categories to the fullest? I speak of identity categories being “realized” in the sense of people manifesting values based in religious, cultural, social, and political frameworks in their everyday lives. Put another way, can one still be a “good” [identity category, i.e., fill in the blank] if not satisfying the

ontological and ethical demands of kin group, religious community, political party, nation, or state?

This line of questioning about being a “good” person of a particular identity category presents both ontological and ethical problems. On the one hand, these are not new problems, but are based in the histories of imperial and state formations and the ways in which they have regulated ethnic and religious difference, such as through the Ottoman *millet* system. Additionally, enduring social practices related to patrilineal kinship reproduce the boundedness of ethnic and religious identity categories. Modern states in the Middle East conceptualize citizenship and govern family life with reference to patrilineal kinship (King 2018). Thus, both social and state formulations of identity have been mutually constitutive, reinforcing the boundedness of identity categories in legal codes and in social practice.

On the other hand, some ontological and ethical problems arising from religious difference, or more broadly, from value pluralism, are “new” in Kurdistan. Rapid globalization of the Kurdistan Region and the expansion of “secular” spaces and discourses have increased the frequency and varieties of encounters with value pluralism. More than ever before in Kurdistan, people have access to information through the expansion of technology. Censorship exists for certain topics, like the private lives of political leaders, and freedom of expression is limited, but people in Kurdistan have access to many sources of information with a range of viewpoints.

During the relatively prosperous interwar period of 2011 to 2014, many Kurdistan people who had been living in diaspora, such as in Europe or the United States, returned to Kurdistan. Some sought to recreate in Kurdistan aspects of their

former lives abroad, such as by opening new businesses, schools, residential communities, and entertainment services. When I first visited Kurdistan in 2012, I observed that many people were optimistic about Kurdistan's future. There was a sense of anticipation about possibilities for Kurdistan's independence and for collective and individual freedoms. People were grappling with how to realize their goals within certain state and social structures. While the conflict with the Islamic State (2014-2017) halted many projects, it also had the effect of accelerating the circulation of discourses about religion and nationalism. What did it mean to be a "Muslim" in the era of the Islamic State? How was Kurdistan's government and society different from the rest of Iraq or from surrounding majority Muslim countries?

As my interlocutors grappled with questions of identity, they also were exploring the limits of individual and collective freedoms in Kurdistan. In this ethnography, "freedoms" take many forms: They can appear mundane or low stake, such as gym-goers and bodybuilders who spend more time away from their family of origin, eat a non-traditional diet, and follow different rhythms of social life. Higher stake freedoms include choices like (de)converting, "dating" in romantic relationships, or emigrating. I conceptualize "freedoms" in a context of value pluralism by bringing together anthropological theorizations of "modernity," "sovereignty," and "morality." I ask to what extent these theorizations can account for the forces pushing and pulling my Kurdistan's interlocutors toward different Kurdistan's "futures."

To understand how encounters with value pluralism influence ethical self-formation, I draw upon a philosophical line of inquiry about "ethical life" and the so-called "ethical turn" in anthropology (Mattingly and Throop 2018). My purpose in

contextualizing the ethnography in the “ethical turn” is not to “weigh in” on debates about ethics or freedoms, as that would go beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead, I focus on how people experience moral life and identity formation in contexts of value pluralism within a majority Muslim state. I hope that approaching moral experience through ethnography of value pluralism will help us understand the formation of identities from the “bottom-up” of everyday encounters with ethical difference, in addition to the more familiar “top-down” state and social contributions to identity categories.

*Encounters with “ethical difference,” not “Islam”*

Violence, displacement, encounters with religious difference, nationalism, emigration, and hope: these were common discussion topics among my Kurdistan interlocutors, who come from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. In some cases, I was present and witnessed exchanges in which people discussed their different orientations to religion and politics. In other cases, people told me about significant past encounters with what I call “ethical difference” which continue to inform how they manage their relationships with others. In speaking of “others,” I refer to two kinds of “otherness”: The first kind of otherness emerges through identity politics, in which group identity, or perceived group identity, is the key variable. There is a large body of literature on the politicization of identities, often referred to as “sectarianism,” in the Middle East, particularly as it pertains to governance (e.g., Makdisi 2000; Davis 2008; Mikdashi 2014). While the politicization of identities is relevant to my interlocutors’ lives, I focus on another aspect of “otherness.” This second kind of “otherness” hinges



upon different sets of values, rather than different identity categories, coming into play. I refer to this kind of “otherness” as “ethical difference.”

In speaking of “ethical difference,” I refer to encounters that occur in contexts of value pluralism and between people holding contrasting opinions or beliefs, not just about common moral subjects, but also about the ethical dimensions of nationalism and state-making. About the first kind of “ethical difference,” or “common moral subjects,” ethnographic work abounds. Anthropologists of the Middle East and Muslim worlds have documented how people navigate religious rules, particularly pertaining to “Islam” as a “discursive tradition.” For example, Lara Deeb and Mona Harb (2013) have found in Lebanon that religious difference characterizes relationships between people who hold different views on the consumption of alcohol, listening to music, or dancing. Lebanese young people draw upon various “moral rubrics” to navigate religious difference as it intersects with class and gender. While moral rubrics are helpful for understanding how people navigate everyday experiences of religious difference in a majority Muslim society, they have little to no bearing on how the state governs its subjects.

The state makes certain kinds of difference “legible” (Scott 1998) and thus subject to governance, such as collective identity categories like nationality, ethnicity, or religion. For example, we can examine how the Iraqi state has regulated relations between ethnoreligious groups and contributed to the politicization of identities as an expression of state “legibility.” Examinations of the Iraqi state abound, though they typically approach the regulation of religious difference as “sectarianism” and through the lenses of political economy or international relations. There are far fewer anthropological studies, not just of Iraq but of Middle Eastern states in general, which

illuminate the state's contributions to how people navigate religious, or ethical, difference in daily life.

Patrilineal kinship is central to making populations “legible” in Iraq and in many other states across the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. Patrilineal kinship is a type of unilineal descent by which a person's ancestry is traced through the father's line; at birth, a person inherits the religious and ethnic identity of his or her father. So, if a person has a Christian mother and a Muslim father, they will be considered “Muslim” by the state and society. “Patriliney,” the set of ideas and practices concerning patrilineal kinship, is “integral to conceptions of citizenship and group membership in the Middle East” (King 2018:305). The Iraqi state, and the Kurdistan Regional Government within it, use this system of patrilineal reckoning to assign religious and ethnic identity categories to citizens.

Unlike “identity politics,” encounters with ethical difference in contexts of value pluralism are more difficult to describe categorically. They rarely “interest” the state, as they typically do not produce recognizable changes in identity categories, such as a religious conversion. Even in cases of what might be considered “identity transformation,” such as religious conversion, marriage, or personal preference (choosing to identify with one's mother's ethnic or religious identity for example), these subjective transformations are not necessarily made “legible.” States like Iraq, whose citizenship system and recognition of ethnoreligious identities follow patrilineal kinship practices, do not simply fail to acknowledge changes in identity categories – the Iraqi government (and the Kurdistan government) does not permit people to change their official ethnic or religious identity categories on official identity documents. The state refuses to “see”

individual subjects as they ask to be seen. Permitting individual voluntary changes to ethnoreligious identity would be disruptive to the state's citizenship regime. In some cases, the state has weaponized ethnoreligious identity to increase the number of people identified with a certain group to obtain a demographic advantage, like laying claim to a territory, such as in the Arabization campaigns under the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The subjective experiences of identity and value formation that I am describing are often subtle, gradual, and have little bearing on a citizen's relationship to the state. They are, in a sense, illegible. Certain kinds of ethical difference I examine in my dissertation do, however, pertain to governance and thus "interest" the state, not because they challenge inherited or official identity categories but because they figure into discourses about the state. I conceptualize ethical differences more broadly than Deeb and Harb (2013). Not only does my conceptualization of ethical differences concern common "moral" subjects in Muslim worlds about what is or is not permissible in Islam; it also concerns the moral dimensions of nationalism and modernization. In Iraqi Kurdistan, key ethical differences include:

- Supporting Kurdistan independence versus a unified Iraq
- Advocating for a more "modern" society with "secular" public spaces and gender equality, versus a more "pious" Kurdistan in which more conservative forms of Islam guide the state and social life
- Choosing to remain in Kurdistan / Iraq and contribute to its development, or choosing to emigrate and seek better opportunities elsewhere

By working with the concept of "ethical difference," I hope to avoid the potential pitfalls of subjecting my ethnographic data to what Samuli Schielke (2010) refers to as a "grand scheme" such as scholars traditionally have conceptualized "Islam." In his essay

reviewing the “anthropology of Islam,” Schielke makes two observations that inform my approach to understanding ethical or religious experience in my field site. First, Schielke notes that Talal Asad’s important intervention in the anthropology of Islam – critiquing the “textualization” of religious experience and approaching it instead as a “discursive tradition” (1986) – led to a proliferation of anthropological work about religious debate, tradition, piety, and ethics. These studies have offered a much-needed corrective to an obsession with defining “what Islam is,” especially in the era of the “war on terror.” Work on piety and ethics also has helped us “to recognize much better how Muslims’ engagement with their religion is neither the outcome of blind adherence, nor the result of coercion,” Schielke writes, “but an active and dynamic process of engagement with ideals of good life and personhood” (5).

The problem with a research program focused almost entirely on piety and tradition is that it has, according to Schielke, created a meta-narrative in which Islam is approached as a critical “other” to Western liberalism and secularism. In an effort to critique the “alleged superiority and universality” of liberalism and secularism and to analyze how liberal and/or secular regimes mask power, Islam is reduced to a critical other or to a site of resistance. Schielke notes that it is too easy to blame “the usual suspects” (i.e., Western liberalism and secularism) in understanding Muslim lives in the shadow of (neo)colonialism. Although anthropological studies of piety and ethics in Islam have yielded rich portraits of religious experience, these portraits do not adequately account for the “ambivalence, the inconsistencies, and the openness of people’s lives that never fit into the framework of a single tradition” (1). Schielke concludes that anthropologists may fail to recognize “what really is at stake for the people involved,”

and consequently “fail to seriously recognise the humanity of people on their own terms” (6).

In the case of my field site, the intense popular and scholarly interest in Islamic movements, Kurdish nationalism, and politics, often does not capture “what really is at stake” for people “on their own terms.” Too often, scholarly and popular focus is on elites, the “engineers” producing and regulating discourse about religion or politics. To accept these “high-level” discourses as paradigmatic of how people grapple with ethics in the everyday is misleading. For example, “Islamic piety,” broadly speaking, is one kind of ethical positioning in which some of my interlocutors situate their lives. They typically appear to remain within the bounds of piety while resisting the pull of other ethical regimes, such as nationalism or cosmopolitanism. The majority of my interlocutors, however, regularly move in and out of various ethical positions, for reasons I explore throughout the dissertation.

My research attends to contests of values that occur through everyday interactions – not just “between Muslims” (Bush 2020), or between Muslims and people belonging to other religious communities, but between people with many kinds of ethical differences. What do people make of their engagements with religious or non-religious others – such as neighbors, teachers, and coworkers – not in the manner of identity politics or religious conversions, but in the intimate formation of personal values? Before I turn to developing a theoretical framework for understanding ethical difference, I review some important contributions of other interpretive frameworks for understanding religious difference in Muslim worlds.

*Religious difference in a post-Ottoman and patrilineal society*

In contemporary Kurdistan, relationships between diverse ethnic and religious communities reflect historical legacies of imperial and state power. Additionally, narratives about those legacies circulate in political rhetoric and in everyday discourse, informing how Kurdistan people relate to each other across ethnic and religious identity categories. While Kurdistan's majority population is Sunni Muslim Kurdish, people identifying with many other ethnic and religious communities also reside in Kurdistan, including: Sunni Muslim Arabs, Shi'i Muslim Arabs, Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, Arab Christians, Yezidis, Kakai, Turkmen, Shabaks, and Mandeans. At present, intercommunal relationships in Kurdistan are relatively peaceful. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the Ottoman state and its successors repeatedly perpetrated violence against minority ethnic and religious groups (Klein 2011). American and European incursions in the region also contributed to tensions between ethnic and religious groups (Becker 2015; John Joseph 2000; Taylor 2005). Centuries of imperial power struggles and state-formation have created a "zone of genocide" (Levene 1998) encompassing the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

That the history of state and sectarian violence continues to shape how ethnic and religious identities are experienced in everyday life is self-evident for people appearing in this dissertation. Even Kurdistan young people who had no direct experience of violence – such as youth who lived comfortable lives in the Kurdistan Region and who had not personally experienced war or displacement or deprivation – recognize how histories of violence inform social life in Kurdistan. Kurdistan youth learn about violence in modern Iraq through oral histories, news media, and school curriculum. Some young people I

knew expressed distrust, fear, or hatred of certain ethnic or religious groups. This usually took the form of avoiding members of a certain group.

On the other hand, many young people in Kurdistan expressed openness to forming relationships across ethnic and religious boundaries. Some were the children of ethnically or religiously “mixed” marriages. Exogamous marriage is not necessarily viewed as problematic, but social and family norms, past and present, tend to favor endogamous marriage. “Forbidden” love between people belonging to different religions features in Kurdistani poetic traditions (Bush 2020) and in folk music, such as ballads about the “*kchî gawr*,” the “heathen woman” (i.e., non-Muslim) who leads pious (Muslim) men astray. Nevertheless, friendships and marriages between people from different ethnic and religious groups are not unusual in Iraq, though recent conflict and renewed politicization of identities have made these relationships more difficult.

During my fieldwork, I heard two general discourses about religious difference in Kurdistan. One kind of discourse asserted that ethnic and religious “others” were not trustworthy. People holding this view referred to histories of genocide and the conflict with the Islamic State. They also described ongoing problems between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Iraqi government not only as a struggle for sovereignty, but also as a racial or ethnic problem between the Kurdish minority and the Arab majority in Iraq.

Another type of discourse also pointed to “sectarian” struggle as evidence of state “failures.” People contrasted genocidal violence and failures of the Iraqi state with the relatively stable Kurdistan Region, which welcomed and protected ethnic and religious minorities. In this way, people spoke of the Kurdistan Region as a majority Muslim

society and government more progressive than other majority Muslim states, particularly antagonist or enemy states like Turkey, the Iraqi state, or the Islamic State. Such discourse characterizes Kurdistan as a “counterpublic” (King 2014), an ethical polity standing in opposition to the wrongs committed by surrounding states. Counterdiscourse about a “tolerant” Kurdistan was prevalent in political rhetoric and in government-issued curriculum, which I explore later in the dissertation.

I interacted with critics of both kinds of discourse about religious difference in Kurdistan. Young people complained of ethnic or religious discrimination and expressed a desire to make Kurdistan a more “modern” and pluralistic place. While it is true that hundreds of thousands of people have found refuge within the KRI’s borders, the degree to which minorities also felt welcomed and treated fairly varied greatly. In my experience, critics of the “tolerant Kurdistan” discourse tended to be minorities, and as I observed, they tended to be discreet in their criticism. For example, in Chapter 5, students Ashur and Rasim express disillusionment with diversity talk they encountered in their private high school. Both boys were Christians attending a private school that, while its student body was more diverse than those found in government schools, was still a majority Muslim school. Although some school administrators and teachers described the private school as tolerant of religious difference, Ashur and Rasim observed that certain “Islamic” discourses or practices were nevertheless hegemonic.

“Tolerance” discourse, or “radical affirmation” of religious difference, is a feature of post-Ottoman societies (Bush 2020). It also features in scholarship on the Ottoman Empire, some of which romanticizes the “tolerance” of the *millet* system. As anthropologist Andrew Shryock (2009) observes in his conversation with historians Marc



Baer and Ussama Makdisi, scholars often have treated “Ottoman tolerance as a virtue” and have disregarded how the Ottoman state was “a violent, hegemonic imperial formation in its own right” (936). Makdisi (2017) notes that the significance of the Ottoman *millet* system was not about “tolerance” or “intolerance,” but that different communities lived side by side through imperial and state formations (53). Likewise, rather than evaluating the “sincerity” of the “tolerance” discourse I observed in Kurdistan, I examine everyday experiences of coexistence shaped by Iraqi and Kurdistan state formation.

Andrew Bush, another anthropologist of Iraqi Kurdistan, observes affirmation of religious pluralism in the form of morality tales. In one famous story, a renowned nineteenth century Sufi figure, Kak Ahmedi Sheikh, and another Muslim man are conducting business with a Jewish man. Kak Ahmedi’s Muslim companion asks the Jew why he does not convert to Islam. The Jewish man replied, “‘If Islam is what they do,’ he said, ‘then I have no need for it. If it is what [Kak Ahmedi] does, then I have no strength for it’” (Bush 2017). In this tale, Kak Ahmedi demonstrates what Bush calls the “virtue of not asking” about another person’s religious identity or pressuring someone to convert to Islam. Thus, Kak Ahmedi exemplifies for all Muslims an ethical sensibility of magnanimity and tolerance that makes Islam attractive to religious others. Bush argues that the virtue of not asking “radically affirms” religious difference while undergirding a “natural superiority of Islam” (523).

The “virtue of not asking” may derive from the Islamic concept of “People of the Book” (*Ahl al-Kitab*). The Quran refers to Jews, Christians, and Sabians as “possessors of books previously revealed by God,” referring to the Torah, Psalms, and Gospels

(Esposito 2004:10). Although, in Islam, these books have been abrogated and superseded by the Quran, the Quran recognizes Christians and Jews as “protected minorities” (collectively, ‘*ahl ad-dhimmah, or dhimmi*). In the Ottoman empire, *dhimmi* status permitted Jews and Christians to practice their religion and to govern their own communities through separate religious courts.

In the Iraqi state and the Kurdistan Region, the idea of “People of the Book” persists in common sayings like, “Each one has their religion” (In Kurmanji Kurdish, “Her ek dine xwe et hên”) as Diane King has heard throughout her fieldwork (2017). Another saying in Sorani Kurdish is, “Jesus with his own religion and Moses with his own religion” (“Issa ba dînî khoî wa Musa ba dînî khoî”). Among the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism has the least presence in Kurdistan. In 1948, the Iraqi government required its Jewish subjects to relocate to the newly formed state of Israel. Today, a small community of Jewish people, including Kurds, lives in the Kurdistan Region. Members of one Jewish community invited me to attend a multifaith *iftar*<sup>2</sup> hosted by a Christian institution in Erbil. Around 200 people attended, including some foreign dignitaries. Before the meal, a series of representatives from various religious communities gave speeches about the historic contributions of individual Christian or Jewish Iraqis. Then, some of the audience moved to a nearby grassy area for Muslim prayers; none of the other religious communities represented held prayers for the attendees.

Public “national” space sometimes includes references to religious communities in Kurdistan, like the Barzanî Memorial Center described in Chapter 2. At the Memorial Center, my Kurdish tour guide explained that three prominent domes atop one building

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<sup>2</sup> The evening meal that breaks the daytime fasting during Ramadan.

represent “the three religions of Kurdistan,” which were “Islam, Christianity, and Yezidi.” As Kurdistan officials continue to develop the KRI’s public image, religious pluralism discourse helps establish contemporary Kurdistan as an inclusive, progressive majority Muslim polity “worthy” of statehood. Religious pluralism discourse promotes the superiority of the aspirational Kurdistan state, but also the “natural superiority” (Bush 2020) of Islam and of Kurdistan society.

In Erbil, I sometimes heard people express similar sentiments about religious pluralism, such as in my exchange with Guldar, a middle-aged Kurdish woman. Upon meeting Guldar for the first time, she asked me, “What is your religion?” In Kurdistan, as in much of the Muslim world(s), people tend to assume that everyone identifies with a particular religious tradition. “Each having a religion” is an assumption based in part on the logic of patrilineal kinship. “Patriliney,” the set of ideas and practices concerning patrilineal kinship, is “integral to conceptions of citizenship and group membership in the Middle East” (King 2018:305). The Iraqi state, and the Kurdistan Regional Government within it, use this system of patrilineal reckoning to assign religious and ethnic identity categories to citizens.

Personal status codes also reinforce patrilineal reckoning. In Iraq, the Personal Status Law, in effect since 1959, governs family life, stipulating who can marry, divorce, inherit, and pass on citizenship to children (Efrati 2005). A series of secular governments throughout twentieth century Iraq shaped the Personal Status Law, which was considered liberal relative to other majority Muslim countries. Many Iraqis consider the PSL to protect women’s rights by raising the minimum legal age of marriage, permitting women to initiate a divorce, and regulating more equitable inheritance among male and female

relatives. There have been many attempts to amend or abolish the PSL by critics who want religious courts based on Islamic law to regulate family life.

In Kurdistan people know, of course, that some individuals do not believe or practice their “inherited” religion, or any religion for that matter. While terms like “atheist” (*bêdîn* or *mulhîd*) and “secular” (*‘almanî* borrowed from Arabic, or *sekuler* from English) exist in common speech, they are not official identity categories recognized by the state. National identity documents identify the bearer as belonging to one religion selected from a list of religious identities recognized by the state. As of this writing, the state does not permit an individual to change his or her official religious affiliation on identity documents.

However, converts in the KRI are relatively free to practice their chosen religion or no religion. For example, in Erbil I visited a church comprised of converts from Islam to Christianity. The church operates openly and with state approval in the KRI, which is rare in the Muslim world. Many people, nevertheless, keep their beliefs private or entrust them only to close friends. If they (de)convert, they often do so in secret and continue to give the appearance of adhering to their official religious identity. Although state and society maintain rigid boundaries around ethnicity and religion and limit mobility between those categories, people find flexibility in other aspects of their lives. They work out questions of morality in “private” conversations or in spaces removed from the prying eyes and ears of family, neighbors, or the state.

The Ottoman state, the Iraqi state, and patrilineal social organization have codified religious difference in Iraq in enduring ways. The resulting collective identity categories, however, appear more bounded and rigid than people may experience them to

be in everyday life. Scholars of Iraq and the Middle East have tended to focus on the politicization of collective identity categories, sometimes inadvertently reproducing the illusion of clearly bounded religious and ethnic identities. As Ussama Makdisi observes, “the idea of sectarianism, and the sectarian, has come to haunt the modern imaginary of the Arab world in much the same way that the idea of racism has haunted the modern imaginary of the USA” (2017:25). Makdisi and other contributors to the edited volume *Sectarianization* (Hashemi and Postel 2017) locate the emergence of sectarianism in the form which we recognize it today in the nineteenth century Ottoman empire. During the mid-nineteenth century Tanzimat period, the Ottoman state promoted a form of citizenship and a sense of nationality untethered from religious affiliation, which Makdisi suggests threatened Ottoman Muslim subjects’ sense of superiority. At the same time, American and European imperial powers were pressuring the Ottoman state to undertake reforms, and Western missionary activity in the Ottoman empire was increasing. Western “protections” of Eastern Christian populations became entangled with imperial political and economic projects.

The conflation of religious identity and imperial powers contributed to cycles of religious massacres in the Ottoman empire, which continued throughout twentieth century Iraq. Fanar Haddad (2017) write,

The sectarian competition we are witnessing in Iraq today, and elsewhere in the region, is not simply a product of the fact of sectarian plurality in and of itself; it is more a product of the emergence of the modern nation-state, and is related to contested political dynamics to do with nation-building, national identity the (mis)management of sectarian plurality, and, ultimately state legitimacy (102).

Scholars critical of “sectarianism” have demonstrated that the presence of religious plurality itself is not to blame. Rather, we should look to the imperial and state

formations that have pitted communities against one another. My approach to examining these problems of power in Iraqi Kurdistan is to consider ethnoreligious identities and state-making more broadly as “contests of values,” in which no “vision” (e.g., the Iraqi state, Kurdish nationalism, Islam, cosmopolitanism, etc.) adequately unifies all the spheres of interlocutors’ fragmented and liminal lived experiences “caught between” competing visions.

In the following chapters, I examine the “contests of values” shaping institutions, cultural formations, and individual lives. I have written an ethnography of how “sectarianism” intersects with “value pluralism”. Examining value pluralism, or the contest of values, is an underdeveloped approach within our discipline and within my geographic area of specialization (Robbins 2013b). Ethnographies of morality in the Middle East at times describe how different values pull people in multiple directions. Samuli Scheilke (2009; 2015), for example, demonstrates how Egyptian youth experience the pull of competing values, like having fun but also being good Muslims. Scheilke suggests that youth desire to emigrate to escape the painful pull. Lara Deeb and Mona Harb (2013) likewise demonstrate how Lebanese youth draw upon different moral rubrics to rationalize their decisions, such as rejecting or accepting a family member’s or friend’s invitation to a wedding or a cafe where alcohol is served. Anthropologists of the MENA region, like their interlocutors, tend to focus on a particular kind of ethical positioning, which is typically some expression of Islam. For example, Saba Mahmood’s *The Politics of Piety* (2005) shows how the ethical and the political can become linked within a single domain, such as the women’s piety movement in Cairo. While anthropologists’ tendency to approach morals or ethics as *Islamic* reflects the widespread influence of Islam in

everyday life, it is also a testament to the enduring pull of religious systems for how compellingly and thoroughly they can organize people's lives.

### *Ethical positioning*

In the following chapters, my interlocutors, to varying extents, ascribe to various competing narratives about Kurdistan and Iraqi observations with Kurdistan people. "Ethical positions" are heuristic devices I use to organize my data and analysis; they provide narrative frameworks for the many people and stories following. Ethical positions, of course, are not clearly delineated in lived experience, and their histories, methods, and goals often overlap. Sometimes they clash, and painfully so. My interlocutors felt pulled in different directions as they engaged in ethical self-formation within the larger spheres of family, religious community, nation, and world. Their stories - the ways in which these youth described themselves, explained their situations, and struggled to generate hope - comprise the lived experience that this dissertation bears witness to and takes inspiration from.

Cultural transformations that individuals or groups seek to realize often hinge upon future-oriented narratives about the desired self, society, or state. The "moral ambition" (Elisha 2011) of individuals may involve attracting more people to their cause to increase mobilization and their effect on society. During my fieldwork, I encountered recurring narratives circulated in conversations with my interlocutors, as well as in news media, the Kurdistan government, and non-governmental or humanitarian organizations. Each narrative is oriented toward particular goods with reference to some kind of ethical position. My use of the language of "ethics" or "ethical" is informed by the recent

“ethical turn” in anthropology (Mattingly and Throop 2018), which emerges from anthropology’s longstanding concern with morality and values. In this dissertation “positions” are “ethical” in the sense that they are concerned with evaluative and negotiated moral action about the world as it is said to be, as it is experienced, and as it might or should be. People work out their lived experiences, observations, and rationalizations in reference to one or more ethical regimes and those regimes’ corresponding sets of values. Ethical positions contain clusters of values, with some values overlapping with other ethical positions. Most of these positions, however, encompass certain values that are incompatible with other positions and their values. Thus, people feel pulled in different directions. Not everyone is positioned to be pulled in different directions, for reasons I explore in the dissertation, and not everyone resists the pull.

My interlocutors mainly consist of Kurdistanian young people who are positioned, by virtue of their wealth, status, or education, to move in and out of competing ethical positions. Over the 20 months I spent in the field, I observed the various ways my interlocutors dealt with the push and pull of ethical life. Some eventually, or at least tentatively, settled on one kind of ethical position, perhaps to escape the pain of being pulled in different directions. Other interlocutors resisted becoming settled, or constrained, by a single position. They struggled to reconcile values characteristic of competing frames, such as simultaneously striving to be an “ethnonationalist” and a “modernizer.” Values upheld by ethnonationalism, such as loyalty to tribe and nation, might be undermined by values upheld by “modernization,” such as egalitarianism and pluralism.



Ethical positions strongly exert the power to contain people and institutions within their narrative grasp. The internal coherence that a clearly defined position, or narrative, provides is alluring. Ethical positions compellingly explain the world and offer coherence, especially when people feel their world is falling apart. Ethical positioning is about generating and negotiating narratives that seek to explain the world and one's place in it, with a strong undercurrent of moral duty to contribute to the realization of a particular vision. In my field site, there is a shared sense that things have gone horribly wrong in Iraq's and Kurdistan's past, but there is no single ethical position or kind of positioning that accommodates all possible values or all possible futures for Kurdistan or for Iraq. Ethical positioning draws upon with the same raw data of history and lived experience and help people (re)frame that data to generate particular justifications for their inherited or chosen values. While some of my interlocutors focused on radically different interpretations of Iraqi and Kurdistan histories, other interlocutors looked ahead to possible modern or cosmopolitan futures.

#### *Bricolage, bricoleur, and ethical self-formation*

My ethnography is a bricolage of Kurdistan youth experiences. I refer to "bricolage," not in the structuralist sense by which Levi-Strauss (1966) theorized myth, but rather as an activity, a tactic employed both by interlocutors and by ethnographers. I speak of bricolage as a metaphor for a method rather than an epistemological concept. The bricoleur combines and creates with whatever is at hand, which is why the French *bricoleur* sometimes is translated "handyman." Levi-Strauss contrasts the bricoleur with the engineer, who has the training and resources to construct a new cultural whole rather than to repurpose materials and tools. The engineer, however, is a "myth," as all

discourse is bricolage (Derrida 1978). People “make do” in their everyday lives as they “make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (De Certeau 1984).

The bricoleur is akin to the “wsta” (وہستا), the Kurdish handy-person who often advertises their services by painting “وہستا” and a phone number on the sides of buildings. Typically, the wsta is not formally trained. The wsta is a tinkerer or a hack, who might, for example, rig up your connection to the neighborhood’s electrical system using the abandoned objects lying in the empty lot (i.e., junkyard) near your house. Hiring the wsta is more expedient than asking a “professional,” perhaps someone from the city’s office of electricity, to come repair the electrical connection, which really is part of a systemic problem. Most people appearing in this dissertation are like the wsta: They are not wealthy businessmen, or politicians, or religious leaders. They do not have the entire “ethical position” and its resources at their disposal, so they appropriate aspects of different frames to fashion a working narrative. Their working narratives take into account how they really (and not just ideally) live. The “making do” that people live by typically does not fit neatly into any ethical position. People who “make do” as bricoleurs inhabit the liminal spaces between ethical positions. There are significant social, religious, and political pressures to inhabit fully only one frame, and to direct one’s efforts at realizing the values of that frame. Thus, inhabiting the liminal spaces between frames may be criticized as indecisiveness or hypocrisy.

Although the bricoleur is criticized for innovation (often considered dubious or unsanctioned), it is the self-styled engineers and their followers who do not acknowledge

their own projects of bricolage: Ethical positions, though they are presented as original, clearly-bounded, and coherent frameworks for living, might themselves be products of bricolage, just older and sanctioned. Bricolage enriches the ethnography by connecting the threads of seemingly disparate sites - what do schools have to do with bodybuilders or city planners? - to weave a picture of everyday experiences of cultural transformation across the KRI. Thus, my research sites include:

- A private secondary school with a diverse student body and faculty
- A government secondary school for Kurdish girls in a poor, rural area
- Fitness centers, including one gym where I worked as a group fitness instructor
- Education planning weekly meetings for NGOs and government officials
- Youth social gatherings, some focused on fun, such as socializing at cafes, and some focused on activism, such as volunteering in IDP or refugee camps

What connected these people and spaces was a shared interest in transformation, a desire not only to improve oneself, but also to contribute to the betterment of the larger realms of family, religious community, nation, and state.

### *Outline of the ethnography*

Chapter 2, “*Ma ’ash nîya*” (“There are no salaries”), introduces Kurdistani interlocutors grappling with state failures and national disappointments, which constrain how they realize their own ethical lives. The challenging circumstances of the war against Daesh, the economic crisis, and alleged government corruption lead people to question the cultural and political pillars supporting the “nation” and the “state”. Interlocutors

encounter the purported “goodness” of the mythical Kurdish nation and aspirational Kurdistan state in social studies classes and in national sites commemorating the nation. At the same time, they are confronted with harsh, lived realities of cultural and political practices, such as “patriliny” and sovereignty-making, which make them question the “goodness” of the “nation.” The chapter also considers how anthropologists likewise struggle with analyzing ethical life premised on notions of “the good” in field sites that appear bleak.

Chapter 3, “They Don’t Love Iraq,” reflects on how people critique Kurdistan society and aspirations to statehood by measuring “Kurdistan” according to their vision of a “national” and “unified” Iraq. The chapter focuses on teachers and students at Kurdistan Civilizational School (KCS), a private high school, and one of several spaces featured in this dissertation, in which people encounter competing ethical positions. Many people, especially those displaced from elsewhere in Iraq, evaluated their present situation in Kurdistan by recalling their life in pre-invasion Iraq. These “nostalgic” interlocutors came of age during the sanctions era, which they recall warmly as a time in which people supported one another as neighbors and fellow citizens. They contrast their childhoods, marked by material shortages, with those of their Kurdistan private school students. Their students enjoy material comforts and security but suffer from their insular and pampered lifestyles. While some interlocutors expressed resignation about youth “apathy”, others, like “Mariam” the high school civics teacher, were determined to rehabilitate the state for the next generation – if not a unified Iraq, then at least a Kurdistan state committed to the good of all its citizens. Only time will tell if Mariam’s

vision for restoring the country reached her cynical Kurdistan students, many who dream of leaving Kurdistan for a better life abroad.

Chapter 4, “This is the Life Here: Ethical Life among Bodybuilders and Gym-goers,” considers how bodybuilding and gym-going narratives contribute to a larger discourse about broken bodies, state violence, and ethical life in Iraq. Interlocutors assert that they have created truly “pluralistic” spaces, like “modern” fitness centers, in which they can work out their own ethical self-formation by escaping, or at least minimizing, the powers of family, sect, and state. By understanding how Iraqi bodybuilding narratives both employ and critique tropes about national strength, “modernity”, and pluralism, this chapter demonstrates how the spread of the global fitness industry offers individual athletes and their fitness communities a set of ethical practices and an interpretative framework in the wake of the collapsing Iraqi state. The selves and subjects produced in discursively “pluralistic” spaces were at odds: People drew upon romanticized notions of the autonomous individual, which conflicted with the ethnonationalist or religious citizen-subjecthood desired by administrators, managers, family members, Kurdistan society, and the emerging Kurdistan state.

Chapter 5, “There is No Future,” offers several vignettes in which interlocutors express deep doubts about cultural practices, state institutions, and even “causes,” such as a future Kurdistan state, or a rehabilitated, shared national Iraqi identity. Some people also struggle with reconciling the everyday experiences of the “immanent frame” with the transcendent, such as Ashti, the Kurdish teacher who felt “called” to work in Iraqi Kurdistan but was sliding deeper into despair at the apparent lack of progress in her students and in her homeland. The concluding chapter, “Bits of Hope,” asks if

interlocutors' various modes of ethical positioning, which seem to generate hope and make life liveable, might also aid anthropologists. Perhaps an anthropology of "hope" could reinvigorate the discipline by returning to its foundational humanism – to "the moral obligation to hope" (Geertz 2000) that our efforts can contribute to better understanding in a "dark" world.

## **Ch. 2 “Ma’ash nîya”: State failures and national disappointments**

*“Politicians create fresh hells, not dream cities.” - Bakhtiyar Ali, I Stared at the Night of the City*

### *The first day of school*

In the Grade 10 classroom, someone has opened a window. Students sitting close to the window can feel the prickling, January cold on the back of their necks. There is not much heating in the school, but the classrooms become stuffy and stale nonetheless. A truck selling propane gas canisters drives slowly by the school, announcing its neighborhood rounds with a tinny tune like an American ice cream truck. Later a vegetable seller passes in his creaky pick-up truck, windows rolled down, shouting, “*Yalla bandora! Yalla kheyar!*” (Come get tomatoes! Come get cucumbers!)

It is the first day of the semester at Kurdistan Civilizational School (KCS), a private K-12 school.<sup>3</sup> A group of girls has invited me to sit in an empty desk formerly belonging to a student who has emigrated with her family to Australia over the Winter break. In front of me, two girls turn in their desks to face their classmates. “Everyone is leaving!” laments Ishtar, the group’s apparent leader. She studies me, the newcomer, for a moment. Then she points to a girl near the front of the room, “She’s leaving next week!” Ishtar says mock accusingly. The girl spins around and says, “Yes, I’m leaving for Sweden!”

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<sup>3</sup> Kurdistan Civilizational School was a network of three campuses located in each of the three Kurdistan governorates: Duhok, Erbil, and Slemani. Although KCS was locally owned and run, it maintained a connection with an American NGO. The American influence in the school was intentional, as KCS taught using curriculum imported from the United States and methods characteristic of “classical Christian education,” the educational model upon which it was based.

“It’s colder there than here,” I observe, shivering from the open window. The girls speak rapidly, code-switching between Kurdish, Arabic, and English.

“We speak like this because we know different languages,” Nergîz explains. “She only speaks Arabic and English [gesturing to Ishtar], and we [gesturing to Gulistan] speak Sorani Kurdish, Arabic and English. It’s based on who you’re talking with, which language you use.”

“Everyone is leaving,” Gulistan says. “We had two or three in our class leave. It’s not nice here anymore.”

“Because of the problem with Daesh?” I ask.

“Yes,” said Ishtar. “Because of that. But also because sometimes the classes here are too hard.”

Their literature teacher, Jamila, enters the room and directs the class to look at Book 18 of *The Odyssey*, in which a beggar enters the plot. This class is taught in English, as most of the KCS courses are, although students sometimes make comments in Arabic or Kurdish. “Do you think begging is shameful?” Jamila asks the class. The class seems to think so. “If begging is a choice,” Jamila continues, “then why would people choose to do something shameful?” Hawar, one of the more vocal male students, gestures in the direction of a nearby, busy intersection and exclaims in Kurdish, “There are beggars in this street *şerem nîya* (with no shame)!” Jamila nods without comment. (Later that year, the numerous Syrian refugees, predominantly children, begging at that intersection disappeared; allegedly, they were rounded up and taken to refugee camps outside the city.) Jamila moves on to the next event in the plot. She finishes her lesson, leaves the room, and Bijar the math teacher enters the grade 10 room.



In math class, Bijar, becomes distracted by a couple of boys in the front who are struggling with the lesson. He leans over their desk and explains. The girls in the back of the room take advantage of this interlude and spin around to face each other again. “How could she kill herself? She was not the type of person to do that. Everyone says so,” whispers Nergîz. A 24- year-old lawyer had been found dead in her car near the luxury residential area “Dream City.” The press was reporting it as a murder, but these girls were skeptical. Nergîz described the condition of the body, gesturing to her face and wrists. I leaned closer and asked, “So do you think it was a murder?”

“Definitely a murder,” Ishtar said, her expression deadly serious.

“Yes, her brother is a police officer,” Gulistan urgently whispered. “Either she or her brother must have been involved in a bad case, a case that wasn’t closed, you know?” Mr. Bijar turned again to face the class, and the girls ducked their heads as if working on their assigned calculations.

During lunch in the cafeteria, several grade 10 students and I gather around one of the plastic tables. They take turns sharing information I ought to know as a newcomer to Erbil. “Hewlêr is nice,” one timid girl offers. The students all look at me to hear my initial impressions of Erbil.

Before I can respond, another student, Noor, concludes the conversation as the bell rings: “That’s bullshit,” she says, standing up and stalking off toward the high school building. On the first day of the new semester, students have discussed emigration, the conflict with Daesh, begging, and a possible murder. Maybe Noor is right, I thought.

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*(Later, in conversation with grade 10 students)*

Layla: I don't think that I have a future here. Who would have known that one day there was gonna be no salary?"

Serbest: This is the first time in history that people don't get a salary.

Layla: How are the people going to live?

"Ma'ash nîya"

It was a saying, an explanation, an excuse, and an expression of resignation I heard over and over during my field work: "*Ma'ash nîya*," ("There are no salaries"). When I asked taxi drivers or service workers about their life in Kurdistan, most often the reply included, "*Ma'ash nîya*." When I visited a government school to observe classes, only to find most of the teachers socializing in the break room all morning rather than teaching their lessons without pay, the explanation offered was, "*Ma'ash nîya*." When I heard people complain about the prices of goods, they reminded shopkeepers or managers, "*Ma'ash nîya*." The saying was a reference to the Kurdistan Regional Government's months-long freeze and reductions on salaries owed to some 60% of the population. The phrase also signified systemic dysfunction of state and society. By the end of my field work, when people asked me what I thought about life in Kurdistan, my standard reply was, "*Khelkî Kurdistan bashn, balam ma'ash nîya*" (The people of Kurdistan are good, but there are no salaries). This answer seemed to satisfy everyone.

Many Kurdistan people struggled to feel hopeful in a landscape marred by cycles of war and violence and in a time of economic stagnation. My fieldwork (September 2015 - June 2017) occurred during a period of deepening crisis, or *qairan*, for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Many of my interlocutors spoke about the *qairan*, and it

was the subject of numerous news media reports. *Qairan* primarily referred to the KRI's economic difficulties, although I came to understand that it, like the saying "*ma'ash nîya*," referred to political and social woes as well. Economic problems stemmed from several sources: First, the Kurdistan Region had become a "safe haven" for people fleeing surrounding conflicts, burdening the KRI's infrastructure. During the 2003-2011 Iraq war, thousands of people displaced by the violence in Baghdad and southern Iraq settled in the Kurdistan Region. Starting in 2011, refugees from nearby Syria also began spilling into the KRI. Then, in June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or "Daesh" as it is known in the Middle East, invaded Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. Iraqi military forces abandoned their posts and fled along with hundreds of thousands of people, most of whom went north to the Kurdistan Region.

In the weeks following, Daesh displaced over 500,000 people and attempted to exterminate Yezidis, an ethnoreligious minority. The Kurdish *peshmerga* military forces led a difficult campaign against Daesh. In August 2014, Daesh captured Kurdish-controlled areas and sent the *peshmerga* retreating. People feared ISIS would attempt to take the Kurdistan capital city of Hewlêr (Erbil). In response, U.S. President Barack Obama ordered airstrikes to protect American citizens and assets in Erbil. U.S. airstrikes continued over the next three years as the conflict spread into Syria and as ISIS sympathizers continued to launch attacks inside and outside Iraq.

Kurdistani people became increasingly demoralized by the protracted conflict and its effects. An estimated 1.5 million refugees and IDPs living within the Kurdistan region were straining its power grid; in the intense heat of summer or the damp cold of winter, electricity was out for hours at a time. There were frequent water shortages.

Meanwhile, those who could afford better lived in gated, luxury residential compounds where they noticed only a blip as city electricity (*raîsî*) went out and expensive, personal backup generators (*mölıda*) switched on. At the same time, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was engaged in another conflict: a political disagreement with the Iraqi federal government. After Kurdish forces took control of Kirkuk in 2014, the KRG began selling oil independently rather than through the federal Iraqi government. Consequently, Baghdad began withholding the KRI's share of the national budget. (Baghdad did not resume sending revenue to the KRG until March 2018.) With its budget increasingly strained, the Kurdistan Government began reducing and withholding salaries. As over half of the KRI's population was on the government payroll (Joseph and Sümer 2019), economic stagnation ensued.

It seemed to me that, over the course of my fieldwork, the atmosphere in Kurdistan gradually darkened. I often heard people speak critically of the Kurdistan Government, which was rumored to be lining its own members' pockets while claiming it could not pay thousands of public sector employees' salaries. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP or PDK), the dominant political party, barred several members of Parliament belonging to rival party Gorran (Change Party) from entering Erbil; resulting protests turned violent. Kurdistan President Mesud Barzanî did not step down when his elected term ended, citing a state of emergency. As the months dragged on, patriotic displays rang hollow for some. Families who lost loved ones in the war struggled to make ends meet. University graduates could not find satisfying work. Many young people I came to know through my time at the gym and at a local university, felt their lives had stalled

indefinitely. With the *qairan* overshadowing Kurdistan, how could anyone generate hope?

In this chapter, interlocutors living in a time of crisis struggle to conceptualize the Kurdish “nation,” which is central to thinking about the “state” in Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region. A sense of “rightness” about one’s nation also is crucial for generating hope. The stories in this chapter demonstrate how the nation’s disappointments, such as being denied an independent state or experiencing some negative aspect of Kurdish national “culture,” are intimately connected with personal disappointments. In their narrations, interlocutors incorporate national myths, civilizational and regional histories, and reflections on life in pre-invasion Iraq (before 2003) and experiences while living abroad. People wrestle especially with how their lived experiences and beliefs fit with, or do not fit with, their subject positions, as a “Kurdish female,” for example, or as a returnee from the Kurdish diaspora. Fundamental to conceptualizing the “nation” is a sense of “rightness” or “goodness” (Anderson 1999) that may not correspond to one’s lived experiences as a member of, or resident in, that “nation.”

#### *Patriliny and the myth of the Medes*

At Kurdistan Civilizational School (KCS), the new *komalayatî* (social studies) teacher, Karza, was a recent graduate with degrees in sociology and philosophy from a local Kurdish university. KCS students had experienced a lot of turnover with their *komalayatî* teachers. Students told me that their previous *komalayatî* teachers did not answer their questions, did not use the textbook, and instead gave students summaries to memorize and recall on multiple choice tests. Their new teacher, Karza, employed a different approach. Karza brought a subversive energy into the classroom, where he

taught *komalayatî* for students in grades 7, 8, and 9. As required by the Kurdistan Region's Ministry of Education, Karza taught directly from the government-issued *komalayatî* textbook. He sometimes departed from it, however, by raising questions or including information he learned during his university studies. Although Karza spoke only Sorani Kurdish and taught his courses in Kurdish, he frequently paused and permitted his multilingual students to translate for one another, as some students at KCS spoke Arabic and did not understand Kurdish. Translation often led to debates about interpretation that departed from the lesson, and Karza encouraged discussion. He prompted his students to think critically and not to accept everything they were told or read, including the government-issued social studies textbook. At times, he made subtle, critical remarks about contemporary politics, connecting the historical content of the lesson to the present-day.

For example, during one lesson, Karza read aloud from the textbook about the Islamic history of the region. He paused reading and asked a boy to draw a tank on the dry erase board. "In 2003, democracy came to America on the back of a tank," Karza began. "And long ago, Islam came to Iraq in the same way. Before Muslims came, the name of this country was Kurdistan. And with Islam came 'Arab ideas,' (*fiqrî 'arab*) and women became victims." These comments caught me off guard as I sat in the back of the classroom taking notes. Karza did not look in my direction, and I wondered if I heard him correctly. I felt certain that the government issued textbooks contained nothing overtly critical of Islam or the United States. After class, I confirmed with several students that what I heard was indeed what Karza said, but the students were puzzled about what point their teacher wanted to make. It was one of many episodes in which I wondered how my

presence in the classroom influenced the lessons. But Karza's political commentary also was typical of his teaching style, leading students down a critical path but stopping short of forming a conclusion for them. Some of Karza's older students appreciated his edgier approach. Most students, however, were baffled by his sly, indirect references to contemporary politics, such as the grade 7 students in the following anecdote.

That day, Karza began class by writing on the board, "Media" (referring to the Median Empire) and "Mediakan" (the Medes). Beside "Media" he wrote "homeland" (*nishtiman*) and beside Mediakan he wrote "Kurd." He turned to face the class, "You know, like in our national anthem, '*We are the descendants of the Medes and Cyaxares.*'"

This was a revelation for the grade 7 students, who exclaimed in unison, "Oh!" Karza described the capital city of the Medes, and he explained that before the religions of Christianity and Islam came to Kurdistan, there was another religion called "Zoroastrianism."

"Is Zoroastrianism the Kurdish religion?" asked Welat.

"There were many religions," Karza replied, "but the Medes at that time were Zoroastrian."

Then Karza wrote "Diaoku" on the board. Karza explained that Diaoku was the man who established the Medes and was the first Kurd.

"So Diaoku is like the first Kurdish father?" asked Heba. Karza nodded and explained to the class how Diaoku's line came to an end when Diaoku's great grandson, Astyages, had no male heir and arranged for his daughter, Mandane, to marry a Persian

man. Mandane's marriage to a foreigner was not only the end of Diaoku's patriline, but the end of the Median civilization.

The Komalayati textbook, and Karza's lesson, probably drew upon Herodotus' account of the "history" of the Medes. According to Herodotus, the Median King Diaoku's great-grandson Astyages was the last king of the Medes. King Asytyages feared his daughter Mandane. This was because Astyages had two dreams, one in which Mandane urinated all over Asia, drowning its inhabitants, and another in which a vine spread from Mandane's genitals and covered all of Asia. Fearful of his daughter's potential progeny, he married Mandane to a Persian man named Cambyses. When Mandane gave birth to a son, Asytyages ordered to have the baby killed because his advisers, or magi, believed Mandane's child would replace Astyages as king. The magi advised Astyages, saying, "Sire, it means a great deal to us that you continue to rule securely and successfully, because if your rule were to pass to this Persian boy, it will come into the hands of others, and the Persians will make us their slaves and despise us, since we are foreigners to them" (67). Through a series of twists and turns, Mandane's baby boy, Cyrus, is not killed and, as an adult, leads the Persians in battle to overthrow Astyages and conquer the Medes. Herodotus concludes, "Now the Medes would become slaves instead of masters, through no offense of their own, and the Persians, the former slaves of the Medes, would become their masters" (71).

Karza mentioned to the class that Diaoku's male successors were Phraortes, Cyaxares, and Astyages.

"What was Diaoku's wife's name? And what was Astyages' wife's name?" asked Pinar, one of the more extroverted girls in the class.



“I don’t know,” Karza shrugged.

“But weren’t they famous?” Pinar pressed him.

“We don’t know their names,” Karza admitted, “but there have been many famous and important women in our history.”

“Like who?” Pinar asked.

“There is a famous Kurdish woman, a legend,” Karza began. Then he told the class about how this woman worked in an important government office, which was a great achievement, especially at a time when few women occupied high positions in the government. Her marriage to an Arab man, however, was a source of controversy. Prior to this class, I also had heard about this controversy. People said that it was traitorous and denigrating for a Kurdish woman from a respected family to marry an Arab man already in a polygynous marriage (permissible in Islam, but socially controversial in Kurdistan). Some Kurdish people I knew had described Arabs as their “enemy,” or at least had expressed distrust of Arabs, due to cycles of conflict and genocide, most famously the Anfal genocide against Kurds. Other people argued that marrying “for love” was all that mattered. Knowing this, I wondered if the *komalayati* teacher was drawing a connection between a contemporary Kurdish female politician’s “mixed-marriage” with an “enemy,” and the mythical “failure” of the Median line when female Median royalty mixed with enemy Persians.

Karza concluded the lesson by telling a version of the Newroz myth about Kawa the blacksmith, a Mede who rebelled against an evil Persian king oppressing the Medes. After Karza dismissed the class, I lingered in the classroom to ask a couple students about their understanding of the lesson. They repeated the highlights to me. One of the boys

turned to Karza, who was erasing the board, and asked, “Was the problem that the daughter [Mandane] married a Persian man?”

Karza simply answered, “Yes.”

In Iraqi Kurdistan, it would be difficult to imagine the Kurdish nation without its foundational patrilineages. They include ancient lineages, like Diaoku’s lineage in the myth of the Medes, as well as patrilineages from more recent history, such as the three generations of the Barzanî family whose members have figured prominently in Iraqi Kurdistan’s political life. One of the strongest contributors to and stabilizers of Kurdish identity is patrilineal kinship, in which a person inherits ethnic and religious identity from his or her father (King 2014). In the *komalayati* lesson, Karza drew upon the logics of patrilineal kinship, or “patriliny,” when he spoke of the “failure” of a Median royal woman marrying a Persian man, thus producing children who were not considered Medes but Persians. Consequently, the Median royal line was absorbed into the Persian nation, and the Persians later rebelled and conquered their former masters, the Medes.

The logic of patriliny also is at work in contemporary Iraq, as it is across much of the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. For example, the child of an Arab Christian mother and a Kurdish Muslim father would be recognized, both by social convention and by the state, as Kurdish and Muslim, the same identity categories ascribed to their father. The Iraqi state and the Kurdistan Regional Government use patrilineal identity categories to assign their citizens religious and ethnic identity categories and to confer citizenship, as do the majority of states in the Middle East (King 2018). Patrilineal kinship has significant legal implications, connecting people to land and determining how property

can be passed from individuals. Many people can trace their genealogy through several generations, especially if they belong to an esteemed lineage, such as the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

At the heart of Karza's lesson about the mythical rise and fall of the Kurdish nation was a failed patriline. It failed because a Kurdish woman had a child with a man from not just the wrong patrilineage, but the wrong nation. In other lessons, Karza commented that the Kurdish nation (*gel* or *millet*) has been the pawn of its more powerful neighbors, Iran and Turkey, for centuries. Many times, Karza expressed frustration that Kurdish people are the perpetual pawn of their foreign masters, whether Persian or Iranian, Ottoman or Turkish. Likewise, historian David McDowall (2004) observes that, "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). In drawing upon the logic of patriliney, Karza drew a line from the original "failure" of the Median / Kurdish line to contemporary fears about Iran and Turkey.

Within Kurdistan, certain lineages, such as the Barzanî family and their Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), have become the dominant political players and guardians of national mythology. Some people criticized how the Barzanîs control the Kurdish ethnonationalist narrative and regulate displays of nationalism. Karza, for example, critiqued contemporary politics by contextualizing them within a foundational national myth that provided a narrative structure in which the Barzanî family, Iran, and Turkey play archetypal roles in contemporary politics. Many of my interlocutors, however, spoke of Kurdish nationalism as existing beyond a tribe or political party; they

appealed to a deeper, larger struggle spanning time and territory. The struggles of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, for instance, or of Rojava, the Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, represent "greater Kurdistan," an enduring and noble nation, beyond the provincial cause of a de facto state run by an oligarchy in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The "goodness" of nations

Benedict Anderson (1991), who famously, and perhaps romantically (Chatterjee 1999), conceptualized the nation as an "imagined community," was nonetheless aware of the dangers of nationalisms, such as colonialism, racism, and genocide. People living in Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region know these dangers all too well. Despite all the "wrong" nations can do, however, we have not abandoned the concept of the "nation." Anderson speculated this is because the "nation" represents an essential "goodness" for its people in a way that religion does not. Anderson observes that one cannot say, "My religion, right or wrong," as it would negate that religion's claims on truth and adherents. Conversely, one could believe in an essential "goodness" of one's nation, whether its current rulers do "right" or "wrong":

For if nations can, at least hypothetically, be 'wrong,' this wrongness is temporary, and is always set against a more permanent 'good.' The question then is – and one poses it in opposition to the eternal goodness of religion – what is the source of this goodness, given that the nation, no matter how grandly conceived, is intrahistorical (it has no place in heaven or in hell)? I argue that we need to think about innocence, or, more precisely, about who, in the national ambience, guarantees the nation's ultimate blamelessness" (1999:197).

The nation embodies the goodness of the dead, the living, and the unborn. During times of crisis, the nation's leaders invoke the sacrifices made by the nation's dead, compelling the living citizens to make similar sacrifices to ensure the future of the nation, symbolized by the unborn. Many scholars have since critiqued Anderson's "imagined

communities”, and I do not examine those critiques here. Rather, I take up Anderson’s inquiry about the “goodness” of nations, approaching it not through history or philosophy but through ethnography.

I argue that what is at stake in encounters with the Kurdish “nation” and its purported “goodness” are not merely the political ramifications of successfully or unsuccessfully cultivating patriotic sentiment or gaining international support for an independent Kurdistan state. Also at stake are individuals’ ethical sensibilities, their sense of purpose and identity formed through their participation (or non-participation) in the ethical dimensions of nationalisms and state-making. The ethnographic accounts in this chapter, which feature Kurdistan people encountering, conceptualizing, and responding to the “nation,” demonstrate how individual projects of ethical-self formation become entangled with the “goodness” of the nation.

In what follows, I examine how the genealogy of Kurdish nationalisms and state-making contributes to contemporary Kurdistan subjectivities, that is, to the way that people living in the Kurdistan Region conceptualize selfhood and understand their relationships to other individuals, as well as to collectivities like their family, religious community, nation, and state. The ways in which people have conceptualized Kurdish identity and nationalisms have shaped not only everyday discourse, but also scholarship on Kurdistan. “Deep-seated Western views” of language and culture (Allison 2018) and orientalist epistemologies have constrained how foreign and local academics and politicians approach Kurdish identity and politics (Hassanpour 1993), which a new generation of scholars, including many ethnic Kurds, is challenging (Al-Ali et al. 2020).

*Decolonizing Kurdish nationalisms and state-making*

Throughout this dissertation, I refer to the Kurdish “nation,” “Kurdish nationalism” or “ethnonationalism,” and the “Kurdistani state.” Using these terms critically requires examining the genealogy of narratives, academic and popular, about Kurdish identity and nationalism. A reevaluation of Kurdish studies is long overdue, as argued by a recent “Decolonizing Kurdish Studies” roundtable comprised of a new generation of scholars, many of Kurdish origin (Al-Ali et al. 2020). The discipline of anthropology likewise is confronting its history of complicity with colonization (Jobson 2020; Allen and Jobson 2016; Harrison 2011), including knowledge production about the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region (Asad 1973; Deeb and Winegar 2015; Makdisi 2008; Sharkey 2008). Reassessing epistemologies and methods within Kurdish studies and within anthropology is especially relevant for research about Kurdistan, a territory which was, and in many ways still is, a “colony” of the modern state (Kurt 2020).

Knowledge production about Kurdish people and Kurdistan has been concentrated in the West, produced by imperial or colonial agents and by researchers. Western and orientalist epistemologies have dominated how foreign and local academics and politicians approach Kurdish identity and politics (Hassanpour 1993; Al-Ali et al. 2020). Kurdish studies scholars, including many academics of Kurdish origin, often focus their work on Kurdish nationalism and the possibility of Kurdistani statehood, and thus overlook many other aspects of Kurdish or Kurdistani lifeways. During my fieldwork, I encountered scholarly preoccupation with Kurdish nationalism on many occasions. The most memorable of these encounters occurred when I gave an invited lecture for faculty members at a local university in 2017. The organizer asked me to talk about my ongoing

research, so I accepted the opportunity, hoping to promote anthropology. I knew that my discipline was little-understood and respected in my field site, especially relative to prestigious fields like medicine and engineering.

Faculty in attendance at my talk mainly worked in science and technology fields, as the university skewed toward STEM education. Overall, faculty reactions were not favorable. While some faculty criticized anthropological methods during the question-and-answer segment, commenting, for example, that “anthropology is not a real science,” others complained that I was missing the point: Why was I socializing with youth in schools and fitness centers? Why was I not interviewing politicians and experts? Would not Kurdish nationalism be a more important and relevant subject, considering the upcoming independence referendum? The consensus was that I had misapprehended my field site.

The critical response reflected, in part, the timing of my talk during a politically tense moment in the months before the 2017 independence referendum. At another faculty talk, I observed heavy criticism of a foreign guest lecturer who argued that the Kurdistan Region should not pursue forming an independent Kurdish state, a very unpopular opinion at the time. What struck a nerve, I believe, was that I was ignoring local “experts” and their opinions about an urgent issue. Instead, I was listening to children and young adults talk about their relatively privileged lives while the rest of the country suffers: Wealthy young people, with the latest iPhone model, hanging around expensive malls and cafes or sitting idly at home playing video games or watching American movies, while refugees beg on street corners and live inside abandoned construction sites. Seemingly self-absorbed bodybuilders and gym-goers paying one or

two hundred dollars a month for gym membership, when many people struggled to pay their rent and feed their families. Including privileged youth in my research, however, does not belittle or erase the suffering of others. The painful histories and present situations of Kurdish people, as well as of many other groups of people who have suffered violence in Iraq, are woven throughout my ethnography.

Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdistan state are intimately connected with longstanding narratives about Kurdish people. Internationally, the following narrative outline about Kurdistan is well-known: Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without a state, and they are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East. They have suffered seemingly endless cycles of violence and many betrayals by their alleged allies, reflected in the oft repeated saying, “The Kurds have no friends but the mountains.” Mountainous terrain ties together much of greater Kurdistan. Those who have sought to control this territory, from the seventh century Arab conquests to modern states, have been thwarted by the difficulty of governing mountainous terrain occupied by numerous independent Kurdish tribes and emirates skilled in the “art of not being governed” (Scott 2010). The “Kurds have no friends but the mountains” narrative has been effective in garnering support for Kurdish causes; it is employed, for example, by advocates of American-Kurdish political allyship (Mansfield 2014).

Such narratives portray Kurdish people as highly nationalistic and resistant to imperial and state formations, and thus often the victims of imperial and state violence. These narratives endure in political and academic discourse, shored up by scholarship that reifies Kurdish identity and politics. Kurdish Studies scholarship often focuses on elaborating Kurdish origins and demonstrating a historical, unified “Kurdish” identity.



For example, Wadie Jwaideh (2006) argues that, “A strong sense of nationality has existed among Kurds for a very long time. Although a people of mixed origin, the Kurds constitute a nationality that has proved its vigor throughout the ages” (290). Jwaideh attributes a strong sense of Kurdish national consciousness to the Kurds’ “peculiar mountain culture” which is the “product of environmental, geographic, and historical forces that have combined to shape the general configuration of Kurdish life and institutions” (291). Likewise, Peter Hahn (2012) describes the Kurds as a “militant mountain people of a distinct ethnic and linguistic identity” (16), language echoing colonial racial typologies characterizing some groups, such as the Iraqi Assyrian levies, as “martial races.”

On the other hand, some scholars critique the idea of a unified Kurdish identity predating World War I. Historian David McDowall argues that “it is extremely doubtful that the Kurds form an ethnically coherent whole in the sense that they have a common ancestry.” Kurds are most likely the descendants of various Indo-European tribes who moved westward from Iran some 3500 years ago (2004:8). McDowall maintains that “the Kurds only really began to think and act as an ethnic community from 1918 onwards” in the era of Wilsonian self-determination (2003:4). Anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen notes that the term “Kurd” or “Akrad” (its Arabic plural) historically was used to refer to all non-Arab nomadic and tribal people; only gradually did people come to use the term to refer to a specific ethnic group (1992a:111). Van Bruinessen speculates that the “underdevelopment” of Kurdistan, exacerbated by difficult travel and the inaccessibility of villages, hindered Kurdish nationalist movements, making “primordial ties” all the more important (1992:20-21). Consequently, van Bruinessen suggests that identity

dichotomies were intensified, hinging upon a “dualistic world-view” of “my enemies’ enemy is my friend” (1992:77), which brings to mind Fredrik Barth’s (1969) classic theorization of ethnic boundaries.

Kurdish identity, or *Kurdayetî*, as conventionally understood today, is based on language and ethnic self-identification, as well as other modes of Kurdishness, like dress, custom, or cuisine, which are said to signify Kurdish ethnicity (Celiker 2013; Bruinessen 1992b). In some contexts, “Kurdish” cultural markers may differ little from surrounding cultural groups. Perhaps the strongest case for unified Kurdish cultural identity can be made for language, as Yalçın -Heckman argues (1991:27). Some scholars have argued that varieties of Kurdish are “dialects” of the same language, which reinforces a sense of pan-Kurdish identity or national unity; conversely, “dialects” may be more accurately described as distinct languages belonging to a Kurdish language family (Ghazi 2009).

Empires and states historically have subjugated their Kurdish populations through suppression of Kurdish language and culture. The Arab conquest brought Islam and the Arabic language to the region that is now Kurdistan. Some of my Kurdistani interlocutors regarded Arabic and Islam, especially more conservative variants of Islam, as hindrances to the Kurdish cause at best, and at worst, as “colonizing consciousness,” to borrow a phrase from John and Jean Comaroff (1991). Successive empires, like the Mongols and later the Ottomans, perpetuated linguistic domination over their subject peoples. The states created after World War I, such as Turkey and Iraq, continued Kurdish linguistic and cultural suppression to varying extents (Hassanpour 1996; Fernandes 2008; Salih 2019). Since its creation in 1921, Iraq has maintained official recognition and language rights of its Kurdish population, but, as Christine Allison notes, these rights “have always

fallen short of Kurdish demands, which have been a leitmotif of Kurdish resistance” (Allison 2018:21).

Kurdish resistance and aspirations to statehood have become the focal point of scholarship on Kurdish identities in Iraq. A rich body of literature examines Iraqi identities through the lenses of Pan-Arabism, Iraqi nationalism, and sectarian, class, and urban-rural divides (Batatu 1978; Davis 2005; Longrigg 1953; Bashkin 2008; Eppel 1998). However, Kurdish experiences of identity formation within this literature typically are regarded as provincial, with the modern state at the center of identity formation in Iraq. Thus, Kurdish identity, like other minority identities in Iraq (Bashkin 2012), is reduced to a kind of “otherness,” conceptualized primarily through its opposition to imperial (Ottoman or British) and state formations (Iraq, Iran, Syria, or Turkey). Scholarship which views ethnic plurality as inherently problematic within the modern Iraqi state also reproduces Kurdish “otherness.” In this literature, the formation and contestation of collective identities typically are conceptualized with the Iraqi state at the center, undergirded by some idea of “Iraqi nationality,” whether unified or “fragmented” (Zubaida 2002). Iraqi nationality competes with pan-Arabism, or with ethnic and territorial nationalisms such as with the Kurdish population of Iraq.

As Arbella Bet-Shlimon (2019) argues in her study of Kirkuk, the “boundaries of the nation-state” too often limit conceptualizing identities in Iraqi society. Bet-Shlimon observes that historical and contemporary narratives about Kirkuk approach the fact of ethnic pluralism as problematic and as a threat to the nation state. In the historical record and in the present day, however, many people in Iraq claim multiple or hybrid identities that do not correspond neatly to state-recognized identity categories. Furthermore, some

people are ethnically or nationally “indifferent” to the identity categories assigned to them by external powers, (Bet-Shlimon 2019, citing Zahra 2010) until those identity categories are used by the state or groups to lay claim to territory and resources.

We have seen how popular discourse, political rhetoric, and some scholarship perpetuate certain narratives about Kurdish identity and politics. These narratives are problematic because they reproduce the colonial gaze; rely on a state-centered approach that marginalizes Kurdistan; reify identity categories according to Western notions about “ethnicity”; and reduce power struggles between groups and the state to “sectarianism.” Such narratives are especially egregious considering the ways in which Kurdistan continues to be marginalized, both as a political reality and as an object of study. As Lissa Malkki (1995) has argued, theorizing group identities with reference to states and the “national order of things” pathologizes “stateless” populations. For the reasons outlined above, I use the broader and more inclusive term “Kurdistani” to refer to people residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. I use the ethnic designation “Kurdish” only when people self-identify or ascribe this identity to others, and I do not refer uncritically to “Kurdish” or any other identity categorization.

### *Kurdistani sovereignty as a contested good*

Central to my interlocutors’ encounters with nationalisms and state-making is the contested power to define and ascribe “Kurdish” and “Kurdistani” identities, or conversely, “Iraqi.” Encounters with the “nation” occur in sites familiar to anthropologists of sovereignty and the state, such as contexts of Foucauldian disciplinary power like schools, or “spaces of exception” like camps (Agamben 1998). Nationalist

messaging in textbooks, in the classroom, and in patriotic ceremonies at schools are all well-trodden territory for anthropologists of youth and nationalism in the Middle East (Adely 2012; Kaplan 2006; Altinay 2004; Herrera 2006). People predictably encounter Kurdish nationalist ideology and imagery at “national” sites, like the Barzanî Memorial Center described in the following section. Another key site for contesting sovereignty is the ubiquitous refugee or IDP camp, found throughout the Kurdistan Region, including informal camps like the Yezidi settlement described in chapter one, and formal, government-regulated camps, like the camp for Syrian Kurds which appears later in this chapter.

Theorizing sovereignty has been a key concern of the discipline of anthropology, from classic studies on kingship and authority (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1940), to the emergence in the 1990s of the anthropologies of the state and globalization which examine modern forms of governance and the regulation of bodies and populations (Aretxaga 2003; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Das 2004; Humphrey 2004). In the past couple decades, anthropologists have critiqued “the sign of sovereignty itself as a category of Western political thought,” (Bonilla 2017:330), which approaches statehood and self-determination as if they were “one and the same” across the postcolonial world (Kauanui 2017:327). Western concepts of sovereignty also may be problematic because they are premised upon the classically liberal “fiction” of “autonomous individuals” (Rose 1996).

Anthropologists continue challenging “the rationalization of sovereignty as simply the unification of power and the basic concept of political organization” (Kauanui 2017:328), instead approaching sovereignty as “a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Studies of settler

colonialism reveal how sovereignty is both a conceptual framework and a discourse that produces particular experiences of political life (Sturm 2017; Simpson 2014; Ford 2010). For example, Amal Bishara's work in Palestine demonstrates how people enact "provisional popular sovereignties" based in "insistent confrontation or quiet acts of caring for community in the face of abandonment" (Bishara 2017:350). Although popular sovereignties may not impact the political order, they can, however, "challenge the legitimacy of state authorities, create new forms of collectivity, and forge new ideas of how power should function, even though they have not ultimately restructured state power" (350).

In her work on Kurdish women's resistance movements in Turkey, Marlene Schäfers (2020) shows how "familial and personal relationships are crucial sites where expectations of political loyalty and allegiance take on shape and substance but are also negotiated and contested" (120). When political movements become institutionalized in everyday life, "sovereignty becomes just as much a social as a political project, one that is lodged at the heart of ordinary life and the intimate relations of kinship, sexuality, and friendship" (120). The embeddedness of sovereignties in the "everyday, the personal, and the intimate lends 'projects of sovereignty' immense strength while simultaneously rendering their claims to power continually vulnerable to competing loyalties" (Schäfers 2020:121). Schäfers observes that it is "precisely those moments of vulnerability when loyalties compete, conflict, or overlap," which are "particularly valuable from an analytical point of view, because they allow us to observe the contours of the social labor that goes into the making and maintenance of sovereignty" (2020:121).

The sites of contested sovereignty throughout Kurdistan, such as schools and camps, are not new ethnographic or analytical territory for thinking about sovereignty, but they are underutilized sites for exploring the intersections of “sectarianism” and “contests of values.” Rather than analyzing these sites through the anthropology of sovereignty, I approach “sovereignty” as a contested “good” within a framework of value pluralism. Many of my interlocutors were engaged in a struggle to meet the demands of various ethical regimes, and subsequently pursue certain “goods,” while also pursuing individual projects of sovereignty, or personal “dreams.” My interlocutors, sometimes by choice and other times by force, participate in spaces of contested individual, collective, national, and state sovereignties. The incursion of political loyalties, such as the ethical dimensions of nationalism and state-making, into the “loyalties” of personal life, such as kinship and friendship, deeply impacts Kurdistan subjectivities and forms of belonging. Political incursions into personal life can be painful and disruptive. In the vignettes following, interlocutors’ encounters with the “nation” leaving some people wondering if “sovereignty” and nationalisms are “goods” worth pursuing in contemporary Kurdistan.

### *National sites*

On a chilly day in mid-March 2017, when the winter had not quite yielded to spring, the mouth of Shanidar cave was shrouded in mist. Surrounding the cave, as far as the eye could see, rose the jagged Zagros mountains, whose peaks disappeared into grey, heavy clouds. A new Kurdish acquaintance, “Sëbr,” was leading us (myself and my husband) on a three-day tour around the Kurdistan Region to visit historic and cultural sites. I had requested that we visit Shanidar cave. The site became world-famous in the

late 1950s and early 1960s, when Neanderthal remains were excavated there by Columbia University archaeologist Ralph Solecki and a team of Kurdish workers. Traces of flower pollen, presumably brought into the cave by humans to commemorate the dead, were considered the oldest and best example of ritualistic human burial. (Later researchers argued that the pollen may have been the result of animal activity.) Shanidar appears in the Kurdistan government-issued social studies (*komalayati*) curriculum, and the KRG's official tourism website includes a page about the cave. At the time of my visit, the site seemed neglected, with litter scattered everywhere and some weathered didactic panels about the cave's history that needed replacing. Managing this out-of-the-way-site was probably a low priority at the time for the Kurdistan Government, of course, as it was dealing with a war and an economic crisis.

We returned to Sēbr's SUV and headed toward the Barzan region. From the backseat, I asked questions about Kurdish nationalism, and our guide responded by telling us stories about corruption. In one story, Sēbr witnessed a shady government-business deal being made. He said that for a time after, he worried someone would threaten him or something bad might happen to him because he knew about the deal. But to his amazement, nothing happened because "they do this openly. There is no secret," he scoffed.

When we reached a security checkpoint near our destination, Sēbr told the guards that we were tourists just passing through the area. He did not mention that we were going to visit the Barzanî National Memorial center commemorating Kurdish revolutionary leader Mullah Mustafa Barzanî. From the 1940s until his death in 1979, Mullah Mustafa Barzanî was one of the primary leaders of Kurdish resistance movements



against the Iraqi and Iranian governments. “If we tell them here that we are going to the memorial, they will have television cameras and will interview you, and you will be on the evening news, ‘Foreigners come to honor the late Mullah Mustafa Barzanî,’” Sěbr chuckled. Because it was the month of Mullah Mustafa’s birthday and the *Newroz* spring holiday, many people were visiting the memorial.



Figure 2 Kurdish women from Zakho gathered for a group photo during their visit to the Memorial Center, March 2017. Photo by the author.

We drove a few minutes more, reached the memorial gates, and parked in a small lot. Sěbr asked if I would cover my hair out of respect. “We won’t be here long,” he said as if to reassure me I would not be covering my hair for an extended period. I tucked my short hair inside a knit beanie.

As we walked slowly through the memorial complex, Sěbr pointed out a large building, with a banquet hall said to hold up to 1500 guests. He pointed to the building’s three domes “representing the three religions in Kurdistan.”

“Which three?” I asked.

“Islam, Christianity, and Yezidi,” he replied. Earlier in the day, Sēbr told us that his grandmother converted from Judaism to Islam. Her conversion caused quite a stir in their small town, Sēbr explained, because it was “not necessary” for Christian or Jewish women to convert when marrying a Muslim man. I waited to see if he had any comments about religious representation at the memorial, especially about the absence of Judaism, but he remained silent. Looming over us, an enormous Kurdistan flag flapped in the cold wind.

The graves themselves were simple stone slabs with inscriptions. A short stone wall enclosed the little cemetery, and vivid green grass was growing over the graves. Quiet, respectful people left small bouquets of *nergiz*, the pale-yellow daffodil popular during the Spring *Newroz* season. As soon as we approached the cemetery, a young man dressed traditionally in *jli kurdi* noticed us and walked quickly in our direction, snapping photos with his large camera. Sēbr was telling us about the inscriptions, but I was distracted by the photographer, who circled around us while our friend talked. Finally, the photographer introduced himself, saying he worked for the memorial archive, and that he photographs all foreign visitors. Sēbr gave us a knowing look.

Our guide seemed eager to leave the memorial and continue our tour, but like a good host, he waited patiently whenever we saw something that interested us. Other memorial visitors began approaching us, smiling nervously, and asking to take group selfies with us. I chatted with some young Kurdish women from the town of Zakho who were travelling together for the holiday; my husband posed with a couple families. As we walked back toward the parking lot, I noticed a banner in Sorani Kurdish and read aloud,

*“Mullah Mustafa nasnamay netewanî gelî Kurd.”* Turning to Sěbr, I asked, “‘Mullah Mustafa is the identity of the Kurdish nation,’ is that translation right?”

“Yes,” he said, glancing toward the banner.

“Is Mullah Mustafa a national hero?” Kyle (my husband) asked.

“The Barzanîs want to make him one, but most people, especially outside Erbil and Duhok provinces, in Slemanî and in greater Kurdistan, do not consider him a hero. Rather, he is the opposite,” Sěbr replied drily. He stopped walking and hesitated, observing a large tent beside the banner. “Do you want to eat in the tent? They serve a small meal to visitors. Every year they spend millions of dollars, some of it to feed all the guests to the memorial.”

I nodded. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

We stepped inside the tent. Around one dozen men and women, probably relatives, clustered at one end of a long row of tables pushed together. Sěbr led us to the other end, where an old man sat eating alone. The old man asked about us, and the family at the other end quieted to hear Sěbr’s brief explanation. A staff member brought us a platter of bread to share, and for each person, a plate of bulgur, a small bowl of lentil soup, and a flimsy plastic water cup.

Sěbr looked disappointed. “This is a military meal,” he sighed.

“There’s no raw onion either,” the old man added.

After our meal, we stood outside the tent, sipping small cups of hot, sugary black tea and chatting with other visitors for a few minutes. Sěbr motioned for us to return to the vehicle. He seemed tense. As we pulled out of the memorial center, I apologized, saying, “Maybe we stayed too long.”

Sěbr said it was “fine,” though his tone of voice and taut expression said otherwise.

Sěbr, like many Kurdish people I met, expressed disillusionment with political life in Iraqi Kurdistan. As we visited sites across the Kurdistan Region, Sěbr’s remarks seemed to follow a “script,” benign running commentary that gave an overall positive impression of the Kurdistan Region. I imagine he had used this script countless times in his career as a tour guide for international visitors to the Kurdistan Region, mostly “retired people interested in Mesopotamia,” he chuckled. Knowing that I was interested to hear not just a polite script but also his opinions, Sěbr gradually disclosed them. He had become cynical through repeated encounters with the Kurdistan Government, its agents, its policies, and its “scripts,” such as when he gave tours for “important” international visitors. Throughout our trip with Sěbr, he offered us the official script, but he prefaced his “scripted” remarks. He drew our attention to how the Kurdistan Government would want the Kurdistan Region portrayed and contrasted that “good” image with how he and people he knew experienced life in the Kurdistan Region.

When we visited the Barzanî Memorial Center, he spoke in a resigned tone, and his comments were tinged with bitterness: About how we international visitors might be received eagerly and how our visit might be filmed and reported in news media, as he had witnessed many times when working as a tour guide. About how the Memorial Center conflated the Kurdish nation with the Barzanî clan, evidenced by the banner declaring Mullah Mustafa Barzanî to be the “identity” of the Kurdish nation. And when he pointed out the three domes representing the “three religions of Kurdistan,” the lack of

representation of other religions, including his own partial-Jewish ancestry, was made more obvious by Sěbr's grim silence.

On our way to visit the Yezidi holy site of Lalish in the Duhok Governorate, we passed by several camps for IDPs. Near the town of Sheikhan, Sěbr pulled the vehicle over on a hillside, where we had a view overlooking an expansive IDP camp. The sky was grey and misty. White tents flapping in the cold wind stood out starkly against the red-brown mud of the plains. Sěbr complained that Yezidi IDPs had suffered more than other internally displaced people because Christian churches, foreign and local, only supported Christian IDPs. Throughout our tour, Sěbr made oblique remarks about the Kurdistan Regional Government's "inability" to direct money to certain relief efforts or to pay government sector salaries.



Figure 3. Refugee camp near Sheikhan, March 2017. Photo by the author.

During our evening meal in a café, Sěbr ate half-heartedly and told us his story. When he was a teenager in the 1990s, Sěbr paid a man to smuggle him out of Iraq. For

weeks, Sēbr and a handful of other people trekked through the mountains crossing the Iraq-Turkey border. The smuggler abandoned them without food or water for two days in a filthy rice paddy; people sobbed from hunger and thirst and incessant mosquitos. At one point in their journey, the refugees were instructed to hide inside cotton bales on a truck. It was miserably hot, and the cotton stuck to their sweaty bodies. Finally, they reached Greece, where Greek people “were kind because of our mutual enemy, the Turks.” But the refugees had to sleep in a park that gay men used for clandestine meetups. In the morning, the police dispersed the sleepers with water hoses, which was welcome, Sēbr said, smiling sadly, because they had not showered in weeks. Eventually, Sēbr made it to London, where he worked his way up in the restaurant industry. Like many people in the Kurdish diaspora, he returned to the Kurdistan Region during the relatively stable and prosperous 2000s. With his savings, he paid 250,000 dollars in advance to secure a house in a new residential construction project in Erbil. When the real estate industry tanked, Sēbr sold his unfinished house at a huge loss.

For the last leg of the tour, we stopped in the town of Akre, famous for its *Newroz* (new year) celebrations. Our friends in Erbil had encouraged us to borrow their *jilî Kurdî* to wear when visiting Akre. Sēbr regarded the traditional Kurdish clothing my husband and I wore for the occasion with a mix of amusement and resignation, perhaps having seen many tourists also eager to participate in Kurdish “culture.” Waving us off, Sēbr stayed with his vehicle and chain smoked. From a crowded rooftop, we watched fireworks and men bearing torches marching up the mountains surrounding Akre. Another rooftop spectator pointed out to me a separate procession of women bearing torches marching up a different mountain.

After the fireworks and toward the end of the festivities, there was a frantic rush of spectators as everyone tried to return to their homes and vehicles. Myself, my husband, and a few other people were quickly enveloped by a column of hundreds of rowdy young men, some bearing torches or firearms. In that moment, I realized how quickly the festivities had changed from a family-friendly affair to a dangerous one. During the drive home, I casually mentioned to Sēbr that I had been “harassed” by men in the street. Sēbr, not taking his eyes off the road, replied flatly, “That is how people are here,” and why he preferred not to attend such events.

On the drive home, I thought about how the “nation” can take many forms, like the large meals of *dolma* and *biryani* we enjoyed in friends’ homes; picnics in the countryside during the Newroz holiday; or the families strolling in around the bazaar fountains eating ice cream in the cool evening. That night, the nation I observed was personified by aggressive men dominating the public space of a national cultural event celebrating the endurance and “goodness” of the Kurdish nation. But it was not good for all.

From female acquaintances, I heard a range of stories about gender-based violence, from sexual harassment to “honor killings.” Some people spoke with sadness about severely curtailed opportunities for women, like when Ashti told me how her paternal uncle forbade her from going to school after age eleven. Some expressed frustration, such as female students who complained to me that their families would not permit them to study abroad but allowed their brothers. And many expressed mixed frustration and resignation about cultural gender norms, including men like Sēbr the tour guide. Within Kurdish studies, there is growing acknowledgement and discussion of how

the gendered aspects of Kurdish “culture” shape the lived experiences of Kurdish women (Hardi 2011; 2013; Fischer-Tahir 2005; 2009; 2010), as well as the experiences of female scholars within Kurdish studies (Schäfers et al., 2020; Hardi 2020). In later chapters, I discuss how Kurdistani interlocutors deal with the gendered aspects of culture.

In the ethnographic vignettes in this chapter, we see interlocutors grappling with the purported “goodness” of the Kurdish “nation.” If patrilineal kinship, patriliney, and “patriarchy” are integral to Kurdish cultural identity, as in the myth of the Medes and in contemporary state and social practices of ascribing identity, then can Kurdish “culture” be “good” for women? Can a nation run by a “kleptocratic” oligarchy be “good”? Can a nation that treats its non-Kurdish residents as second-class citizens be “good”? These questions are, of course, rhetorical in the sense that not all my interlocutors ask these questions; some people merely allude to problems. I bring these questions to the fore in thinking about the ethical dimensions of nationalism and state-making, especially how individuals link their own ethical self-formation to the nation or the state. Before I move to analyze how interlocutors wrestle with the nation’s “goodness,” in the following section I discuss how anthropologists conceptualize “goodness,” particularly as it pertains to violence and suffering.

### *Suffering and anthropology of the good*

Anthropologists, especially those who work in Iraq (Al-Mohammad 2012) or in Iraqi Kurdistan (King 2011), frequently bear witness to suffering. My interlocutors suffered many types of violence, from gender-based violence, to discrimination, to the atrocities of war, such as physical injury, rape, or psychological trauma, that had



devastated the lives of so many. Suffering has always been “there,” visible to anthropologists working in “the field,” but in recent decades, anthropologists increasingly have turned their attention to documenting suffering and the conditions which produce it. Anthropologists, who for much of the discipline’s history as a “science of the ‘other’” (De Certeau 1986) focused their research on “exotic others,” or the “savage slot” (Trouillot 2003), now focus primarily on the “suffering slot” (Robbins 2013a). The “suffering slot” reflects a disciplinary shift to what Sherry Ortner has dubbed “dark anthropology,” or a focus on “the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality, and oppression)” (2016:47). “Dark anthropology” infuses ethnography with the work of many theorists and social scientists who have examined power, violence, and human suffering (Agamben 1998; Butler 1997; Arendt 1970; Foucault 1977). In some ways, my ethnography reflects “dark anthropology,” as I would expect any holistic ethnographic approach to contemporary Iraq to include at least some of the “dark” themes haunting the country.

One strength of ethnography is “bearing witness” to suffering (Atalay 2018; Bonet and McWilliams 2019; Hauser et al. 2018), which is just about everywhere you look in Iraq. Bearing witness involves interrogating the effects of overt violence, such the thousands of civilian deaths during the 2003-2011 Iraq war. Bearing witness also entails examining less obvious forms of violence, like the everyday discrimination internally displaced people and refugees suffer in the Kurdistan Region. Discrimination is one manifestation, among many, of “structural violence,” meaning “the ways in which epic poverty and inequality, with their deep histories, become embodied and experienced as violence,” as Paul Farmer has popularized the term (2010:47). Farmer (1996) observed

that anthropology's longstanding commitment to cultural relativism and to the "culture" concept led many anthropologists to conflate forms of violence with "cultural difference." The conflation was symptomatic of "'studying down' steep gradients of power" (277), and of a discipline built on "othering" people and societies, as critical scholars like Talal Asad (1973) had been arguing for decades.

While "dark anthropology" has addressed some of the discipline's problems with conceptualizing violence, the intense disciplinary focus on suffering tends to overlook other aspects of human experience. Joel Robbins (2013a) observes that, as anthropologists in 1980s and 1990s increasingly focused on power and violence and began the work of decolonizing the discipline, the "culture" concept receded into the background. In the disciplinary transition from studying the "savage" to the "suffering," some of the strengths of ethnography have diminished, namely the "critical potential of the notion of difference" (2013a:447). In the era of dark anthropology, ethnographies resemble case studies of the same inequalities and suffering subject, just situated in different cultural contexts. "We have learned so much in the last few decades about how human beings can disregard and do violence to one another," Robbins argues, that other ways of understanding human experience have been neglected (458).

As a supplement to anthropology of the "suffering slot," Robbins proposes an "anthropology of the good," a line of inquiry about how "people living in different societies strive to create the good in their lives" (457). An anthropology of "the good" does not presume the existence any universal goods, but rather examines how people pursue various socially or individually defined "goods." Robbins argues that a shared model of human action, one which recognizes that people think some things are good and

worth pursuing, has undergirded anthropology since its inception. The “savage slot” drew upon romantic notions of a utopia lost to the Western world, which might be found in the lives of the “other” (Trouillot 2003). “Dark anthropology,” though it has moved beyond the romanticism and orientalism of the “other,” nevertheless suggests in its critique of suffering that better ways of living are possible.

Disagreement about conceptualizing an “anthropology of the good” centers on two problems: The first problem concerns how to define ethics and the ethical subject; the second concerns whether or not anthropologists can or should describe anything as “good.” While it may be argued that anthropologists have been studying “the social construction of morality” since the beginnings of the discipline (Howell 1997), historically, anthropologists have not given morality and ethics as much attention and systematic study as other areas of inquiry, like political or economic life, kinship and marriage, or religion (Laidlaw 2017). During the “ethical turn” of the past couple decades, anthropologists increasingly approached morality and ethics as objects of inquiry by engaging with philosophical traditions. Out of the ethical turn, two general schools of thought emerged, which I refer to as “virtue ethics” and “ordinary ethics.” There is, of course, more nuance within individual anthropologists’ work, which Cheryl Mattingly and Jason Throop (2018) cover in depth in their *Annual Review* article. Here, I group anthropologists loosely for the purpose of sketching an outline of a particular debate about ethical agency in which I position my own work.

Anthropologists in the first group, “virtue ethics,” typically approach ethics as a conscious, moral deliberative process, set apart from everyday life, for the purpose of determining what is “good” and living accordingly. Their work often draws upon neo-

Aristotelian thinking to theorize how people become ethical subjects through conscious reflection and action. Ethics concerns the examined life, in which, “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and every choice is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim” (Aristotle 2009:3). It could be said that roughly the same model of human action and approach to morality informs both ancient philosophers, now enjoying a renewed interest among anthropologists of ethics, and classic social theory. For example, Robbins (Das et al. 2015) notes that Emile Durkheim’s formulation of “moral facts” assumes that human action is oriented toward pursuing “the good.” This is because, as Durkheim argues, “it is psychologically impossible to pursue an end to which are indifferent – i.e. that does not appear to us as *good* and does not affect our sensibility” (1953:45).

Anthropologists working with a virtue ethics framework posit an ethical subject who is a “self-interpretative animal” (Taylor 1989) with a capacity for “reflective freedom,” which is the “capacity reflectively to evaluate in light of values or ideals” (Laidlaw 2017:188). In this formulation of “ethics,” the ethical subject requires freedom and capacity to reflect, a process philosopher Charles Taylor calls “strong evaluation,” in which people make distinctions between the importance or value of things. Taylor suggests that the power to evaluate desires is “distinctively human” (1985a:15-16) and that it shapes individual identities or selves. In this sense, strong evaluation guides personal projects in which people “quite deliberately set out on a concerted project of refashioning themselves, in light of a set of values or doctrines to which they consciously subscribe, or of modelling their conduct on that of chosen exemplars” (Laidlaw 2017:186) Joel Robbins (2004) points out that chosen exemplars are exemplary because

these individuals realize a value to its fullest potential in ways that everyday life does not permit ordinary people. We admire Mother Teresa's compassion and selfless service, but most of us do not want to live in deprivation as she lived so that we might realize certain virtues to the fullest in our own lives. Although we might not have the conditions, the capacity, or the desire necessary to pursue any virtue to the fullest, values are salient nonetheless in everyday life. "Our identity is defined," Taylor argues, "by our fundamental evaluations...the concept of identity is bound up with that of certain strong evaluations which are inseparable from myself" (1985a:34).

These basic philosophical observations about ethics, morality, meaning, and identity, can inform anthropological analysis, but they only go so far. If we assume a model of human action based in "first person virtue ethics" (Mattingly 2014), then it follows that ethnographers need only to listen to how people articulate justifications for their choices or way of life. But "dark anthropology" makes evident what we already know: Most people do not live in conditions of their own choosing, which greatly constrains self-reflective and virtue-oriented ethical agency. An "ethics" which requires certain freedoms and capacities suggests that only the privileged have "ethics" or are capable of fully realized ethical agency. As Michel Foucault observed (1997), a person living in unfree conditions, such as slavery, only can carry out the will of the master or of others; a person in these conditions would have no "ethics." Thus, it is no surprise that anthropologists whose research involves people living in extremely difficult circumstances vigorously object to neo-Aristotelian models of ethical agency.

Hayder Al-Mohammad, for example, argues that in war-torn Iraq, the fundamental question people are asking is not "*What must I do?*", but rather, "*What can I*

*do? What am I capable of doing?'"* (Das et al. 2015, emphasis is Al-Mohammad's). To suggest that people in desperate circumstances are pausing to philosophize about the virtue of their actions seems ludicrous when survival is at stake. "You don't need that category [of "the good"]," Al-Mohammad continues, "to say why somebody goes out and works for twelve, fourteen hours a day in fifty-degree Celsius heat to explain why they struggle for their daughter, their son, their neighbor, their friends" (ibid.). Some human action "is simply its own explanation – there is nothing more to say" (ibid.).

Objecting to the "strong," or some might say "narrow," view of virtue ethics does not imply that there is no "strong evaluation" occurring in human action. Rather, the ways in which human beings are ethical subjects can be found in ordinary human life, which "is a life of continuous and routine self-description, self-evaluation and incremental self-constitution" (Laidlaw 2017:177). Because ethics can be found in mundane, daily acts, this approach is often referred to as "ordinary ethics" (Das 2012; Lambek 2010; Lempert 2013). Ordinary ethics questions the degree to which self-reflection, virtue, and "the good" are necessary criteria for speaking of ethics and ethical subjects. The "ordinary" approach views ethical behavior not as a transcendent, reflective process requiring certain conditions and freedoms, but immanent in everyday life, and especially so for people living in unfree conditions.

In some cases, perhaps there is "nothing more to say" about many human behaviors other than their surface-level description. Al-Mohammad suggests that anthropologists, by saying anything "more" – such as interpreting human action through virtue-oriented ethics and premising those ethics on some notion of "culture" or "tradition" – risk reverting to unequal knowledge production which plagues the

discipline. To illustrate his point, Al-Mohammad describes a scene in which he visits a household: he takes his shoes off before entering the home; children collect their toys from the living room; he is instructed to sit in the most comfortable seat, where he is served a glass of juice, and so on. Al-Mohammad reflects how he, as an anthropologist, might interpret this domestic scene:

Maybe if this scene were played out in the Middle East, where I work, I might have been forced to reference Islam, the twinned shame/honour, or how the glass of juice symbolises vitality, or the wooden table male power and authority, or whatever version such logics now take in the discipline. But, thankfully, we will be spared this today for the above took place in North London in the home of an Anglo-Saxon couple for whom we do not seem to have prepared logics and cosmologies as yet...How odd the ethnographic subject has figured out her world and can so easily locate goods and bad, never fluffing the distinction. In truth, we inhabit worlds we are not masters of, and with no clear blueprint or principles by which to proceed – no matter how many texts and traditions we keep citing and referring to. What we find in the world are not goods which make claims on us, but *oughts* (Das et al. 2015).

In the above excerpt, Al-Mohammad speaks of two concerns: The first is that an anthropology of “the good” conflates “the good” with custom or rules, which is a foundational debate about morality. In saying “we inhabit worlds we are not masters of,” Al-Mohammad echoes what many social scientists have recognized to be common to human experience. As Karl Marx famously phrased it, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (2005:1). The second objection is to the “prepared logics and cosmologies” of the discipline, which in this case refers to stereotypical characterizations of the Middle East or Islam.

*Two caveats about the good*

It seems to me that the two concerns Das and Al-Mohammad express – the one about orientalist-haunted knowledge production and the other, an observation that people are not the masters of their worlds – are conflated in this debate on “the good.” Firstly, what Al-Mohammad and Das object to in conceptualizing “the good” is not only the concept itself, but also its cultural baggage: Western-dominated knowledge production within the social sciences, which continues to haunt scholarship about the “non-Western world.” Inviting Eurocentric philosophy into an anthropological conversation about conceptualizing ethics in “non-Western” places does seem to perpetuate Eurocentric knowledge production about morality. Moreover, that Eurocentric knowledge production is historically bound up with colonial and neocolonial projects, which, in justifying their rule, have advanced some concepts of “the good” as universal. Modern secular, liberal governance, in its “right” to adjudicate “the good,” can harm more than help, such as Saba Mahmood (2015) has found in Egypt, where colonial and postcolonial “secular” governance exacerbates tensions between religious minorities and majorities. Additionally, Elizabeth Povinelli (2002; 2011; 2016) has given us many examples demonstrating how late liberalism’s ability to ascribe good and to determine which ways of living are best reveals the dark side of “positive liberty” as it empowers settler colonialisms.

In the ethnographic and historical records, we have seen how people mobilize concepts of “the good” toward “bad” ends, to put it crudely. Not only have anthropologists documented destructive uses of “the good,” such as Veena Das in her work on India, in which speaking of “the good” sounds like the “salvation talk” of



religion or of political liberalism (2014; 2018). Anthropologists also must be wary of how “the good” becomes implicated in projects of liberation, including those of our own discipline (Das et al. 2015). Das objects to a virtue ethics approach because discursive regimes about “the good” grant anthropologists “the right to judge the behavior of others, good intentions notwithstanding.” One risk inherent in an anthropology of “the good,” Das argues, is that it creates a “division of ethical labor,” in which “the philosophers will give us the theory and we the anthropologists will tell them how things are on the ground.” Here, I would point to James Laidlaw’s (2017) observation that defining anything as “ethical,” meaning related to “ethics,” does not imply that anthropologists also approve of said “ethical” behavior or are making any kind of moral judgment. “One can imagine a movement, a party or even a society of highly ethical monsters,” Laidlaw reminds us.

Nevertheless, Das is right to be concerned about who gets to theorize about “the good” in anthropological analysis, considering the historical dominance of anthropological theory in the West (Harrison 2011). Not only have anthropologists employed methods or theories we now reject as inaccurate or unequitable; some suggest that the discipline itself is irrevocably and irredeemably dependent on knowledge production about “otherness.” In her 2017 article reviewing the state of the discipline, Lucia Cantero remarks that the “discursive presence of the past” characterizes anthropology as “ontologically haunted,” or as “hauntology” (309), using the portmanteau coined by Jacques Derrida (1994). In the same year as Cantero’s review, Vassos Argyrou also described anthropology’s perennial “problem” as “hauntological or

spectral,” again referring to Derrida’s “theme of the spectre or ghost that exists and does not exist, is present and not present” (53).

The “spectre” that haunts the discipline is the problem of representation: “There is no anthropological paradigm,” Argyrou argues, “in which cultural difference does not emerge as cultural inferiority, not a single one that has not been found guilty of ethnocentrism” (2017:51). Argyrou insists that, “no matter how well intended, anthropological representations cannot avoid being ethnocentric” (52). Anthropologists are “possessed by the idea of Pure Humanity” lurking in the discipline’s foundational axioms like “making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange,” and subsequently, they seek “ways and means of neutralizing representations.” Consequently, anthropology is stuck in a pattern of theoretical “turns” in a struggle to “redeem otherness” (53). Thus, in anthropology “the return of the repressed disturbs and spooks the living” (52). It could be said that “the good,” like “otherness,” becomes both the object and the subject of our discipline.

In addition to the methodological, or “positional, problems of power when anthropologists conceptualize “the good,” Das also expresses concern about how anthropologists might conceptualize “the good” as a moral consensus, or as the winner in a contest of “values.” An anthropology of “the good” seems to assume that, not only can our interlocutors articulate their values and desires, but that it also uncritically accepts their articulations as “true”:

Our experience is never transparent to us, and because we can so often mistake our performance of allegiance to higher ideals – be these those guaranteed by the state, the party, or religious authorities – as somehow corresponding to our true need, conflict of values is too tame a description of the impasse in the light of which we must craft our moral lives and our lives as moral (2018:490).

In conceptualizing “the good,” there are two interrelated concerns at play: First, anthropologists should be careful never to presume that we know what people value or desire, or to accept uncritically what they say they value and desire; this is fundamental to our disciplinary training. The second and related problem concerns theorizing the role of custom, rules, and power in shaping “morality” or “ethics.” For Al-Mohammad and Das, anthropologists working with virtue ethics risk conflating “the good” with the “normative.”

Das suggests that what a virtue ethics approach considers “a conflict of values” is simply “the difficulty of reality,” because “real” life does not “offer us a set of commensurable values among which we can choose” (2015). Although “cosmologies might appear coherent and well-integrated when they are narrated,” Das concedes, they often are incommensurate with lived experience (2014:490). Das fears that conceptualizing “the good” as a kind of transcendent ethics undermines the value of everyday human action. “So great is the lure of the good,” Das argues, “that power disappears in rethinking the social” (Das et al. 2015). Rather, attention to the contingencies of experience, such as “luck” or “chance,” can tell us about “the shape of our moral lives,” in which our obligations stem not from contracts between sovereign subjects but from our willingness to accept responsibility for an other whom fate has placed in our vicinity” (490-491). Das’s description of ethical agency gets to the heart of the problem of freedom in ethics: “whether action and reflection are to be set apart” (2014:493)

Although Das, in her 2014 article, does not propose a new theoretical framework for “ethics,” other anthropologists have offered some alternatives to what I have

categorized as a “virtue ethics” approach. Hayder Al-Mohammad, for example, seeks to broaden the scope of ethics beyond a focus on the “self,” found not only in “virtue ethics,” or the “ethics of self-cultivation” (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006), but also in some “ordinary ethics” approaches (Lambek 2010; Das 2012). Instead, he develops an “ethics of being with” (2010) which recognizes the always, already situatedness of people and the “interdependency and intercorporeality” of human action (Das et al. 2015). Borrowing from Wittgenstein the concept of “the rough ground of the everyday,” Al-Mohammad examines how ethics emerges from everyday interactions in which “lives come together in complex ways and in which care and also neglect and violence ravel and unravel the entangling of lives with other lives”. His concept of “entanglements” is immanent in everyday life, and it echoes Veena Das’s “contingencies” and “willingness to accept responsibility for an other.”

Drawing upon Erving Goffman’s work on interactions in which people move through shared space without bumping into one another, Al-Mohammad proposes an “ethics” embodied in similar everyday movements between people. “If one turns to the everyday in Iraq,” he writes, “one can find small gestures, moments of kindness and care, that are not simply positive tales contained within the destruction of post invasion Iraq but are the very grounds by which many Iraqis have been able to survive and live through the terror and uncertainty of the last decade” (2015:111). Al-Mohammad’s middle way ethics, between transcendence /event and immanent / everyday, produces a picture of life in Iraq that does not reproduce tropes of destruction and breakdown and does not cast people exclusively as victims or survivors.

Other anthropologists also offer theories of ethics which hold the transcendent / event in tension with the immanent / ordinary. In Webb Keane's work, for example, the ethical subject is not just an individual but any collective or system with a capacity for conscious self-formation. An ethical subject expanded beyond the scope of the individual opens the way for anthropologists to reevaluate work on collectives, such as kinship studies, as James Laidlaw suggests (2017). In his analysis, Keane makes a distinction between "ethics" and "morality," which he adopts from philosopher Bernard Williams: Ethics is the Socratic examined life, whereas "morality or "the morality system," refers to how people generate answers for the problem of the examined, or ethical, life. It is a distinction that may be clarifying, but not necessary.

Another philosophy-inflected anthropological approach to ethics can be found in Jarrett Zigon's work. Zigon argues that ethics are found not in the "metaphysical humanism" of virtue ethics and self-cultivation, but in "assembled and situated worlds." Morality is built on living in "attunement" with one's world, something like habitus (2008:17). "Ethics" emerges only when that attunement is compromised by "breakdown" and attunement is no longer possible. One response to breakdown is cultivating "an ethics of dwelling," which Zigon describes as "the response to an existential imperative emerging from a world that has become unbearable as a result of a particular situation that has led to the breakdown of this world" (2018). An "ethics of dwelling" is not a premeditated, "examined life," and cannot be known before breakdown. It is, rather, living "sanely" to the degree possible in the world as people experience it.

In approaching ethical life in Kurdistan through an "anthropology of the good," I describe my interlocutors as I found them: positioned somewhere between constraint, like

Zigon's "attunement," and the "freedom" inherent in self-reflection. Amidst the "breakdown" of state and society, interlocutors still point to certain, desirable "goods," whose attainment seemed possible in the transitional moment for Kurdistan in which I conducted fieldwork. Recognizing the complex, constrained, even miserable, conditions in which people live does not entail their complete inability to speak about moral self-evaluation or reflective capacities. The pull between the "ought" of morality and the "can" of ethical self-reflection is where I locate ethics. The tension between the two is a productive space for anthropologists of value pluralism. As James Laidlaw writes,

It is part of the work of an anthropology of ethics to describe the historical changes, the changing kinds of institutions and practices, that explain the greater and lesser degrees to which, as well as the differing ways in which, people at varying historical junctures have become taken up with ethical reflection and the formulation and following of explicit, more or less rationalized, ethical doctrines" (2017: 184).

This positioning – between the "should" and the "can" of moral systems – allows me to work with concepts of the "good" just as interlocutors do: In an always emerging, tentative way, in which individual projects of ethical self-formation intersect with the larger projects of the "nation" or the "state." It is a position that recognizes the two aforementioned caveats characterizing an anthropology of ethics – that virtue ethics brings with it some Western cultural baggage, and that "ethics" often is conflated with the normative, not "can" but "ought." At the same time, it is a position that is not hindered by the tedious work of sorting out the "immanent" or "everyday" from "virtue ethics" and "self-reflection." It recognizes, rather, that "ethics" is what emerges from those intersections or tensions. It is in those intersections that I find my interlocutors working out their ethical lives, and in which I situate my analysis.

### *Sovereignty-making in a Syrian Kurdish camp*

In an earlier section, I suggested that “sovereignty” and “sovereignty-making” might be conceived of as desirable “goods,” or as undesirable, according to which interlocutors and discourses were speaking. In this section, I explore this idea further by examining how Kurdistan “sovereignty-making” in a camp for Syrian Kurdish refugees impinged upon the ethical lives of two young men, Serkar and Serhand, in their efforts to realize their own “moral progress”. The refugee camp was a 30-minute drive outside Erbil’s city limits, in an impoverished town called “Betala.” During former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s regime, hundreds of thousands of non-Arab minorities, including an estimated 600,000 Kurdish people, were forcibly resettled in camps called “collective camps” (*mujama’at*) as part of Saddam’s Arabization campaigns (McDowall 2004, 339). Betala began as a collective camp. A Kurdish university professor I knew described Betala as one of the “empty places” created by displacement, rather than a meaningful place associated with a particular family or group and their claims to the land. With time, as camp residents constructed more permanent residences and small shops, Betala the Kurdish collective camp became Betala the town. Years later, after Betala had established itself as a Kurdish town, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) constructed new, separate camps for recently displaced Arabic-speaking Iraqis and for Syrian Kurdish refugees.

One afternoon, I was in the area and decided to visit the Syrian Kurdish refugee camp in Betala. Unlike the Yezidi settlement described earlier, the camp for Syrian Kurdish refugees was enormous and clearly visible. Small, uniform cinder block structures in neat rows stretched as far as the eye could see. As my Kurdish taxi driver

and I approached the camp, he clicked his tongue and said, “*Zor badakhtawa*” (How very unfortunate). The camp was tightly gated and guarded. I heard that its residents were discouraged from mixing with the Betala townspeople, probably to maintain control over the population, such as preventing intermarriage, minimizing any potential conflict between camp and town, and contain the spread of (mis)information about camp conditions.

While I had walked freely into the neglected construction site where the Yezidi people were living, at Betala camp a security guard ushered me into an office crammed with several men. An official demanded to know why I wanted to see inside the camp; they “had problems” with people visiting the camp for “*exposé*” journalism. Several minutes of intense negotiations followed, during which I assured these officials that I was a harmless student merely there as a cultural observer and not as a critic. It would be better if I had a letter of support, they said, though there was some disagreement about where I should get the letter. I suggested the Erbil Governorate education office. The official said it would be better to take a letter from the Kurdish security police (*asayîsh*). For a couple minutes the men discussed the situation in Behdînî, a dialect of Kurdish I do not speak or understand. Finally, the official turned back to me and said, “Actually, you could visit the Barzanî Charity Foundation and take a letter from our director. That would be good.”

Surprised, I asked, “So the *asayîsh* letter wouldn’t be necessary if I have a Barzanî Charity letter?”

The official explained, “We [the Barzanî Charity Foundation] are in charge of the camp. The *Asayîsh* [security police] answer to us.”



This answer was unexpected, so I said, “Oh, I didn’t know the Barzanî Charity Foundation was in charge.” A long pause followed, during which I worried about this revelation. The Barzanî family had been the Kurdistan Regional Government’s ruling family since Mullah Mustafa Barzanî led the Kurdish struggle against the Iraqi central government in the 1960s and 1970s. The current KRG President was Mullah Mustafa’s son, Mesud Barzanî, who controversially had overstayed his elected term since 2015, citing a national emergency. It was said that the Barzanîs were involved in many business deals, pocketed large sums of money, and had their critics imprisoned or killed. I did not know about the nature of the relationship between the Barzanî Charity Foundation and the Kurdistan Regional Government, but I suspected it might be highly politicized.

With some hesitation, I was told that I would be allowed inside the Syrian Kurdish refugee camp today only and with a chaperone beside me at all times. I was forbidden from asking any political questions. I could not ask about the situation in Syria. I could not ask about Kurdish political parties, or the Kurdistan Regional Government, or the Kurdistan Regional Government’s relationship with the Turkish government. I vigorously agreed to these conditions. My chaperone would be “Serkar,” a quiet young Kurdish man who had been standing silently in the corner during the meeting. Negotiations ended and I followed Serkar out the office door. Once out of earshot of the other officials, Serkar became very talkative. He hoped to continue his studies in the United States. He had earned a law degree from a Kurdistan university, but he did not practice “because practicing law is very dangerous here,” he said. I nodded, recalling that the previous year a female lawyer was found murdered in her car near Dream City. After

graduating, Serkar struggled to find a job in a stagnant economy, so he accepted a position with the Charity Foundation which shared his name (Barzanî).

“This camp is really good, the best one, you know,” Serkar said eagerly to me as we walked around the camp. “You know we were refugees in Iran. It was terrible. We didn’t have anything, not like this. No shelter, no food. That’s why it’s important for me to work in the camp. I know what it’s like to be in this bad situation.” I asked him if he was talking about the failed 1991 uprisings against Saddam Hussein’s regime, resulting in thousands of Kurdish people fleeing into the mountains. “Yes, some to Turkey, some to Iran. The Barzanîs, we went to Iran. And you know they killed 8,000 of our men,” he said, referring to an earlier tragedy: In 1983, Saddam Hussein’s forces abducted and later murdered an estimated 8,000 males belonging to the Barzanî tribe (McDowall 2004). Serkar was born as a refugee in Iran and spent the first three years of his life there before returning to Iraqi Kurdistan in 1994. I found it strange that he spoke as if he remembered living in camps when he was between 1 and 3 years old. Perhaps it was a collective memory; perhaps his relatives impressed upon him the horrible conditions they suffered in the camps.

Serkar pointed to some new plots, where very small cinder block structures were being built. “We have only 80 plots, but already 1,160 people have given their names. There is not enough space,” he said in a quiet, serious voice. During our camp tour, we ran into some employees of the International Finance Corporation (a sister organization of the World Bank). Months before I visited Betala, I had met these IFC employees in a different camp. They warmly greeted me, explaining that they were in the Betala camp for “awareness raising” purposes. Serkar seemed alarmed by my acquaintance with the

IFC staff, but he remained silent. After our tour ended and we ate lunch with some of the BCF staff, Serkar said farewell. A fellow BCF employee, “Serhand,” offered to give me and another BCF staffer a lift back to Erbil.

From the backseat, I watched the flat, dull landscape rush past. Oil tankers lumbered along this route headed to and from the border with Turkey. Serhand broke the silence, “Do you have any questions about the camp?”

“Oh, I always have questions.” I thought for a moment. “What is the general opinion about the camps? I mean, people who maybe have never been in the camp, what do they say about them?”

Serhand replied in a resigned tone, “Oh, sure, you know, I am very sorry to say this - this isn’t my opinion, I am just telling you what people say - they say that the people in the camps are bad. Because they see some Syrians begging in the street, like gypsies, they think all people from Syria are like this. Actually, only 30% of the refugee population is living in the camps. The rest are living outside.”

“Do you mean in the host community?” I asked.

“Yes, with the host community.” Again, he emphasized that this was not his opinion, just the general public opinion about refugees. After Serhand dropped off his fellow staffer, he invited me to move to the front passenger seat.

Aware that women typically sat in the backseat when traveling with unrelated males, I asked, “*Ayb Nîya?*” (It’s not shameful?). I had to repeat it twice before he replied.

“Do you know what this word *ayb* means?” He seemed agitated. “It means something like *sherem* (shame), like something a person shouldn’t do.” He paused and

then said, “Well, maybe you have some idea about it, but for me, I’m not one of these traditional people. You are like my sister or friend; there is no difference. It doesn’t matter to me.” I apologized for my rude question and moved to the front seat. “Besides,” Serhand continued, “Kurdistan is changing. People are becoming more open.” I asked what accounted for this change. “It is social media, people are traveling, it is more open, people go outside for study.” As he drove, Serhand told me about his time in Cyprus studying for a law degree. “When I was there, I had a girlfriend,” he said, “and she came to Kurdistan and visited my family.”

“But would your sisters be allowed to travel outside?” I asked.

“Well, you are right, there is a difference,” he conceded. “Yes, they can travel with family or friends, but alone, no. And they can have male friends, but not to stay the night, if you know what I mean.” I didn’t comment, waiting to see if he would say more. “I mean, here the woman has to be a virgin until marriage, but not for the man.” I nodded.

“Did your girlfriend enjoy her visit to Kurdistan?” I asked.

“Yes, Barzan is a beautiful area,” he began, his aspect brightening. He wistfully described the natural beauty, rivers, mountains, and the Spring Newroz (new year) season. After a lull in conversation, I asked Serhand if he had any plans for the future. Would he keep working for the Barzanî Charity Foundation? He seemed unsure. He said the economy was bad, and he didn’t have a plan. He fell silent and remained so until we reached my drop-off point. I thanked him again for his hospitality. His tone became resigned again, “You’re welcome. It was our duty.”

Serhand's parting comment about "duty" reflects not only cultural hospitality norms, but also how his own ethical self-formation was bound up with the larger process of sovereignty-making in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Barzanî Charity Foundation, with the permission of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), manages the Betala camp residents because the refugees are ethnically Kurdish; the KRG's right to govern this "Kurdish" population is presented as "natural," as Kurdish people from Syria and from Iraq belong to "greater Kurdistan." For many years, the KRG has been positioning itself as the patron of all ethnic Kurds in "greater Kurdistan," a homeland and aspirational future state spanning Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Refugee and IDP camps not only shelter populations; they also heighten and make visible political and social tensions. Liissa Malkki's work (1995) has illuminated the central role the "camp" plays in creating boundaries and purifying identities for the nation or the state. In my encounter with the officials running the camp for Syrian Kurdish refugees, I was told I could not ask any questions about Syria or Turkey or their political relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government. Instead, the camp officials presented the refugees from Syria as primarily "Kurdish," and thus rightfully under the authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its agents, the duty-bound patrons of all Kurdish people living in greater Kurdistan.

In Chapter 1, I wrote about Sara, the displaced Christian woman who worked as a teacher and volunteered in a camp for displaced Yezidi people. By working in the camps, Sara, Serkar and Serhand linked their own sense of moral duty and ethical self-formation to the larger frames of family, nationalism, and religion. Sara, Serkar, and Serhad represent the motivations and concerns of many people I met during my fieldwork; they

are, in a sense, “types.” Sara primarily drew inspiration from her Christian faith and made appeals to shared Iraqi citizenship and shared humanity. Throughout my fieldwork, I heard many people make similar appeals. Sara became a key interlocutor who could speak about living in the Kurdistan Region as an ethnic or religious minority, and she appears again later in the dissertation.

Serkar and Serhand also made moral appeals to common humanity. Additionally, they contextualized their own moral strivings within the Kurdistan Region’s claims to sovereignty, tolerance, and progress. As bearers of the Barzanî name, Serkar and Serhand expressed a duty to help other ethnic Kurds. They also were eager to tell me about the moral progress and modernization they saw in Kurdistan. Both men, nevertheless, expressed deep disappointment about the stagnant economy, lack of jobs, and Kurdistan’s perennially “victimized” position in regional and global affairs. For good or for ill, their fortunes were tethered to the Kurdistan Government’s. Although probably better-connected and better provided for than the average Kurdistan, Serkar and Serhand nevertheless echoed the countless conversations I had with young people throughout my fieldwork, in which individual moral strivings were intimately connected with the moral dimensions of nationalism and state-making.

### *“Kurds ascending”*

Politicians, journalists, historians, and everyday discourse characterize the Kurdish nation as the victim centuries of cyclical violence, including genocide, war, and civil conflict. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and ensuing war, while it absolutely devastated much of the country, was the beginning of a new era for the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq. The invasion seemed to bring one chapter to a close – that of Kurdish people

suffering violence at the hand of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein – and to open another. For almost two decades, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq enjoyed a relatively calm period of political stability and economic growth. Many Kurdish people who had been living abroad in diaspora returned to their homeland. International commerce flourished, in large part secured through the Kurdistan Regional Government's independently negotiated agreements with foreign companies. During this era of "Kurds ascending" (Gunter 2007), many people became hopeful about the Kurdistan Region's future. After decades of struggle, Kurdish people in the KRI were living with more autonomy and prosperity than ever before.

The Kurdish ascent came to an abrupt halt in 2014, when the Islamic State began its campaign across Iraq and Syria. As a result of the 2003-2011 Iraq war, the conflict with Daesh, and the ongoing war in Syria, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people and refugees have settled in the KRI. Some of the IDPs and refugees are ethnically Kurdish, but most are not, such as Iraqi or Syrian Arabs, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and Yezidis. Kurdish people, although still a minority population within the state of Iraq, are the largest demographic in the Kurdistan Region. Thus, the Kurdistan Region has found itself in reversed roles, suddenly in the position of overseeing hundreds of thousands of people belonging to other ethnoreligious populations, such as Arabs, with whom Kurdish people have a long and storied history. During the war with the Islamic State and the ensuing economic crisis, the Kurdistan president Mesud Barzanî, son of Mullah Mustafa Barzanî, declared a national emergency and overstayed his elected term. Members of Parliament associated with Goran, a political opposition party, were barred from entering the Erbil Governorate, and

Parliament was suspended for months. The Barzanî family and their political party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP or PDK), tightened its grip on the Region's government.

For many people, the ascendancy of the Kurdistan Region signaled the end of a unified Iraqi national identity. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed many demonstrations of Kurdish ethnonationalism, often mandated or regulated by the Kurdistan Regional Government. These demonstrations are not always well-received among ethnically Kurdish residents of the Kurdistan Region, many of whom question the sincerity of the demonstrations, considering the alleged corruption of KRG politicians and restricted freedoms, such as freedom of expression. I met many Kurdish people who professed belief in a greater Kurdish cause and desire for an independent Kurdish state yet had little hope that the current political regime would promote these causes equitably, if at all.

A victory for the "Kurdish nation," such as an independent Kurdish state, would not be a victory for all. Many of my non-Kurdish interlocutors expressed ambivalence about living in a Kurdish majority polity. Some had escaped violence elsewhere in Iraq or in Syria and had found refuge in the Kurdistan Region, for which they were grateful. But many newcomers to the Kurdistan Region also encountered racism or felt they were treated as second-class citizens. I also heard non-Kurdish people, some from families living in the KRI for generations, criticize how the Kurdistan Regional Government privileged its ethnically Kurdish citizens. Non-Kurdish people were expected at times to participate in displays of Kurdish ethnonationalism, such as the non-Kurdish private school students appearing in Chapter 3. For others, especially some of my older non-



Kurdish interlocutors, a victorious independent Kurdish state would be the final nail in the coffin of a unified Iraq. For those worried about Kurdish hegemony, the KRG is in danger of repeating many of the same injustices Kurdish people experienced at the hands of former Iraqi government agents.

In this chapter, we have witnessed people living in Kurdistan grappling with the purported “goodness” of the Kurdish “nation.” The centrality of patriliney and patriarchy in Kurdish “culture” has left many interlocutors wondering about its “goodness.”

Patriliney figures into national mythmaking, as we saw in the *komalayati* lesson about the Medes, and in ethnonationalist displays, such as those during the Newroz holiday or at national sites like the Barzanî Memorial Center. National mythmaking portrays the Kurdish nation as continually victimized but resilient, as in the popular saying, “The Kurds have no friends but the mountains.” But some, such as Karza the *komalayati* teacher, or Sebr the tour guide, point out the underlying power struggles and betrayals in the Kurdish nation’s “ascent,” which have precipitated many an individual “fall.” In that uncertain, transitional moment, it seemed the Kurdish “nation” and the Kurdistan Government teetered on the edge of a political and social downfall.

Whether Kurdish or not, young or old, privileged or poor, many of my interlocutors hold in common a set of questions about their life in Kurdistan: Why did this bad thing happen to me, to my family, to my community, and to my country? How should I live in light of this knowledge and experience? One answer, proposed by many Kurdish politicians and nationalists at the time, was an independent Kurdistan state that would protect people from violence inflicted on them by others – often by the Iraqi, Iranian, Turkish, or Syrian state, or the “Islamic State.” An independent Kurdistan state

seemed like a good answer to some people, but many of my interlocutors who were not Kurdish worried that a Kurdistan state would not protect them equally, if at all. If so, then a Kurdistan state would not be a good thing worth pursuing. Alternately, emigration seemed like a good option – for those who could afford it. Moreover, suffering so much state sanctioned violence left many people questioning the “goodness” or “desirability” of a Kurdistan state, and by extension, question the purported “goodness” of the “nation” and of the political formation known as the “state.” The following chapter takes up the question of the feasibility and “goodness” of one specific state - a “unified” Iraq.

### **Ch. 3 “They don’t love Iraq”**

*“My architect friends, fellow users of protractors, compasses and rulers, look at this city. Consider the tall, stone houses with Greek-style columns and all the serenity of the dwellings of the Olympian gods that are slowly mushrooming. What, when you look carefully, do you see other than disorder? Nothing. Nothing. Despite the meticulousness of the engineers, each working to their own designs, it’s still a wasteland. Any beauty you plant in a wasteland will only draw more attention to that wasteland.” - Bakhtiyar Ali, I Stared at the Night of the City*

The school minibus bumped along one of the major thoroughfares of Ainkawa, the Christian-majority township of the city of Erbil. During the months I conducted field work in Kurdistan Civilizational School (KCS), I often rode a minibus to school with students who lived near my home. I sat in the front seat, with Marwa sitting between me and the driver, a kindly, middle-aged man everyone called “Amo” (“uncle” in Arabic). Marwa was in grade 8 at KCS, but she projected the authority and disapproval of a maiden aunt. The bus transported around 15 students to and from Ainkawa, mostly rowdy boys older than Marwa. The boys frequently argued over which English pop songs to play on the bus radio, which was connected by Bluetooth to their smartphones. From the front seat, Marwa policed song lyrics, alerting Amo, who understood some English, when the song was “dirty.” Amo would scold the boys and make them choose another song. On the daily bus ride, Marwa alternately worked on homework and offered commentary on students’ behavior, her classes and teachers, and things we observed outside the bus.

One morning, a compact car with four passengers turned in front of the bus. It moved slowly, impeding our progress. Amo, Marwa, and I leaned forward to study the car’s license plate: Someone had applied an image of a Kurdish flag with the word “Kurdistan” to cover up the part of the plate that typically says “Iraq.” Amo pulled around the car, and we stared at the passengers as we drove past. After a moment of

silence, as if to process what they had just seen, Amo and Marwa began discussing the license plate. “People here are so crazy about their country,” Marwa said to me, rolling her eyes. I understood that by “country,” Marwa meant “Kurdistan.”

Not long after meeting Marwa, she told me privately that she was Mandeans, a fact she did not draw attention to at school. Mandeans are one of Iraq’s dwindling ethnoreligious minorities. Their community formerly was centered around Baghdad. During the Iraq war, Marwa’s family fled Baghdad and moved to Erbil. Between 2003 and 2019, about 90% of Mandeans left Iraq. By 2019, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs estimated that only 400 Mandeans were living in the Erbil Governorate and were facing “extinction” (Salloum 2019). “I hate everything Kurdish,” Marwa continued, “*komalayati* (social studies), grammar, all of it!” Amo nodded solemnly and said, “They don’t love Iraq.”

In this chapter, I examine how people critique Kurdistan society and aspirations to statehood by measuring “Kurdistan” according to their vision of a “national” and “unified” Iraq. In some cases, people also referred to ideas about “democracy” that might be called “Western” or “neoliberal.” Many people, especially those displaced from elsewhere in Iraq, evaluated their present situation in Kurdistan by recalling their life in pre-invasion Iraq. They characterize their former homes as “open-minded,” diverse, and peaceful, rather than as divided according to sect. These “nostalgic” interlocutors, like the teachers appearing in this chapter, came of age during the sanctions era, which they recall warmly as a time in which people supported one another as neighbors and fellow citizens. They contrast their childhoods, marked by material shortages, with those of their

Kurdistani private school students. Their students enjoy material comforts and security but suffer from their insular and pampered lifestyles. Consequently, the younger generation lacks the good character or ethical sensibilities formed through hardship. To their teachers' dismay, students often exhibited apathy toward their peers, especially toward those belonging to different ethnoreligious groups. These Kurdistani youth, like many of their adult counterparts, are not motivated by a shared sense of "Iraqi" identity. As Amo the bus driver observed, "they don't love Iraq."

Students' lack of "brotherly love" and apathy about Iraqi society's fragmentation discouraged their teachers, and some, such as Naila, became increasingly cynical. Other teachers, like Sara and Mariam, redoubled their efforts to help their students cultivate the ethical sensibilities they lacked. In their lessons, they made frequent appeals to concepts like common humanity, a shared monotheistic identity, or duty to one's self, family, and country. Students received these lessons unevenly. Sometimes they resisted and argued with their teachers, and at other times they remained silent. Occasionally, older students expressed sentiments about improving themselves and their country, but more often they expressed a desire to escape the turmoil.

Teachers' efforts to cultivate a sense of moral obligation in their students often failed, or appeared to fail, to motivate them. With a few exceptions, teachers' appeals to shared "Iraqi" national identity were met with defiance or indifference; most students asserted they had no such national identity. Likewise, appeals to a shared "Kurdistani" experience only seemed to prompt students to recount their internal differences and to retreat into their fragmented sense of identity and insular lifestyle. When I interviewed students, individually or in groups, however, their thoughts on these topics could be

drawn out, though not without provoking some to arguing, and in one case, a near fist fight. My impression was that many teachers had “given up” and resigned themselves to focus their lessons on mastery of content rather than on character, and I could not blame them.

On the one hand, we could, as some interlocutors told me, expect “immature” or “selfish” behavior from children. Upon hearing that my research involved listening to youth, people reacted variously with amusement, dismissiveness, or even indignation that I was not consulting with “experts” and “elders.” In conducting research with children, I confronted not only negative “cultural” attitudes but also scholarly skepticism. In a recent *American Historical Review* roundtable, historians discussed to what extent “chronological age” is a “useful category of historical analysis.” In a vigorous rejoinder to the roundtable, “The Kids Aren’t All Right,” Sarah Maza argues that children are not a reliable or productive category of analysis because they “produce few sources of their own voices, have limited agency, and as individuals and as a group soon outgrow their subaltern status” (Maza 2020).

I think we can make a couple observations, without delving into this debate among historians. First, anthropologists conducting ethnographic research might be better positioned to collect the ephemeral data of childhood. Secondly, not all children “outgrow their subaltern status,” because there are more ways of being subaltern than simply age. Among my interlocutors, refugee or displaced young people seemed painfully aware of their low status. Even wealthy Kurdish youth I knew expressed frustration with their low place in the social and political hierarchy, which for many families still centers on the *dîwanxane*, a room for receiving relatives and other guests.

More than once, I heard a Kurdish young person complain that their presence was welcome in the *dîwanxane*, but not their opinions. Kurdistanian society generally did not regard young people as social or political actors, or at least not agents of consequence.

My sense is that the dismissive talk about the political agency of Kurdistanian youth that I heard during my fieldwork represents a fissure in Iraq's collective memory and contemporary experience. As Hanna Batatu (1978) notes, many protests throughout Iraq's history have been youth driven. In the years since my fieldwork, protests in Baghdad (Barbarani 2019; Bobseine 2019), as well as in the Kurdistanian city of Slemani (Saadi and Chomani 2020), have consisted largely of youth. On the one hand, members of older generations criticized youth because they seemed to shirk their political duties as agitators and revolutionaries. On the other hand, negative commentary about youth referenced not only the moral shortcomings of seemingly apathetic youth and their families, but also the state "failures" which produced them. Chief among those failures is national unity.

The problem was not that Kurdistanian youth were unaware of their political potential; I knew from their conversations with me that many believed it would not matter. In this chapter and in the following chapter, I center the voices of people belonging to two groups: The first group is comprised of teachers, most of whom came of age during the sanctions era and who are critical of their students' moral and political behavior. The second consists of young people who are surprisingly articulate about how state failures and national disappointments have created an aura of apathy, but not exactly as their teachers perceive it.

To demonstrate how people envision and critique Kurdistan statehood vis-à-vis Iraq's, I offer ethnographic vignettes observed during a semester I spent in Kurdistan Civilizational School (KCS), a private school in the city of Erbil. I found the Kurdistan Civilizational School to be a microcosm and laboratory of the aspirational Kurdistan state: As microcosm, the internal dynamics of the school illuminate the imaginaries, subversions, and evasions of statecraft and its subjects; as laboratory, the administration, teachers, and students experiment with potential socio-political futures within the relatively safe space of the school. While I observed some of these dynamics at work in other private schools and in government schools, the demographics and power struggles within KCS uniquely reflect those of Kurdistan society and state. I suggest that this private school is unique among the dozen or so private schools I visited in the region because its founders and education program invited religious plurality and promoted critical thinking. KCS presented an unparalleled opportunity to witness the complexities and subtleties of Kurdistan statecraft and emerging sovereignties in a transitional moment for the country.





Figure 4. Youth walk through Sami Abdulrahman Park, facing the Kurdistan Regional Government Parliament building. Photo by the author.

### *Negotiating identities at KCS*

Before moving to examine how the Kurdistan state is produced and contested in educational settings like Kurdistan Civilizational School (KCS), I first provide some context about education in general in Kurdistan, as well as historical context for KCS.

The majority of Kurdistan students attend government schools, while less than 3% attend private schools (Vernez et al. 2014). My interlocutors tended to categorize private schools either as “local,” meaning government-run schools, or as “international,” which referred to private schools. For example, the Chouefat school belongs to an international organization which establishes schools across the Middle East, and every school operates according to standardized policies, procedures, and curricula. Other “international” schools are based on a foreign, national education program, such as that of the United Kingdom. For example, the British International School of Kurdistan (BISK), followed

the same sequence of courses and exams given in the U.K., with the goal of preparing students for higher education there, or perhaps elsewhere in Europe or in the U.S. I regularly encountered Choueifat and BISK students, and sometimes their teachers, at the gym where I worked or at popular cafes. The impression these students and teachers gave me was that their schools were hyper-focused on their respective international curricula and exam systems and gave little importance to Kurdistan government curricula.

The KRG Ministry of Education mandates that private schools incorporate Kurdistan curricula into their programs (interview with KRI Director of Private Schools, 2012), but it appears that this policy has been applied unevenly. Some people speculated that certain private schools with connections to wealthy and politically powerful families were exempt from the KRG Ministry of Education's requirement to teach Kurdistan courses like *komalayati* (social studies). In these allegedly exempt schools, it seemed to me that there were few opportunities for students to explore controversial religious or political topics. Private school students told me they sometimes discussed sensitive subjects among themselves, but these topics rarely arose in the classroom, and certainly they were not the focus of lessons as they often were at Kurdistan Civilizational School.

Another network of private schools in the Kurdistan Region followed the Gülen *hizmet* model which originated in Turkey and advertised its religious tolerance, opportunities to learn Turkish and travel to Turkey, and strong STEM training. It was no secret that Turkey exerted influence in Iraqi Kurdistan. In June 2016, the Turkish government blamed a violent, attempted coup on Fetullah Gülen and his supporters. (Fethullah Gülen, from his exile in Pennsylvania, denies this and instead accuses Turkish president Recip Erdogan of staging the coup to consolidate power.) Consequently, the

Gülen schools in the KRI became suspect; it was said that connections between the Kurdistan Region and Gülen were dangerous. These Turkish schools were “taken over” (that is, the schools were sold and some administrators and teachers were replaced) and alleged ties with Turkey were severed. Being shut-down or taken-over was a fate the administrators of KCS likely feared.

The copresence of government courses and government trained ethnic Kurdish teachers alongside the private school’s “classical Christian” curricula and ethnically and religiously diverse faculty presented a challenge. To understand this challenge and the religious ethos of the school, I first offer some historical context. In 1991, after the First Gulf War, the United States established a no-fly zone over the Kurdistan Region, as well as in the Shiite south, to prevent Iraqi aircraft from entering those airspaces. In 1992, the Boutros family, who are Arab Christians, emigrated from Baghdad to Kurdistan with the goal of opening a private Christian school to serve local, Kurdish children. The Boutros family asked their American, Christian humanitarian aid acquaintances to help them establish the school through a partnership with a sister school in Tennessee and through a Tennessee-based NGO. These partnerships provided American classical Christian education curricula, which follow the classical Trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric under the umbrella of a “Christian ethic.” Additionally, each year a few American volunteers moved to Kurdistan to teach in the schools. During an interview in 2012 I asked KCS cofounder Yakub Boutros what his initial “vision” for the schools was:

In 1992 I moved from the south and came to the north to stay with the [Kurdish] nation. And I saw many NGOs and different groups of people including churches, including ministries, Christian ministries, trying to help, working, spending money, time, people. But a lot of things needed to be changed, specifically in the lives of a lot of people. I think the way to do that, education is the best way to touch the heart and mind of people. Not just any kind of education, but a specific

kind of education which will be in addition to any scientific subject. The ethic is very important. Read, write, and be exposed to real ethics in the world, including Christian world, the Christian ethic, as well as world ethics. To help those students in a new generation to understand life, real life, that's one hand, and number two is that they can affect their home, their mother, their father, their brothers, their sisters, and that's how education can help impact. That was the idea when we started.

The Iraqi family-American NGO partnership eventually opened three campuses across Kurdistan, one in Duhok, one in Erbil, and one in Slemani. A steady stream of American Christian evangelicals volunteered to teach in the schools. The current and former teachers I spoke with understood their teaching assignments as opportunities to contribute to the development of an "under-served group" (Kurds) through education with a strong Christian influence. Whether their activities inside and outside the school constituted "evangelism," or proselytization, is contested and highly individualized. My sense is that any activities that could be construed as Christian "evangelism" were tolerated for many years, until a tragic event occurred that involved the death of a foreign teacher and a local student.

Boutros asserted that the school always had been open about its Christian content, and that parents knew this when enrolling their children. When I asked most students and parents about this, first during preliminary dissertation research and later during my dissertation fieldwork, most parents acknowledged they knew about the Christian orientation of the schools, but they did not mind it as long as no one was "forcing it" on the students. Besides, the English language education and perceived quality of its curricula relative to the Kurdistan government schools were very attractive to local parents.

One could argue that the three Kurdistan Civilization Schools were “colonizing” the KRI, and that is what some critics, both local and foreign, suggested to me in private. During our interview, Yakub Boutros showed me a thick stack of publications condemning the schools. He held up one Arabic language article written by a mullah, titled “Replacing Islam with the Cross.” Boutros tossed this article in the direction of the stack and said, “*Moushkila*” (A problem). Some Europeans and Americans working in the Kurdistan Region also told me privately that they considered the KCS approach as “cultural imperialism.” It was not incidental that all three KCS campuses opened during periods of American intervention in the country. However, these periods of international intervention, both war and humanitarian aid, also made possible the many, other private, “secular” schools, as well as a variety of business opportunities. One could assert that, collectively, international schools were “colonizing” the Region. As far as I know, most of the international private schools opened with the invitation and participation of local Kurdistan people.

What Kurdistan people I spoke with considered objectionable about the KCS approach was that the schools were teaching Christian religious content to a student body that was majority Muslim. In the Kurdistan Region, people are accustomed to government schools offering religion and language courses corresponding to the student population’s ethnoreligious identity. For example, in the Christian majority township of Ainkawa there are government schools designated for the majority Christian population there; these “Christian” schools offer some instruction in indigenous Syriac language, as well as Christian religion classes. Across the Kurdistan Region, Turkmani, Arab, and Kurdish students receive the majority of their education taught in their first language;

additionally, schools offer some courses in other languages, like English. Students customarily are not subjected to religion classes that do not match their family's religious identity. Older generations reportedly dealt with religiously diverse student populations in places like Baghdad by simply asking the Christians to leave the classroom during Islam classes, or vice-versa, and another teacher would offer lessons about Christianity. This was not always the practice, as some people told me about their own experiences of having to stay in the classroom during the majority students' religion class or being sent outside without another teacher to offer alternative lessons.

Boutros argued that these practices of "separation," or, what many might call "sectarianism," plagued Iraq. In response to public criticism, Yakub Boutros responded by emphasizing that KCS modeled religious plurality, to the benefit of society:

We told some papers saying that yes, we are Christian schools. They know I'm not just a Christian but a pastor. I speak, I disciple, I preach, I travel and so on. But [I'm] not using the school to do that, let's say, to convert kids to Christianity... The curriculum and the school, because of the moral actions, is Christian based. The Bible is one of the resources, that's one. But the ethic is that the students will be exposed to a wide range of religions in the world: Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and you know, Hinduism, and Yezidism, all that. So in this case it's not the issue of directing the students of what to choose, but the reality is to educate the students about different kinds of belief, different kinds of religions, different kinds of holy books. You know in Islam they believe they have their prophets, and in Christianity they believe they have their prophets, and Judaism they believe they have their own prophets and holy book and so on. So it's kind of neutral on one hand, but to focus on the positive sides on each. It's not our business to convert this or that, and really the statement I have [about] the school is to educate the students to be what they want to be. When they will be 18, when they will be legal age, when they will be in college, when they will be adult age, they decide whatever they want to be. That's the philosophy we have. We do have books about the world religions. That book is shown to the Parliament, and shown to the Minister of Education, and to the curriculum department of the Ministry of Education. Parents, parliament, [government education] ministers – they are happy about the program as it's neutral... They suggested, "Christians can read the Bible, Muslims can read the Qu'ran." And we said, "No, that is the nation's problem, separating people. We don't care what outside the school will happen; inside the school is private. Everybody will study

Islam. Everybody will study Christianity. Everybody will study Judaism. Whatever they will do at home is not our responsibility.

Boutros' suggestion that students will be able to "decide whatever they want to be" is counter-cultural in Kurdistan society, as in much of the Middle East. Religious and ethnic identity is understood to pass patrilineally from fathers to their children, which is reinforced by the state's strict recognition of inherited ethnoreligious categories on residents' national identity cards. The state automatically registers its residents according to the father's ethnoreligious category, and people are not allowed to change ethnoreligious identity on government documents. Having a religion, preferably monotheistic, is normative, and state recognized identity categories do not include "atheist." Personal status laws enforce heritable ethnoreligious identity through strict regulations about inheritance, property ownership, and business. Furthermore, there is intense social pressure to remain within one's inherited ethnosectarian category, as well as to socialize and marry within it.

KCS's vision, or at least Yakub Boutros' vision, celebrating the values of religious pluralism and individual agency produced tensions in the school. Tensions emerged especially when these broadly "Western" or "Liberal" values crossed with social practices that reinforce the conference of ethnoreligious identity through patrilineal kinship and a pervasive majoritarian "Islamic" atmosphere in the school. Later in the chapter I examine these tensions in more detail. Perhaps the way Boutros presented his school to me was a reformulation of the school's educational mission following the aforementioned tragedy. Perhaps the formerly more explicit Christian content and practices were recast as general character education in a monotheistic, pluralistic society, as some teachers and students suggested to me in private interviews. KCS had become a

laboratory for exploring social and political experimentation through evolution of the curricula, practices, and sovereignties. Perhaps due to the impending Kurdistan independence referendum, the war with ISIS, and the economic crisis, experimentation at KCS seemed to be at its peak during my fieldwork. How the contest of values and its tensions affected individual teachers and students varied greatly.

The KCS campus in which I conducted field work enrolled around 800 students from Kindergarten through grade 11 (in 2016 there was not yet a grade 12). The principal was a member of the Boutros family that had been instrumental in founding the network of Kurdistan Civilizational Schools. Most of the KCS administrators and teachers were Iraqi. In the high school building, there were 6 international teachers at the time: one each from Brazil and Pakistan, and four from the United States. The high school faculty also included at least four IDPs, including Christians and Muslims, and several local, ethnically Kurdish teachers. These ethnic Kurds were recent graduates of government Kurdish language colleges or universities. Subsequently they were employed to teach Kurdistan Ministry of Education mandated courses like Kurdish language and literature, Human Rights and Genocide, and *Komalayati* (social studies focused on Kurds and Islam). Incorporating the government required courses in addition to the private school's American-style curriculum based on classical Christian education produced tensions in the school.

When I conducted fieldwork in KCS in 2016, the Kurdistan Region was hosting some 2 million refugees and IDPs, a serious strain on its 5 million Kurdistan residents. KCS likewise absorbed many internally displaced people belonging to different ethnosectarian groups. The school's population included people displaced from Baghdad



and Mosul during the 2003-2011 war, while other people, such as those from Christian towns like Qaraqosh, more recently joined KCS after fleeing the Islamic State and resettling in Erbil. At the time of my fieldwork, the student body was comprised of a Sunni Kurdish majority but had enrolled significantly many more minority members than in previous years, including Shi'i, Assyrian and Chaldean Christian, Turkoman, Baha'i, and Mandaean students. In some ways KCS was able to accommodate minority students, such as by enrolling non-Kurdish speakers in remedial Kurdish language classes. Still, these same students were required to be present in the government-mandated courses taught in Kurdish, such as komalayafî (social studies) and human rights and genocide, despite not being able to follow the lesson. In many cases, other students translated for their non-Kurdish peers as needed, while some non-Kurdish students were permitted to work on material from other courses.

The increased diversity of the student body, the faculty, and other school staff was a source of tensions in the school, particularly as competing views on Kurdistan and Iraq clashed in komalayafî and civics courses. Some teachers, especially those who had been displaced from elsewhere in Iraq, made a point to incorporate their experiences and opinions into their lessons.

Relative to their government counterparts, KCS students and teachers enjoyed more freedom of expression. Teachers, while subject to many curricular requirements, had enough instructional time and autonomy within the classroom to incorporate their experiences and opinions into their lessons. This may have been the case because the school's administration considered "ethics" and religious plurality central to the school's educational program. KCS instructors expounded upon the curriculum by incorporating

moral or ethical commentary, whether they taught social studies, civics, history, literature, or even math and science. Some teachers guided ethical discussions by sharing their own experiences and views and by encouraging students to do likewise. For example, teachers reminded students to be mindful of the diverse experiences and views within their school and society, particularly when those diverse experiences stemmed from ethnoreligious differences.

In some courses, such as Civics, discussions about ethics were built into the lesson. In other classes, such as *Komalayafî* (Social Studies), the teacher sometimes diverged from the required textbook, which included Kurdish ethnonationalist content, to foster critical thinking in the classroom. Consequently, many class sessions involved not only explicit lessons about ethics, nationalism, and the state, but also implicit lessons on the virtues of evasions and subversions of the state and on the nature of sovereignty. Teachers and students employed various strategies in these lessons, such as humor, proverbs, or narratives about personal experiences. In this way, the school functioned as a laboratory experimenting with competing identities and obligations in a society and state said to be fragmenting and failing. I observed these experimental lessons most often in the *Komalayafî* and Civics classes.

Outside of the classroom, KCS students regularly encountered Kurdish ethnonationalism in mandatory patriotic ceremonies, like the one described below, and sometimes at other school events. For example, KCS organized a *Newroz* (Kurdish New Year) party for high school students, but required everyone in attendance, including non-Kurdish students and teachers, to wear *jli kurdi*, or traditional Kurdish clothing. Many students, including some Kurdish students, bristled at the requirement and chose not to

attend the party. Patriotic ceremonies and observing Kurdish holidays with mandatory Kurdish dress seemed performative, demonstrating that KCS, despite its “Christian” educational model and many non-Kurdish administrators, teachers, and students, nevertheless retained a generally “Kurdish” atmosphere. Intentions aside, performing Kurdishness was strategic during a time of heightened Kurdish ethnonationalism due to the war with the Islamic State and ongoing conflict with the Iraqi government in Baghdad. Moreover, because KCS was a private school based on a “Christian” education model, it was subject to some government scrutiny. Members of the Iraqi Arab Christian family who had been instrumental in founding KCS and who worked in administrative positions at KCS lead by example in performing “Kurdishness.”

Additionally, the war and political infighting produced economic stagnation and put government salaries on hold. Some KCS families were reconsidering whether KCS was worth the private school tuition when there were alternatives like cheaper private schools and basically free government schools. Thus, performing “Kurdishness” in part concerned maintaining the approval of the majority Kurdish school population, as well as the representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Education who inspected the school and sometimes attended formal events at KCS. Performing Kurdish culture and Kurdish ethnonationalist ideology produced discomfort among many non-Kurdish students and teachers, as they were drawn into production and contestation of the Kurdistan state, or into efforts to remake the “failed” Iraqi state.

### *Sara’s brotherly love*

At Kurdistan Civilizational School (KCS), teachers, staff, and students, though they came from all over Iraq and from different ethnoreligious communities, had one thing in

common: They were “stuck” in the Kurdistan region, whether they liked it or not (and most did not). By necessity they were employed or enrolled in KCS, under pressure and trying to make the best of the situation. One can almost trace the pressures coming down from the Iraqi state, to the Kurdistan statelet, to its Ministry of Education, to this particular private school and the family that ran it, to the administrators, teachers, hall monitors, and cleaners who populated the school. This diverse group’s daily interactions seemed to me like an impressive juggling act of ethnicity, religion, language, political affiliations, and competing sovereignties.

KCS had absorbed many students and teachers displaced, first by the Second Gulf War, and later by the conflict with the Islamic State. I came to know Sara, one of the displaced teachers, well during my field work. She first appears in Chapter 1 as she volunteers in the Yezidi camp in the abandoned construction site near Dream City. Sara was a Christian woman in her early twenties from the Christian village of Qaraqosh. She had been teaching at KCS for one year before I arrived to conduct field work there. At university, Sara had majored in English and aspired to earn a master’s degree in English Literature. When the Islamic State invaded in 2014, Sara and her extended family fled to Erbil, taking only what they could fit in their vehicles. They left behind their homes, land, and livelihood. The expensive agricultural equipment which the family used in large-scale farming was destroyed by ISIS.

At KCS, Sara taught English language and literature with warmth and enthusiasm. Her large, expressive eyes shone with genuine concern for her students. They frequently came to her in the teachers’ room for advice, both academic and personal, and texted with her outside of school hours. Sara had formed an intense friendship with “Shams,” a

Muslim woman who was close in age and was displaced from Baghdad. Like Sara, Shams was a lover of books and an English teacher, and the two were almost always together, inside and outside the school. Sara and Shams bonded over their shared interests and their experiences of displacement and dreams put on hold. Sara struggled with her own, deep disappointment at how her life had been impacted by war, and this was the subject of many conversations between Sara, Shams, and their fellow teachers. Among the Christian and Muslim teachers there was a kind of interfaith dialogue about God's will, faith, and how to make the best of their situation. Sara was the most vocal in urging the other teachers, as well as her students, to believe that there was a meaningful reason for their suffering.

Over the course of my field work semester in KCS, I witnessed many dialogues in which people critiqued Kurdistan society by comparing it to their experiences in pre-invasion Iraq (pre-2003) and questioning whether one could be hopeful about Iraq's future. Sara had many disheartening encounters with students, which tested her ability to maintain a sense of hopefulness about her students' future, as well as about her own. Once, a difficult student confronted Sara in the middle of a lesson, shouting, "Why do you hate me?!" Sara recalled, "It was just two months after Daesh [invaded Mosul and displaced Sara's family], and I had so much teaching, grading, and work. I couldn't help it, when he said this word 'hate.' I couldn't take it. It hurt me. I don't hate anyone. I just started crying."

As we sat together in the teachers' break room, Sara spoke at length about her struggles to reach her students:

If you pass them in the hallway they will just [bump, push past] you. I remember when I was in school, we didn't dare look the teacher in the eye. Now they look

straight at me and interrupt, “What? Why?” These kids, they are so selfish. Last year we asked them to give some donations because we are building a school for refugees in Dohuk. We told them they can bring something used; it doesn’t even have to be a new thing. Something they already have. And the students didn’t want to. They said, “Why should we do this?” I told them, “We are all human, God created us all the same. You are not different from these people. You have maybe 4 or 5 bags. What are you going to do with all these bags? After some time, you will throw some of them away because you can, because you will buy new. So you can just give it to someone who needs it now.” And they are racist. In my class [today], they are all Kurdish. One is from Duhok. And I said something to them about being one family, “You are all brothers.” And one from Hewler said, “I don’t want the Duhoki for my brother.” And the Duhoki said the same of the Hewleri. I said, ‘What is this? You are all the same. You even look like you could be brothers.’ But they said, “I would never be his brother!” And they don’t respect the old people either. Last year we read a book that had a character named the Ancient. And I asked, “Why do you think this character is named the Ancient? What can we learn from old people?” And they said things like, “Old people don’t know what they’re doing. They are useless. They have a meaningless existence.” I couldn’t believe it. I loved my grandparents, respected them, even more than my parents. Because that is how I was taught, that I should respect them the most because they are the oldest.

Hearing this, I commented that I hoped her country would not become like the United States, “where old people are put in nursing homes and sometimes abandoned by their families.” Sara nodded and continued,

This is why I miss Qaraqosh. I went to America for two months, you know. And when I was there, I saw how people lived. I had a host family. The father got up at 5am and went to work and came home maybe 5pm or 6pm and only had 2 hours with his kids. I understand that people work like this sometimes to afford the living. And his wife didn’t work, so of course he should work hard like this. But I want more than two hours with my dad. So I said I wanted to go back [home]. And people said are you crazy? How could you not want to stay here? But I missed my home, the life there, so much. [Pause] I am afraid of what is happening now. This generation is being ruined. There is no future.

In response to the disheartening exchange between the Hewleri boy and Duhoki boy, Sara selected a poem, one not in the students’ textbook, to share with her students: James Kirkup’s

“No Men are Foreign.”

Remember, no men are strange, no countries foreign  
Beneath all uniforms, a single body breathes  
Like ours: the land our brothers walk upon  
Is earth like this, in which we all shall lie.  
They, too, aware of sun and air and water,  
Are fed by peaceful harvests, by war's long winter starv'd.  
Their hands are ours, and in their lines we read  
A labour not different from our own.  
Remember they have eyes like ours that wake  
Or sleep, and strength that can be won  
By love. In every land is common life  
That all can recognise and understand.  
Let us remember, whenever we are told  
To hate our brothers, it is ourselves  
That we shall dispossess, betray, condemn.  
Remember, we who take arms against each other  
It is the human earth that we defile.  
Our hells of fire and dust outrage the innocence  
Of air that is everywhere our own,  
Remember, no men are foreign, and no countries strange.

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I recorded Sara's lesson with her students and present it below:

Sara: I chose this poem because I have seen so many situations in this school where people need to learn this lesson. We should learn that we were all created by God. He

created everyone of us to resemble who? Him. So when we look at each other who do we see? God. In every person you see the reflection of God. You don't have to be from the same religion, the same color, the same country. God loves us all. He wants us to know one thing: God is love. He wants us to learn to love each other. If you hate a person...

Boy: I hate my sister...

Another boy: Everyone hates his sister...

Sara: It's not hate, it's not the word you should use. Annoyed maybe. Ok. Maybe not all of you know where I am from...

3rd boy: Mosul!

Sarah: No, not Mosul.

4th boy: Qaraqosh!

Sara: I lost my house, everything. My future is on hold. While I was escaping, we had final exams, and now I have only one paper that says I graduated. I cannot apply to master's programs, and I want to do my master's. Should I hate ISIS?

Students all together: Yes!

Sara: No, because God is love. I cannot hate my enemy...

Girl: Then why do we have wars?

Sara: Because we are stupid. Do you think if I saw a person from this group or that group who needs help should I not help?

Students: Never help your enemy!

Sara: No you should because you will show them they are wrong. Our actions can change them for good or bad.

2nd girl: Miss, but if you say that to a Kurdish guy, you should love your enemy, ISIS, you think cutting heads [off] is ok?!

Sara: And love is not about the things you say but what you do or don't do. If my friend is absent and I say bad things about her, how could that be loving her? Also when you see [refugee] people selling in the streets, tissues or something like this, and you say "ugh" [disgusted sound], Why? They are doing their best to survive. What about war? Can we win a war?

Students: Yes!



Sara: How? By fighting and killing and cutting heads you will win a war? Peshmerga are fighting furiously every day. Do you think about these people, these people who are dying every day, they are losing their lives, their families, what will happen to their kids? To their families? If you start with yourself it will make a lot of change. [Pause] My best friend is who?

Students: Miss Shams!

Sara: I have another best friend who is not at this school and is a Muslim too - my best friends are not even my religion. Should I treat them or you any differently?

3rd girl: Miss, what if they treat you differently?

Sara: Then it's their problem if they do. I have a friend in this school - you don't know her, she works in the elementary building - we were in college together for four years. I helped her a lot when she was in college. I used to help everyone in college. We studied together. When we left Qaraqosh and came here, I found her a job in this school. I am not saying this because I am saying I am a better person. No, I helped her because she is my friend. But something happened during phase 2. She stopped saying hello to me. I would wave and say hello to her, and she would say nothing. Even my friends were asking, why does she not say hello to you? But I had no problem with her. It hurt me, but I kept saying hello to her and gave her a hug. God's teaching of forgiveness is that God wants me to do this. Because he told me through his word that I should forgive. Why should I ask for forgiveness from God, or anything from God, but I don't forgive? If some person comes to me for help, I shouldn't ask if he or she is Sunni, Shi'i, Christian. He is a person. If I didn't do this myself, I would be a hypocrite. You know what that means? God not only sees what we are doing but he knows our thoughts, what is in our hearts. In all situations, you will learn that when you are helping others you are doing a good thing.

In many lessons as in the lesson recounted above, teachers like Sara and Mariam the Civics teacher encouraged their students to resist divisions within their communities and country. Sara presented sectarianism as a threat not only to the social and political health of Iraq, but also to the spiritual health of her students. "Hating" one's "brother" would impede students' moral progress, Sara argued. Because her students did not accept their classmates belonging to different ethnic or religious communities or different political parties as their "brother," Sara's appeals to the ethical "golden rule" did not appear to me to persuade her students to reconsider how they viewed their fellow Iraqi or

Kurdistani citizens. In the section following, another teacher named “Naila” joins Sara in reflecting on their childhoods in Iraq. The teachers contrast their childhood experiences with those of their students, questioning whether any “love” for Iraq has survived the past three decades of war and sectarianism.

### *Naila’s Dark Age*

Naila entered the grade 7A Humanities classroom and arranged her things at the desk in the front, where she always sat facing the class. She preferred to sit rather than stand, and she rarely wrote on the board. Her method was to follow the textbook closely, often reading passages aloud. Before the lesson began, a female student asked if Naila heard about some recent government regulation. “No, I don’t like to watch the news,” Naila crisply replied, waving her hand dismissively. “I don’t want to know about wars.” Naila, like many of her fellow school employees, had been displaced by war. Turning to the lesson, Naila asked, “Do you know why the Medieval era was sometimes called ‘the Dark Ages’?” A boy answered “lack of education.” She agreed, noting that “dark” means “without education.” Naila then compared the Medieval period to present day Iraq. “Here we have many children who have left the school and beg in the streets. This is a Dark Age,” she concluded.

Naila conveyed a pessimistic, no-nonsense attitude whether in the classroom or in the teachers’ break room. In the break room she often sat at a table alone, reviewing her lesson plans. Sometimes she joined in discussions with other teachers, especially if they were commiserating about a problem student. Otherwise, she mostly listened to her coworkers’ discussions about family matters or issues of faith, periodically looking up from her lessons and frowning without comment. Naila shared little information about

her personal life, especially not with students; she argued there should be a professional “boundary” between teacher and student. She often expressed annoyance with her students. “I don’t like children,” she explained to me. Naila tolerated them because she relished learning and sharing her knowledge with other people. Thus, it was a surprise to see laconic Naila become so animated when I interviewed her in an empty classroom one afternoon.

She talked at length about her esteemed family history: How her great, great-grandfather served in the Ottoman military and traveled extensively. His descendants were adventurers, as well as photographers, poets, and engineers. Her family ran a printing press in Basra, and her grandfather took tango dance lessons there because “the people of that time were so open-minded.” When she looked at her family members’ photographs from throughout the 20th century and observed their less conservative, Western-style clothing, Naila lamented the loss of freedom of thought and expression. Now Basra was a place where people “refused to develop.” As the political and religious landscape shifted in Basra, Naila and her “open-minded” family moved to Baghdad, where she received most of her education. Many women in her family worked as educators, and Naila said that she felt from a young age she was destined to become a teacher. She remembered distinctly the moment she first learned to read, laughing as she recalled her father catching her reading furtively in the middle of the night. Reading English literature transported her to faraway places, as her ancestors had traveled before her.

Like many people I met during my field work, Naila spoke nostalgically about a difficult but contented childhood in the 1990s. Conflict and sanctions helped people

appreciate the little they had; an orange from the freezer on a hot day was a luxury. Nalia recalled,

In a way it was nice. It was innocent. Our generation is not like this generation we are teaching now. They don't care. We lived in that time...In that time if we had sugar, we were so rich. And my dad was just a normal person. He worked in a factory that belonged to the government. He used to work in a factory that made copybooks for students. Very quality copybooks! [Laughs bitterly] I think yesterday or the day before, I saw someone who still has this kind of book. It was recycled paper. Too dark. He took a picture of it and on Facebook said do you remember this? Most people who made a comment said that we didn't like it at that time, but it is much better than what our children have now. The government used to give us those [textbooks] for free. Now our children have everything, but they are not happy. My father was poor, you can say, but we were ok. We never took money from somebody. We lived with dignity. And we were happy *alhamdulillah*, thank God...After, especially 1999, 2000, things started to be wonderful. Higher salaries, a little bit for all of the people who worked for the government. And things started to come, and factories started to work again. Like factories which were closed in the '90s, factories, dairy, sugar, so it was good until 2003.

Focusing on scarcity and hardship while narrating childhood experiences was a way for people to reflect on and reaffirm their own moral or ethical formation that still serves them as adults. In such narratives, people often contrast their successful childhood moral formation with that of the present-day youth. In recalling the low-quality paper of government-issued textbooks during her childhood, Naila remarks ironically that they were better than contemporary school textbooks produced with better paper but lacking good educational content. Like many other internally displaced people I knew, Naila described the dangers of commuting to and from university classes in Baghdad during the 2003-2011 war. Narrowly missing explosions or having classes cancelled was a regular occurrence. In 2006, her cousin was "savagely" killed, and the family moved to Erbil. Naila recalled her grief at parting with some of her books when the family moved. During her first couple years in the Kurdistan Region, she worked odd office jobs, where she felt her Kurdish co-workers did not respect her. Finally, she found a job opening at a

relatively new private school, teaching grade 2 Humanities. As the school added a grade each year, she moved with her students, teaching the same group for six years. I asked Naila to reflect on the school's curriculum and students:

Here I think the curriculum is much better, because it has a focus on different civilizations, ancient and modern. As I said, before it was all about Arabic civilization in public school...revolutions and so on, and later, First and Second World War with no details. Only [sighs] in a dry way. It was written in a dry way. And the other years about Islamic history and then again about Arab civilizations. Now I think it is nicer. It is written in a very nice way. But the students, I don't know. I have so many things to say about the students. I am always complaining about this generation, they don't care about anything. The blessings that they have now. When I was their age, we couldn't buy sugar. Not just me, all of my generation, we couldn't travel, we couldn't choose anything. We had to live like, I don't know, the horse when they put [the bit and harness] around its face. But now they don't appreciate what they have. The curriculum is good, the teachers. We didn't have school like this. They have AC [air conditioning]. We didn't have AC at that time...Anyway, here they don't understand when I tell them that you have to thank God for what you have, appreciate your parents, your teachers. They don't even respect books. They step on them sometimes. The problem is also about the parents who are careless, who are saying we are paying the money so my son or daughter should pass. [Lowering her voice] I asked my students once, that 20 years after this, or 30 years later, what will happen to the earth? Because it seems that it's not just in this country or this part of the world, but everywhere is like this. What will happen when we pass away and you will be the older generation and you have to raise your kids, what are they gonna learn from you? And they didn't understand. And they started to laugh. When we talked about culture, and we had this exercise about culture, we said each one should write about their culture. And they said the smartphone is our culture. I couldn't even answer them. I said you can find [smartphones] here, but they also use them in China, and the United States, so where is [your] culture?

Naila described her students as completely unmoored from national identity and culture; they lacked moral sensibilities, failing to comprehend, and mocking the ethical lessons teachers offered. In her childhood, Naila recalled how every day her mother read stories to the family and how they discussed the stories and their morals. "We would say, 'Is it ok to say [what that character says]? Is that good behavior? Can we say this in our community or not? What will happen if we face the same situation that happens in the novel?'" Naila encouraged her students to ask similar ethical questions, but they seemed

to lack empathic ability, perhaps due to a failing of the imagination, an idea to which I return later in the ethnography.

The day following our interview, Naila and I sat with Sara in the teachers' break room. Naila and Sara were discussing how their country had changed:

Naila: In my grandmother's time when she was teaching, her salary was 12 dinars.

Sara: Wow...

Naila: It was something, she could buy gold with it and travel.

Sara: But in my mom's time in the 90s [the teaching salary] was so little it wouldn't even buy a set of eggs, you could not buy even shoes.

Naila: 75 dinars per one piece of bread, so we used to bake our own bread at home. So many died because of explosions of the oven. My cousin died because of that.

Sara: I remember when there was a time that you didn't even have proper food to eat. They would eat barley and mix something with it. My mom kept one and showed it to me saying, see this is how we would eat.

Naila: I told [Diana] yesterday about how we didn't even have ice cream.

Sara: But even with all this it was better than now. We were happy. We had peace.

Naila: We didn't have this thinking like who is Christian? Who is Muslim?

Sara: I even thought [Naila] was Christian...

Naila: This always happens. People say happy eid on Christian holidays and I say to them too. Sometimes I explain [that I am actually Muslim]. Maybe because I don't cover [her hair].

Sara: So we had no problems at all. Even though there were not much resources, at least we were happy. And simple things would make us happy.

Naila: We had hope for the future.

Sara: And people were educated more than now. People liked to learn. Now people don't care about education. Before, even though the salaries were low, but

people cared about education. They wanted their kids to have good education. Even the teachers wanted to give more than their salaries...

Naila: Because they loved their students and wanted to serve their country.

Sara: Exactly.

Naila: Now nobody loves the country.

Sara: Like, I do this [teaching] for money and nobody cares. I go to this college so I will be employed and that's it.

Naila: Before 2000 things started to be better. Salaries were higher.

Sara: We were talking about the early 90s...

Naila: From '90 to '96...

Sara: But later it was good. It became very, very good and people were eating well. I don't think Saddam destroyed the country at all. It is the opposite for me.

Naila: Maybe if he stayed by this time we...

Sara: ...would be better...

Naila: Be better, but we would have another war with another country [waves hand dismissively].

Sara: But not war inside, not [civil war].

I heard countless conversations like the one above. Many of my Kurdish interlocutors, though they did not share Sara and Naila's views about former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, agreed that the education system had declined, and people no longer "cared" about learning. As Ashti observed, people had become docile and easier to manipulate in politics and in religion. It was this apathy and docility which produced a dejected spirit among many of my interlocutors. True, chronic war and economic stagnation also contributed to a shared sense of hopelessness, but the lack of proper moral sentiment and hope seemed the most daunting obstacle of all. Naila said that when she

began to hope, something bad would happen that would discourage her anew. Toward the end of our interview, I asked Naila what actions she might take in light of her general discouragement and hopelessness about the future. She replied, “I just am passing the days. If God wants me to travel, I will. If not, I will stay here, and maybe it's better for me. There are so many people who want something, but later they regret it or something bad happens. So I will wait and see. I believe in destiny.”

Discussions between teachers and students illuminated intergenerational tensions about hope and futures. My interlocutors who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s talk about how war and sanctions shaped their difficult childhoods, which were and are central to their continuing projects of ethical self-making. For my interlocutors in their 20s and 30s, generational memory often takes the form of narratives about how war and its effects shaped their childhoods. Difficult memories are softened by nostalgia for small or simple pleasures, such as eating an orange from the freezer on a hot day. Members of the 80s and 90s generations expressed appreciation for how hardship early in life fostered the fortitude and perspective that enabled them to make sense of and to endure their current difficult situations, perhaps even to feel hopeful. Perhaps not incidentally, many of these hopeful people in their 20s and 30s worked as teachers.

Many times, I observed teachers trying to help their students cultivate similar strategies for coping and for generating hope in trying times. Many lessons could be summarized as “We survived and you can, too.” Students typically did not accept their teachers’ narratives and perspectives. In private conversations with me, students would comment that many of their teachers were displaced and that teaching was a stressful, low-status, low-income job. How could anyone feel hopeful in those circumstances? I



cannot recall many students expressing a desire to become a teacher; they aspired to medicine, engineering, and other higher-status type jobs. Both the private school and government students I spent time with typically did not feel hopeful about their futures, though for different reasons. Privileged students anticipated leaving Iraq upon graduating high school or college, and poor female students anticipated early marriage and childbearing. Teachers who survived harsher childhoods than their students became exasperated and discouraged by their students' refusals to adopt hopeful attitudes.

### *Declaring independence*

The civics teacher, Mariam, was not easily discouraged by her students' negative attitudes about Iraq. For its classical Christian education model, Kurdistan Civilizational School imported American textbooks, including an American civics textbook. Curious about how Mariam would use these American books, I joined her class as often as I could. Mariam, like some of the other teachers, permitted me to sit in the back of the classroom with my laptop and transcribe everything that was said. Mariam and her family had been living in Erbil for a few years since they fled their home in Baghdad during some of the worst sectarian violence in the Iraq War. In civics class she often described her experiences and expressed her personal opinions, allowing the students to disagree with her and to debate. In the semester before I conducted fieldwork at KCS, Grade 10 students began learning about the formation of the American government. Mariam announced that this semester, students would study the U.S. Constitution and then the Iraqi Constitution and would compare the two documents.

On the first day of the new semester, Mariam opened her lesson with a question: "Do you think it is important to declare independence?" At that time, there was

widespread discussion about whether the Kurdistan Region could and should declare itself independent from the federal Iraqi government in Baghdad.

Gulistan: It's not always important. It depends on the country and if it's ready. There should not be any economic problems.

Mariam: Ok, so you're saying there should be certain conditions...?

Rozhan: Unity

Mariam: We should agree on everything or on one point?

Kamil: Not agreeing on everything but standing as one...

Hawar: There should be one idea and they work together...

Mariam: But this one idea - let's talk about Iraq.

Ashur: We don't even have the definition of independence here. Everyone has a different subject, a different party. They have debates and discussions, ok, but each has his own idea, so they leave the party and make a new party.

Mariam to a confused student: He's [Ashur] talking generally. He doesn't mean a specific party.

Hawar: Unity means working together and being as one.

Mariam: [To Hawar] You are a Kurdish Muslim, and I am a Chaldi Christian. How can we solve this if we are different?

Hawar: We have a discussion, a debate...

Layla: Can't we put away our differences even if we are different races?

Mariam: What if these differences are in our blood? We have so many different religions here: Ba'hai, Chaldi, Yezidi, Muslim...how can I reach the end of this conflict without hurting what you believe?

Hawar: Secularity!

Mariam: Respect.

Kamil: We can form a system that benefits both sides!

Mariam: How?

Kamil: If you want to be part of something with me, let's form a system that involves both Christians and Muslims.

Mariam: [This semester] we will compare the Iraqi constitution with the American one. The Iraqi constitution writers did not think about the Ba'hai or Christians. They only talk about the majority. What do I believe? I'm a human. We don't have to believe the same thing. Respect. We should share. Serbest, you have all the resources you need to declare independence. What will you do?

Serbest: Who gives me this authority?

Mariam: I give the authority to declare independence. What will you do?

Serbest: Here [in Kurdistan]?

Mariam: Leave Kurdistan, leave Iraq.

Serbest: I will first check my qualifications...

Yakub: You have none! [class laughs]

Serbest: Ok I will check the economy, see what resources I have...

Mariam: What else?

Zayna: Laws

Serbest: Resources...nuclear weapons!

Mariam: I expect this kind of answer from Yakub not from you! What else does a country need?

Rasim: Education

Rozhan: What about religion?

Mariam: That is part of culture.

Mariam wrote the following list of students' answers on the board: 1) Economy, 2) laws, 3) people, 4) education, 5) government, 6) culture, 7) power, 8) flag, 9) national anthem

Medya: A coat of arms?

Serbest: A name for your country!

Mariam continued writing: 10) Name, 11) Land (Mariam's suggestion, after the students failed to think of territory)

Mariam: Serbest, will you immediately declare independence if you have all these things?

Zayna: What about army?

Mariam writes 12) army.

Mariam: Who should you go to first if you want to declare independence?

Hawar: The neighbor countries, the border countries

Mariam: Ms. Diana, what do you think?

Diana to class: In your human rights class, didn't you just learn about an international organization?

No one takes my hint. Mariam says, "Yes, what is this international organization?"

Thomas: United Nations

Gulistan: We don't need them.

Mariam: For sure you need them. Let's go through the list to see why. What about economy? Ashur, why do you need an economy? What do you need?

Ashur: I need...[looking at his desk] stationary? books? [class laughs]. I mean, I need to buy these things. Where do we get the books? America, right? [Indeed, much of the school's curriculum was shipped from the United States through a connection with a sister private school.]

Mariam: Ok, so yes, you need to buy these things. Tell me about your parents, what about the things they need?

Rayna: Jobs because if there is no salary, business will go down...

Mariam: No more shopping...

Serbest: ...the price drops...

Hawar: ...then protests....

Mariam: Economy is very important so we can work, eat, live. What about law?

Kamil: Law is to keep the country moving without problems.

Rozhan: Law is designed to protect liberties.

Zayna: Without law there will be chaos.

Mariam: Yes, there will be chaos. Yakub said that without law, he will be the first one to kill and steal. [class laughs]

Farhana: We need law to keep humanity... [students chatter excitedly]

Hawar: No, it is a nice thing she said, to keep humanity...

Farhana: ...because in this country men think they are superior to women, so law will make us equal.

Hawar: Laws are designed for justice, equality, and freedom.

Kamil: Objection! Objection! Justice doesn't mean equality. There are higher powers...

Mariam: For any society we need equality, justice, and freedom. These three are connected to each other. In America, for example, I don't know if I can have justice, but the other two I can have [equality and freedom]. I can have more freedom. But for Middle Eastern countries this is a problem. And freedom doesn't mean you can do anything, like something wrong. The problem is we don't have it [freedom and equality] from the time we are kids. It starts with the family, the religion, the society. If the family is not having the relationships of equality, then zero [equality outside the family in society].

Rozhan: But tradition?

Mariam: We have to respect certain traditions, rules, but if we are to be equal, we start with the family. Then there will be justice. So if Farhana and Serbest are my daughter and son and come to me, it doesn't matter if [they are] girl or boy.

Rida: Justice is related to equality...

Mariam: If I have a ticket to freedom and I give it to you, what will you do?

Kamil [grinning]: Sell it for a higher price. That's how you make a profit.

Mariam: But what about the people who are victim to this buying and selling? Laws need to suit every single person. Ok, let's talk about people.

Kamil: People are basic to the country. [Unclear discussion among boys at the front of the room]

Mariam: The murderer is basic? We have countries that don't have these crimes...

Serbest: In those countries the people are good.

Mariam: No, the laws are good.

Hawar: If the laws are good, who makes them [follow the law], who scares them?

Mariam: The state.

Kamil: If we have criminals, we can't have a proper country...

Mariam: We have a proper country...

Kamil: ...But all the points [gesturing to the board] must agree with each other.

Mariam: There are countries without [a lot of] crime! I don't remember the names now, but there are. Ok, let's talk about education. What is it for?

Rozhan: To keep our country in a forward position.

Mariam: Be realistic. You have to improve yourself for your country? You are in school for your country? Be realistic. [touching the wall, indicating an imaginary framed degree] You will take a degree for your country? Seriously? No, first you improve yourself. What do *you* want to be in the future?

Basma: Famous

Mariam: For what?

Yakub: A communist [students laugh]

Mariam: Thomas, why are you here?

Thomas: My parents made me [class laughs]

Mariam: I agree with you, Thomas. You have to go to school until age 18. We are forced to come to school. I was like you. My family forced me to be in school. Why?

Hawar: I want to be something. When you are a student you are nothing! You want to grow up and be something.

Mariam: My dream, remember what I told you?

Students: You wanted to be a lawyer.

Mariam: When I was younger I wanted to be a teacher. But then I discovered I have the ability to be a lawyer. But my father kept asking me, "Why do you want to be a lawyer? Will you be an ambassador?" Finally he used his authority and said, "This is the end of discussion. No more lawyer." Ok. I finished high school and decided to go to the English Language department. I got good grades. I decided it was ok to be a teacher. I don't know why I changed, because my dream is still to be a lawyer. But still I love teaching. This is a blessing. I'm sure some of you are following your parents who are telling you to study medicine, engineering, whatever. But I have a friend who quit medical college. Her mom forced her to go. After 8 years of study she quit, said bye, went to France and studied engineering, which is what she wanted. Getting [an] education without getting what you really want, to me, it's nothing. [Bell rings, class disperses]

### *Judgment Day and the national government*

Early in the semester, Mariam distributed photocopies of the United States Constitution to her 10th grade civics students. Her method was to ask different students to read through the chapter aloud in class. Mariam would stop the student reading aloud to discuss important points in the chapter or to ask discussion questions. She opened class with a question, "Why did they [the U.S.] need a national government?" Silence. She asked again, and still the students were silent. "You know what?" she asked. "You need to start watching the news."

Serbest: Miss, we have too much homework to watch the news.

Mariam: So what? Since 1991, when I was 7 or 8 years old, I kept hearing about the "judgment day." People were saying what was happening was the judgment day. This is always the case when something bad is happening. For example the Armenians after World War I said that it was the judgment. One day it will be judgment day for you. You don't know and I don't know when. So I just live my life and try to know what is going on. [pause] So why do we need a national government?

Zayna: To prevent chaos.

Mariam: That's it?

Gulistan: What do you mean by national government?

Serbest: In Kurdistan we have our own government.

Mariam: But still Kurdistan is part of Iraq. What else? You know why we have brains? To think with them. Think: What do I need by a government?

Rasim: A system of laws.

Zayna: A country.

Gulistan: A system that organizes a country through rules and laws.

Mariam: Ok, but what does government mean to you? In one word. [silence] Thomas, what does it mean to you?

Thomas: It's supposed to be a like a parent watching over you, supervising you...

Mariam: Good.

Ashur, [from the back, sitting tall and struggling to be heard]: I think of it as a large company that produces...

Serbest: A factory!

Layla: ...especially for oil.

Mariam: Ms. Diana, what do you think?

Diana: Does it have to be one word or can I say a phrase?

Mariam: Ok, a phrase.

Diana: Protection of liberties.

Mariam: Wow, that is a good answer, but we don't have this in the Middle East! If you were to find an Iraqi woman Ms. Diana's age and ask her, she would never say this phrase.

Hawar: What did she say?

Diana, louder: Protection of liberties.

Mariam: We can compare the two [Iraq and the U.S.]: The difference between Thomas [a white American citizen whose parents were employed in Erbil] and Hawar [a Kurdish



local] is what they learn and how they will think. Why did Ms. Diana give me this answer?

Yakub: Because she is in university!

Ishtar: Because this is what she learned in school, what her parents taught her...

Mariam: What else?

Ishtar: ...and this is her experience of living in America.

Yakub raises his hand and says almost exactly what Ishtar has just said.

Mariam: Yes, her experience. [Brief interruption] I want you to keep thinking about this question about why we need a national government.

Gulistan resumes reading the textbook chapter aloud. Mariam instructs students periodically to underline things in the text, especially dates.

Hawar: Miss why do you make us learn all these dates?

Mariam: Dates are important. Do you know when is Army Day? [Silence] No one. Of course you know the date of Newroz because you have a holiday, you have a celebration. Do you know the date of the liberation of Baghdad? [Silence]

Serbest: We only know the Kurdistan dates! We don't study Iraq in school.

Mariam: You can't blame the school because you don't know! [Pauses, shakes her head] To be honest, I have full respect to the United States. The people who live there deserve it.

Zayna: And we don't deserve it?!

Mariam: No, we don't. [The students look shocked.] The regime of Saddam Hussein, if you said your opinion [makes throat slitting motion], bye bye. We asked for help to get freedom and democracy, and this is the result? We have greedy people in the government. And what do we do about it? So, I will do my best to earn what I want. It is the same with you. Like, when you cheat, what do you get?

Serbest: You pass!

Mariam: Then?

Yakub: You go to university!

Mariam: And after that?

Rasim: You get a career!

Mariam: You can't get the career if you didn't work to earn it. You can't become a doctor without studying.

Serbest: Miss, I don't want to be a doctor. I only want to pass. [laughter]

Ishtar: Miss, do you really believe that what we learn here in school is going to help us?

Mariam: Yes!

Ishtar: Mr. Bjar [their math teacher] told us that he worked as an engineer. And what he studied in school did not help him on the job. He had to learn on the job. He said he was "lost" because what he learned in college was not the job.

Mariam: My sister is studying physics right now. You're telling me what she is studying "isn't real"? Physics is how things work. Math is how things work. History is how things happened. What you study IS REAL. The people who are lost are the people in villages who don't study.

Hawar: None of us will graduate from this school and get [into] a good university.

Zayna: Speak for yourself!

Mariam: If you have a dream, a goal, you have to put a plan for yourself.

At Mariam's instruction, Gulistan resumed reading aloud.

Mariam: One of the things about having a new country is that you have to be organized. This is one of our problems.

Gulistan resumes reading aloud. A brief discussion about slavery follows, then Gulistan reads aloud until Mariam stops her again.

Mariam: It's normal when you start a new country to have struggles. Being part of the struggle is normal. But what happens after the struggle is important too.

Gulistan resumes reading a passage about the electoral college.

Mariam: This is the same as the example I told you about yesterday, where you have the village agha or sheikh who represents the village.

Gulistan resumes reading the passage, which is about the delegates not agreeing about the Virginia versus the New Jersey plans.

Mariam: Why is it always going nowhere?

Serbest: Because people have different opinions.

Rozhan: They did not reach a conclusion.

Mariam: Yes, they didn't. Why?

Serbest: No one is willing to change how they think.

Mariam: Let's use school as an example: I say school is important. Someone will disagree with me. At the end we will not have a conclusion. Why? Because I want something to serve my own interests. [Yakub says something in Arabic.] English, Yakub.

Yakub: I don't know how to say it in English.

Mariam: Sometimes the disagreement is over something silly. [Pause]

Mariam tells Mamiz to pick up reading where Gulistan stopped, a passage about the Supreme Court.

Mariam: Is it right or wrong that we have certain [politicians]? Do we really know them? Let's say we have certain names here [makes a gesture like list-making] Is it right for me to elect people I don't know? What do you think? [Silence]

Serbest: It is better for people to choose. Because someone on the committee may bribe, or they pick their cousin.

Mariam: The time of Nouri al-Maliki was like this. [Pause] Hadi, what do you think? [Hadi mumbles something.] Ok, I will come back to you. Malek, what do you think?

Malek: It is better to know the people.

Hawar, turning to Malek: Why?

Georges: The politicians can be bribed or biased. If you don't know the person...

Mariam: The only time I voted I was at university. It was my first and last time to vote. When I decided to vote for [Ayad] Allawi, it was because I saw what he did [his record].

Yakub: What did he do?

Mariam: Many things! I felt safe then. As a woman I could go out from the university [into public places]. He helped the poor. And many properties that REALLY belonged to the church he gave back.

Zayna: Was it the only good time?

Mariam: Yes. [Pause, silence. The bell rings.]

In the class session transcribed above, the civics teacher and her students are reformulating sovereignties and notions of personal agency in a strained socio-political environment. Mariam frames their discussion with the concept of a “judgment day,” a time of testing which “everyone” will face. Spurred on by the imminent judgment day, Mariam impresses upon her students their roles and responsibilities in, if not preventing the judgment, then responding appropriately to it. The civics classroom served as a “safe space” for students to express their opinions and disagree. Because their teacher was a displaced Iraqi Christian, her perspective differed from other teachers in the school. The government Kurdish courses particularly seemed to present only Kurdish ethnonationalist perspectives; other teachers, such as in math or science, were simply very focused on their course content. When Kurdistan students protested learning about “Iraq” because they are in Kurdistan, Mariam reprimanded them. She reminded students that they remain subject to federal Iraq, however flawed it may be. In the class transcript below, Mariam continues to ask students probing questions about the nature of government and calls them to action against corruption.

### *Corruption and a call to action*

The photocopied chapter from the U.S. Civics textbook was titled "Struggle for Ratification." Mariam began class by asking a student read the text aloud. The text outlined the debate between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. After a few sentences, she stopped the student reading and asked the class, "Which do you prefer? Federalists or Anti-Federalists? And why?"

Hawar: Federalist because they want a strong national government.

Mariam: What about citizens' rights?

Hawar: They will be there.

Mariam: Are you sure?

Sara: With a bill of rights.

Thomas: If you take a little from both it will be better.

Mariam: We will get to that later. A strong government needs limits.

Gul: I'm with the Anti-Federalists. They showed more care for the people.

Mariam: Don't you think you need a strong national government though?

Gul: I don't see...

Ahmed: It depends on the government.

Mariam: What about the people of this government? [pause] I should teach you all philosophy.

Hawar: [Government] should have limits.

Mariam: What are the things that should have limits? You should have a list.

Gulistan: No tyrants. Abuse of power.

Mariam: Even when the country has a democracy a tyrant can be there.

Hawar: No greed.

Mariam: Georges, if you are going to choose this list of rights, what should they be.

Georges: I don't know.

Hawar: Maybe so someone will not lose their job by force...

Mariam: Ok, what else?

Thomas: Freedom of speech.

Mariam: After Saddam Hussein, they said you will have more freedom, you will have these freedoms, freedom of speech.

Yakub: We have!

Mariam: No, we don't. Many journalists in Baghdad had this freedom of speech, and they are dead now. To me, if we have a little of both - because they both have positivity and negativity - I think they will reach not only a strong national government but also the rights of the citizens.

Nergiz resumed reading. Mariam stopped her and asked why the text said, "America was an immature nation." It was a comprehension question. Nergiz answered that it was "not much time since the Declaration of Independence." Mariam said, "Yes." Nergiz continued reading.

Mariam: We can see that it's not just declare independence and that's it. Iraq has been struggling how many years? Since 2003. And still, it's not a stable country. Each person wants something for himself. That's why it's not stable. It's not just I have land, I need a government. There will be many killed, many victims. And I think - maybe it depends on the way that the Middle East people think. It's in our blood that we are selfish people. [Several students nod, say "ay wallah."] If you get power, you will forget your beliefs, your principles.

Serbest: Greed!

Mariam: Not only greed. You are the generation that we depend on to change something. [The class falls silent.] Not just politics. If you are a teacher, doctor, engineer - it doesn't matter - you don't need power to change society. You should have your own beliefs and your own principles. You live in Iraq, so what? Change your beliefs. Maybe you can't see it now, but you can change something. I depend on you. Ms. Jamila [their literature teacher and school administrator] depends on you. Don't give up your hopes and dreams because of the society. Our society is not correct. Maybe 40 percent of it is, but..

Rasim: But we have corruption.

Mariam: It is corrupt. But don't corrupt yourself. It's not about having power or an army. You can set your own rules. Be the citizen that we can depend on. It's not only about getting a degree or the college you want.

Georges: What do you think of the U.S. society?

Mariam: To be honest, most of us look at the U.S. according to the movies. But for example, if you want to change your religion, in the USA no one will kill you, judge you. You still have the rights of a citizen. What we need is a real freedom. We don't have it. Still there are certain things you cannot say or do. My uncle, my relatives live there [in the US] and to them it is heaven. They lived in Iraq. They didn't have their rights here.

There are negatives, sure, in every society. But as a citizen no one can touch you or hurt you.

Georges: But no one has touched or hurt me.

Mariam: Maybe you say that now. But grow up, go to university, get a job and then see if you still feel that way.

Ahmed resumes reading. Mariam stops him to emphasize the phrase "a more perfect union."

Mariam: Of course there is no perfect country. But they were trying. [Continuing her interaction with Georges] So what I see here, Georges, is no protection for the citizens. No protection from the attacks of other people. Why did I move here from Baghdad? [Some students say freedom or because your family did.]

Serbest: Freedom, for protection.

Mariam: They threatened us. [pause] Yeah, they did.

Georges: For what?

Mariam: For being Christian. Ms. Diana, can someone threaten you for your religion in the U.S.?

[I asked her to repeat the question.]

Diana: If someone threatens you for your religion, you can go to the police. [That's all I said, unsure about how to introduce complexity into this conversation.]

Mariam: My brother was in Rome studying theology. If [sectarian militants in Baghdad] found out they would have killed him.

Georges: What about now? [Other students ask if Baghdad is safe now.]

Mariam: All of the Christian families in that area are gone.

Georges: Couldn't you just move to another area [of Baghdad]?

Mariam: Maybe we would face the same people.

Ahmed continued reading aloud from the textbook chapter until the bell rang.

When students attempt to shirk their moral and political responsibilities by pointing to state failures, Mariam insists that such failures do not absolve students of their

civic and political duties. While Mariam agrees that corruption and greed plague their government, she also acknowledges that new countries endure struggles, which is “normal.” Although she critiques those in power who are “corrupt” and “greedy,” she does not condemn power itself. Rather than adopting a defeatist attitude about said corruption, she encourages her students to “not corrupt themselves.” Instead, students must choose to work hard in school and in a career, for which their current classes are preparing them, until they come of age to vote and take other political action. “Be the citizen that we can depend on,” she implores them.

### Writing their own constitutions

By April, the 10th grade civics class had moved on to analyzing the Iraqi 2005 Constitution. Mariam distributed copies of the constitution in English. She instructed her students to look at the Preamble and asked Hawar to read aloud. Hawar read, “In the name of God, the Most merciful, the Most compassionate...”

Mariam: It starts with this one because it's an Islamic country. Second, we have the sons of Adam [referring to the second line, “We have honored the sons of Adam”]. These are the circumstances of this country, the fighting. It means we honor all of us, Muslims, Christians, Jewish, whatever races, whatever religion.

Hawar continues: “We, the people of Mesopotamia,...

Mariam: So far, they didn't separate the people of Iraq [into sects] but considered [them] as one.

Hawar continues reading, “...the homeland of the apostles and prophets, resting place of the virtuous imams, cradle of civilization, crafters of writing, and home of numeration. Upon our land the first law made by man was passed, and the oldest pact of just governance was inscribed, and upon our soil the saints and companions of the Prophet prayed, philosophers and scientists theorized, and writers and poets excelled.”

Mariam: Here we can say, “Wow, what a country we have!” Filled with religions, prophets, philosophers. Mesopotamia was the first to write. We have this history; imagine what is happening now.



Hawar continues reading, “Acknowledging God's right over us, and in fulfillment of the call of our homeland and citizens, and in a response to the call of our religious and national leadership and the determination of our great authorities and of our leaders and politicians, and in the midst of international support from our friends and those who love us, marched for the first time in our history towards the ballot boxes by the millions, men and women, young and old, on the thirtieth of January 2005...”

Mariam: For the first time since Saddam Hussein's regime, people have a right to vote. But later we will find out about what the people who represent us, the leaders, what they did. [There is a guest at the door. Mariam steps out for a moment and then reenters.] So you will say I will vote for this one because he or she will do something for me.

Hawar reads, “...invoking the pains of sectarian oppression inflicted by the autocratic clique and inspired by the tragedies of Iraq's martyrs, Shiite and Sunni, Arabs and Kurds and Turkmen and from all other components of the people...”

Mariam: Shia, Sunni, Arab, Kurd, Turkoman, and from all others...What is missing here?

Layla: Christian

Mariam: Yes. They have suffered a lot. I don't mind that I live in a religious country as long as they say I can keep my rights. To me, I prefer the secular countries. It will guarantee the same rights for all citizens. We are the people from this land. Syriac, Assyrian, Chaldi. We are from here. Why did they not mention us? Iraq consists of many races, religious groups. Mark this section. Put a sign on it.

Hawar reads on about sectarian conflict and the suffering of various ethnoreligious groups until he comes to the phrase "hand to hand, shoulder to shoulder," which is meant to symbolize unity, but Mariam stops him. She repeats the phrase sarcastically, making a clashing motion with her hands and shoulders. One student jokes by making a self-flagellation movement in reference to Shi'i religious practices.

Mariam: This is the difference between people who learned from the past and those who did not. If we go back to ancient times, we were more developed than now. Imagine it: We are blessed in this country because we are part of this land, but we are cursed, too. For example, I am 33 years old. My mom keeps worrying about me, about my grandchildren. If we stay here there will be no future, she says. Shall we go or shall we stay? Shall we act or shall we be like a people just watching, waiting? But we have this faith in each one of us. It will make us have hope.

Yakub [sneering]: Inshallah

Mariam [seriously]: Yes. Inshallah.

Hawar resumes reading aloud and asks, "Miss what does 'sectarianism' mean?"

Mariam: It means sects, like Sunni, Shia, *madhhabiyy* in Arabic, I don't know the word in Kurdish.

There is some brief discussion about diversity.

Hawar continues aloud: ...[We] have taken upon ourselves to decide freely and by choice to unite our future, to take lessons from yesterday for tomorrow, and to enact this permanent Constitution, through the values and ideals of the heavenly messages and the findings of science and man's civilization. The adherence to this Constitution preserves for Iraq its free union of people, of land, and of sovereignty.

Mariam: [Our experience] is below the expectations. Because, let's be honest, maybe at that time...what grade you were in 2003?

Students: Miss, we were not even in school! [Students chatter]

Mariam: [Claps hands] It was the dream of all Iraqi citizens...

Hawar: for Saddam to go...

Mariam: Yes, I am telling you: many families suffered, many families lost their members, moms, dads, kids, and we all know what happened in Halabja and Anfal. [Pause] Some of them - the ones that supported him, they didn't want to - but when they had decided was that Iraq should be changed, it should be better. But what I see is that is that it turned worse. My dream is to go back to Baghdad, the place where I was raised, the place where I spent my childhood, my university was there, my friends are there. And I keep dreaming of my own house, of our garden, the big one, and the tree in the middle of the garden. And I keep dreaming of how I used to ride the bicycle in the middle of the street with my friends and still I want [trails off]...but when will this come true? [Pause] When I am reading this [constitution preamble] it is perfect, and then as I continue reading it is missing something. And then as Hawar said, it is lies. [Politicians] should not blame the citizens if they [politicians] did not do their duties.

Yakub: But Saddam was the most powerful...

Medya: Why do some people believe in his reign, say that it was all safe?

Hawar: It was safe, wallah, it was safe!

Mariam: I will answer you [Medya],but let us go back to that one [section].

Serbest: [Under his breath, beside me] Hawar is talking like he was the cousin of Saddam Hussein...

Mariam asks another student, Belend, to read aloud “Section One: Fundamental Principles.” Belend reads, “Article One: The Republic of Iraq is a single federal, independent and fully sovereign state in which the system of government is republican, representative, parliamentary, and democratic, and this Constitution is a guarantor of the unity of Iraq...”

Mariam: Article one is very important. They mention many important features: republican, representative, democratic. Well. Which one of these points we can see that they did not [achieve]? Is it a republic? [Students shake heads no.] I agree with you: Failure. When we saw on TV the fighting, stealing, killing, and where is the money? [Imitating politicians] Blah blah blah. And we can go and see [the politicians’] castles, some of them are in London, some of them around the world.

Belend reads, “Article Two:

First

Islam is the official religion of the State and is a foundation source of legislation:

1. No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam
2. No law may be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy.
3. No law may be enacted that contradicts the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in this Constitution.

Second

This Constitution guarantees the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people and guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaean Sabians.”

Mariam [raises eyebrows, speaks in a sarcastic tone]: Oh really? [Pause] I prefer separation of religion [and state]. Because here Islam is the official religion, but it is not the same of Christianity, Yezidi, Jewish; it is not the same with other, different religions. [Pause] I'm sorry, but you know my ideas. I am very free and open. There will be struggles. There will be clashes. There are certain points, like, getting the Iraqi ID is against Christianity. [Pause] Here the Constitution guarantees the Islamic identity of the majority and guarantees the full religious right and practice of all individuals such as Christians, and, by the way, the Mandaeans are the people who follow Yahya....

Rasim: John the Baptist

Mariam: There are certain ceremonies we have - as Christians we are proud to be, and the Muslims are proud and the Jewish are the same. And believe me, I can tell you it happened that many families in Baghdad prevented Christian families to put the cross on their doors. Why? [They said] “we are Muslims, you have no right.” It happened at university, I remember this: I used to wear a short skirt. And one of the girls wearing a veil, she said, “Why you don't wear a long [skirt]?” And I said “Why?” And she said,

“Don't you have respect for our religion?” And I said, “Respect your religion first and then come and respect our religion.” And my friend, he was a Shii Muslim, and he said [to the veiled girl], “You have no right to ask her to do something that her religion is not asking her to do that.” And it happened with many: the security of that university at that time tended to be more religious and they kept writing “to respect yourself as a girl, you have to wear a veil and reduce your makeup, and it is better if you are wearing gloves.”

Hawar: But, miss, Islam does not say wear long skirts like this. It is only an idea...

Mariam: I know. I can see the real Islam in Mihriban [gesturing to her]. I can see the real Islam in you. But the majority, I don't know what they think of themselves. So I don't agree with this [point in the Constitution]. They did not guarantee my religious practice. Or my rights. They did not. [Speaking rhetorically] Why am I here? Why I am here in Kurdistan? Why did I not stay in Baghdad? [silence]

Belend continues reading aloud, “Article 3: Iraq is a country of multiple nationalities, religions, and sects. It is a founding and active member in the Arab League and is committed to its charter, and it is part of the Islamic world.”

Mariam: You can see they keep repeating "the Islamic world". Ok. We got it.

Hawar: Miss, what is wrong with that?

Mariam: You will see that they do the opposite of what they say.

Belend reads aloud, “Article 4: The Arabic language and the Kurdish language are the two official languages of Iraq.”

Mariam: Did they achieve something? Well, yes. Before [2005] only Arabic was official [language]. And now Kurdish [is an official language]. But still, there are Assyrian and Chaldean, and they are not [official] languages; they should mention them here.

Belend continues: “The right of Iraqis to educate their children in their mother tongue, such as Turkmen, Assyrian, and Armenian shall be guaranteed in government educational institutions in accordance with educational guidelines, or in any other language in private educational institutions.”

Mariam: I studied Kurdish. I was in grade 10. But did they really apply [Article 4]? Are Christians and Assyrians studying in their mother tongue?

Rasim: But now there are restaurants having names in Assyrian...

Ashur: Miss, they are in Ainkawa...

Mariam: No, I am talking about the school. I studied Kurdish in grade 10, one year, yeah I studied, only one year. Did I study the Syriac one? No, I did not. My sister studied for a very short time, and they decided we will change it for something else.

Hawar: Miss, now it is really better. In Duhok there are schools who teach Christianity.

Mariam: I am talking about Baghdad.

Ashur: For example, I studied in grade 1 through 6 in Syriac in Ainkawa (a township within Erbil).

Mariam: Guys, I am talking about Baghdad and the South!

Throughout her lessons, Mariam returned to the same themes: She and her family enjoyed a good life in Baghdad until the 2003 invasion, the subsequent war and sectarian violence, and her family's eventual displacement. In her narrative, she emphasized that Christians and other ethnoreligious minorities had been targeted, citing this as evidence of the failing Iraqi state. While still living in Baghdad, she witnessed the spread of sectarian political culture and violence, which she associated with a corrupt and failing government that had betrayed its citizens. Although Mariam initially desired to become a lawyer, her father disapproved, and she chose to become a teacher instead. With time, Mariam had begun to see her role as a teacher as an opportunity to contribute to rebuilding her country. She told her students that they could make the best of their situations, just as she had done and continued to do during the (then) current economic crisis and war with the Islamic State. Students could choose what to study and discern how best to improve themselves and their country. Like Sara and some of the other teachers, Mariam's expressed hopes for the future largely rested on her students' success – if she could persuade them to not give up hope and abandon Iraq, either by emigrating,

or, if they remained in their country, by resigning themselves to cynicism or apathy and withdrawing from political, and to some extent social, life.

Mariam's students received her lessons unevenly. Some students questioned whether the situation in Baghdad, and in Iraq as a whole, was really "that bad." Her students had not directly experienced any violence in their relatively insular, privileged lives in the Kurdistan Region. Some found it difficult to empathize with their displaced teachers' stories and to respond to teachers' appeals to morality and duty. When I asked students during private interviews to tell me what they thought about their teachers like Mariam and Sara, a few described them as role models or inspirational and expressed appreciation for their teachers' apparently genuine concern for their students. Other students, however, complained that they did not want to stay in Iraq, where they might end up in a "lower status" job like teaching. Others aspired to medicine and engineering but conceded that these were careers their families desired for them. Instead, many students hoped to emigrate to Europe or to the United States, where they could escape the "failed" Iraqi state, the "failing" Kurdistan Region, and perhaps family pressures, too.

*"The history of where you are from"*

During my semester in KCS, I conducted several class wide group interviews. These usually occurred when a teacher was too burdened with administrative work or felt unwell and offered me the opportunity to interview their students. Teachers were never present during group interviews. I sat at the front of the class typing furiously on my laptop while students answered my questions.

Diana to grade 8 class: What have you learned in *komalayati* class?

Dana: The history of our country.

Chira, correcting him: The *Islamic* history of our country.

Dilvin: Komalayati in this school isn't taken seriously. This is the first year we've had a proper teacher and book. We should have started from grade 4, but nobody paid attention to it. Komalayati is about your country and where you are from, and you should know it. But no one in this school does. In other schools they memorize it.

Diana: When you say "country" which country do you mean?

Ahmed: Iraq

Many students: Kurdistan

Diana: How many of you consider your country to be Iraq? [Ahmed raises his hand.] And the rest of you?

Other students: Kurdistan! [15 raise their hands. The remaining 4 students had lived outside Iraq and thus considered themselves to be foreigners, e.g. Canadian.]

When I interviewed the fifteen or so students in grade 9, my asking their opinions about Komalayati provoked them, leading to a heated debate:

Zina: Yes, we need to learn about [*komalayati*]! They teach us "Human Rights and Genocide" [another Kurdistan Regional Government mandated course], so why not this?

[Students begin to speak over each other]

Rebwar: ...it's important to keep a culture alive...

Halo: ...It's a really good class but some students hate it...

Gul: ...it's horrible because in this type of school we are in now we really don't need it...

Yusuf: ...It's a waste of time, we don't do anything real...

Cejne: ...The teacher is really nice, but the lesson is boring...

Rebwar: ...The info is useful, but the majority of the class doesn't care...

Lunja, unable to stay silent any longer, stood up and turned to confront Yusuf:

Lunja: So you think it is unnecessary to study *komalayati*?! So, when someone asks you the history of where you are from, what will you say?

Yusuf: I am from Iraq!

Several students speak over each other arguing about the definition of “their country.”

Gul to me: Miss, if you come to the truth of it, there is no Iraq, there are Kurds, there are Assyrians...

Halo, rising from his desk: Your history is who you are, your identity. If you don't know your history, you don't know who you are.

[Students cheer and clap]

Arjin, a petite, outspoken student stands up and faces her classmates.

Arjin: Let me tell you about my country: First of all, there is no gender equality! [Some female students vigorously clap] Second of all, they force religion upon you! They are close minded!

Just as in Mariam's civics lessons, the Grade 9 students could not reach a consensus on national identity. Their criticisms of Iraq and Kurdistan referenced sectarianism, gender inequality, economic crisis, and government corruption. They were especially cynical about Kurdish ethnonationalism and the campaign for an independent Kurdistan state. When Bailen, one of the more patriotic Kurdish students tried to defend his political party, the other students heckled him. Bailen moved aggressively toward Yusuf, and students stood between them to prevent a fight. Frightened, one of the female students left the room and informed Ms. Helin, who entered the classroom and commanded everyone to sit and be silent. That was the end of my interview with Grade 9, and thereafter I interviewed students in smaller groups.

After the fight in Grade 9, some students told me privately that they were disturbed about what happened. There had been previous tense episodes like the one I



witnessed. The students had learned to avoid controversial topics to keep peace among the relatively small student body. Many had grown up together in the school, and now the school was more diverse than before. The *komalayati* class, as well as my presence in the school, seemed to exacerbate tensions about controversial topics. When I created a space for students to express their opinions, their discussion quickly deteriorated into a brawl. Not incidentally, Karza, who incorporated political critique and secular philosophy into his lessons, was not invited to return to teach *komalayati* the following semester. Students once again did not have a social studies teacher.

Teachers like Sara and Mariam strove to help their students cultivate an ethical sensibility premised on religious or humanistic “brotherly love,” as well as on shared national identity. Over the months I spent in KCS, I observed their moral efforts in the classroom and later listened to their dispirited conversation in the teachers’ break room. No matter how hard they tried to reach their students, it seemed that students generally were not receptive; rather, they were antagonistic or evasive. In school, and in social and political discourse, young people were instructed to desire a functional state, whether Iraqi or Kurdistan. The cause of rehabilitating national identity, however, did not motivate students, especially ethnically Kurdish students. They simply “[did] not love Iraq.”

But these youth did not appear interested in an independent Kurdistan state either. They expressed disenchantment with all forms of political life, and not just the forms available to them, but also those forms they were encouraged to imagine and aspire to in their civics and *komalayati* lessons. Perhaps these private school students’ comfortable and insular lifestyles rendered them apathetic and selfish. That would be a

partial explanation, one favored by some of my interlocutors, but not applicable to all students. Some had experienced the effects of war, displacement, financial insecurity, and discrimination in the Kurdistan Region. Through their lessons in school and their family histories, young people knew that cycles of war and genocide had plagued their homeland for well over a century. That knowledge, and the pervasive gloom due to war, economic crisis, and political disappointments, produced a kind of emotional fatigue.

In addition to historical knowledge and emotional fatigue, young people also expressed skepticism about their own agency. In lessons, and in private conversations, students discussed how “culture” or society limited their abilities to realize personal goals. They experienced restrictions on friendships, relationships, mobility, and choice of career. They expressed little hope, if any, in any potential individual efforts to affect changes in society or in politics. And yet, their teachers repeatedly insisted that students not only possessed the necessary abilities, but that young people had a moral duty to use these abilities to the aid of their family, community, and country. Teachers like Mariam and Sara drew upon a particular model of ethical life presented at Kurdistan Civilization School (KCS), premised upon individual autonomy and heavy responsibility for one’s own moral progress.

When students resisted their teachers’ appeals to this model of ethical life, they were not merely shirking responsibility, if they were avoiding it all. Rather, I believe that their resistance reflected their skepticism in the feasibility, and not necessarily the desirability, of individual autonomy in Kurdistan and in Iraq. Since my field work, I have observed some of these young people express solidarity with youth in Baghdad, and more recently in the city of Slemani, protesting government corruption. On Instagram and

Snapchat, they have shared news stories with the hashtag “SaveTheIraqiPeople.” My sense is that, although these young people expressed solidarity with protestors, they were nevertheless skeptical about the “goodness” of the nation and the “goodness” of the state. Ethnonationalism was problematic; they had observed this at school. And desiring a functional state was not enough. Countless times I heard older people speak of the Iraqi state as being “better” during the regime of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, not because they enjoyed more freedoms, but because the state provided more economic and political stability.

Young people I listened to were acutely aware of what was at stake in talk about the nation and the state. They had heard people express nostalgia for an authoritarian and genocidal regime, and they had observed how their classmates and teachers had suffered from “sectarian” violence and discrimination. Now, they were being instructed to “desire” certain forms of political life, when they knew well that these political forms had not protected their friends or communities. Is it any wonder, then, that they questioned whether the nation or the state were ideal political forms, not just for achieving protection or stability, but for advancing human flourishing? Desiring freedoms and desiring the state are not the same thing, especially when one is a member of an ethnoreligious minority community, or when it is unclear who is friend and who is foe.



Figure 5. Mural depicting schoolchildren carrying the Kurdistani flag, painted on the wall of a school in Erbil. Photo by the author. 2017

*“Oh, my enemy!”*

On a chilly February morning, Kurdistan Civilizational School students hurried from their buses to the basketball court. Students and teachers were assembling for a patriotic ceremony. Inside the court there were four groups: Grades 9 and 10 stood together as one unit; grades 7 and 8 stood together; and grade 11 stood by itself. The fourth group was comprised of three students who had been selected to march toward the flagpole and raise the Kurdistani flag. The flag-raisers stood beside a handful of students chosen to sing the national anthem into a microphone. I noticed Muna from grade 8 was one of the singers.

Muna was born into a well-educated Arab Muslim family in Baghdad. Both her parents earned advanced degrees in science and engineering. When Muna was 10 years

old, the family moved to Kurdistan. The move was difficult for Muna. In her new, Kurdish-majority school she was bullied by some kids who said, “Go back to Iraq, we don’t want you here.” Their taunts puzzled Muna: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is an autonomous region within the federal Iraqi state; it is subject to the federal government in Baghdad, and it is located within Iraq’s national borders. Strictly speaking, the Kurdistan Region is part of Iraq. But Muna’s bullies spoke of Kurdistan as many people do – as a separate country. The disputed nature of the Kurdistan Region’s political borders and character is one of the major themes, not only of this chapter, but throughout the dissertation.

It had been three years since Muna moved from Baghdad and enrolled in Kurdistan Civilization School. Now people rarely said negative things about Muna’s “Iraqi” identity. It seemed to me that she had adjusted to living in Kurdistan and her new school as well as one could hope. She made every effort to be cheerful around her teachers and peers. When I visited Muna’s classes, she eagerly waved me over to the empty desk beside hers; she enjoyed surreptitiously writing notes to me during *komalayatî* (social studies) which was taught in Kurdish. She did not know enough Kurdish to follow the *komalayatî* lesson, so she worked on other assignments, doodled, or passed notes back and forth with me. In Muna’s remedial Kurdish language class, the teacher wrote example sentences about the *peshmerga* (Kurdish military) and the Kurdish nation, and he asked the students to do likewise. Muna worked hard to learn Kurdish. “I hate feeling left out,” she said about everyone around her speaking a language she did not understand.

At the patriotic ceremony, Muna and her fellow singers waited for their signal. A male voice instructed the students to stand at attention; they became quiet and stood tall. Only a few placed their hands over their hearts. The three flag raisers marched to the flagpole and hoisted the Kurdistan flag. A recording of the Kurdistan national anthem, “Ey Raqib” (“Oh My Enemy”) began playing; it had a tinny sound, reminiscent of children’s songs. The students began singing. Most appeared to know the words and sang with blank facial expressions. I saw Marwa, the Mandaean girl I often sat beside on the school bus, standing in the grade 8 block and looking very uncomfortable. Literature teachers and close friends Shams, an Arab Muslim from Baghdad, and Sara, a Christian from Qaraqosh, stood with grim expressions. I wondered what emotions the Kurdish anthem stirred in Shams and Sara, both displaced and unhappy. I stood beside Lilo, one of the Kurdish language and literature teachers. She bore an inscrutable expression. Leaning close to her, I asked if she knew all the words (yes), and how often they sang? “Once a week,” she replied quietly. Turning to look at me with a serious look, she added, “It’s necessary (*Payweesta*).” During the anthem, she stood silently at attention.

Meanwhile, the chosen female students sang the anthem haltingly. Muna looked around the gym, her wide eyes full of uncertainty. After the girls finished singing the anthem, high school administrator Ms. Helin took the microphone and said a crisp “*bayanitan bash*” (good morning) which received a weak “*bayani bash*” reply from the crowd. Ms. Helin routinely spoke in Kurdish to the students, unlike most of her fellow administrators who spoke English. She announced that she would be visiting the classrooms for inspection today, “*bashe?*” (ok?). We were dismissed. I hurried to catch up with Muna, who was standing with a friend. I asked if she volunteered to sing, or was

she chosen? Muna said she was chosen, and her friend added, “Yeah she had to [sing] unless she wanted minus on her marks.” Muna said she was “really embarrassed.” She wondered why she was chosen considering that, “We [non-Kurdish students] don’t even understand the words because we don’t know Kurdish.”

#### **Ch. 4 “This is the life here”: Ethical life among bodybuilders and gym-goers**

*“Brother, don’t build your city of dreams. Help the people of this city to escape even more sadness. We fantasise to forget our suffering. Imagination acts as a shield in this city.” - Bakhtiyar Ali, I Stared at the Night of the City*

##### *The coach’s atrophied body*

From an early age, Rashid wanted to be a bodybuilder. He was born in the late 1980s in the city of Mosul, a hub for Iraqi bodybuilding. In elementary school, he drew bodybuilders while other kids drew trees and flowers. At age 12, he did 200 pushups a day and lifted any heavy object he could find. Although relatively small in stature, Rashid was determined to build muscle. In his teenage years, he joined a bodybuilding gym and admired the guys who worked out there because they “loved to be big.” By 2010, Rashid was coaching in that gym, following the example of Fahd, the head coach and a professional bodybuilder.

In 2012, Rashid left Mosul and moved to the city of Erbil, also called Hewlêr, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). During the day Rashid worked in an accounting office, and in the evening, he taught fitness classes and offered personal training in a new gym. A couple years later, Fahd also moved to Erbil, where he reconnected with Rashid. When Rashid saw the physical condition of his old friend and former coach, he was shocked:

When [Fahd] was in Mosul, he was in prison for a while for something that he didn’t do, and he got tortured there. Before he got caught by the police, no, the government – I don’t know what part captured him – he was a really huge guy. I first saw him after he came out of prison. I didn’t recognize him when he came out. He was so thin, 45 kilograms. So it was weird seeing that big guy turn into this small guy. Since then, he was always afraid. He was not able to see any police.



Rashid also recalled standing with Fahd on a busy street in Erbil when a nearby car braked loudly and startled the coach. “He got scared, he snapped up. I felt sorry for him. Anyhow, thank God he has a gym [in Erbil] now,” Rashid concluded. State violence had reduced Fahd from a champion bodybuilder and local hero to a malnourished and nervous immigrant in a city where he knew very few people. Although Fahd recovered enough to open his own gym in Erbil, the traumas he suffered in Mosul haunted him.

In contemporary Iraq, the effects of violence inscribed on individual bodies like Fahd’s make visible the legacies of war and the disintegrating Iraqi state. In speaking of individual debilitated bodies, Iraqis also speak of violence committed against the fractured body politic. Everyday encounters with visibly traumatized bodies, individual and collective, make the discourse of broken bodies especially salient in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Second Gulf War (2003 – 2011) and the conflict with the Islamic State (2014 – 2017) not only injured countless Iraqi people, but also sent waves of internally displaced Iraqis and Syrian refugees into the Kurdistan Region. During my fieldwork, approximately two million IDPs and refugees were living in the KRI – a staggering forty percent increase in the Kurdistan Region’s population. Water and electricity shortages became more frequent. The burden of hosting IDPs and refugees also exacerbated problems between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal Iraqi government. When the KRG independently and “illegally” negotiated oil sales with international buyers, Baghdad responded by withholding the KRG’s share of the national budget. For months on end, the KRG reduced or ceased paying public sector salaries, which supported an estimated sixty percent of the population. However, in this

same period of violence which decimated so many Iraqi bodies, bodybuilding and the fitness industry in Kurdistan were flourishing.

In this chapter, I examine how bodybuilding and gym-going narratives contribute to a larger discourse about broken bodies, state violence, and ethical life in Iraq – or, as I heard many people put it, “this is the life here.” I argue that the convergence of war, state-making, and the global fitness industry upon the sporting body make it a site of resistance and ethical self-formation. Because the sporting body typically symbolizes the “positive” powers of the state or empire, discourses about strength mask the sporting body’s vulnerabilities to these same powers. They also obscure the contested symbolic life of the sporting body in everyday experience and in contexts of violence. In the Kurdistan Region, individual athletes and gym-goers speak of their fitness practices, not as success symbols of the nation or state, but as a means of personal recovery from sectarian violence and failures of the state. Although some version of the victorious athlete trope remains in the narratives of individual Iraqis, it is often transformed into a neoliberal success story inflected with modernization discourse: Individuals compete, not for the sake of the nation or with the aid of the state, but for the sake of becoming a stronger and more “modern” person with the aid of the global fitness industry. By understanding how Iraqi bodybuilding narratives both employ and critique tropes about national strength and “modernity,” this chapter demonstrates how the spread of the global fitness industry offers individual athletes and their fitness communities a set of ethical practices and an interpretative framework in the wake of the collapsing Iraqi state.

*From bullets to bodybuilding*

It was June 2017 and the middle of Ramadan when I met “Georges,” a bodybuilder involved in opening “Fitness World,” a new gym in the city of Erbil. I was surprised to hear that a new gym was opening in this period of what seemed like total stagnation: The war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) dragged on. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) faced a deepening economic crisis and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) had reduced or ceased paying public sector salaries. Consequently, most projects had halted. Marlana, a fitness instructor I met while visiting various gyms, had invited me to see Fitness World, which was not yet open to the public. She knew the owner and was friendly with the staff. Her brother Yusuf, a self-described “gym addict,” was already working out there despite the lingering construction litter. Fitness World sat along 100 Meter Road, one of the major roads that loops around the city of Erbil. The side of the building facing 100 Meter Road had floor to ceiling windows, displaying cardio machines and the people using them to the busy street below. The hall contained neat rows of gleaming new cardio equipment and orderly weight sets.

Georges was mild-mannered and not as bulky as some of the other bodybuilders I had met in Erbil. He had an unassuming smile and soft voice. Born into a Chaldean Christian family in Baghdad in 1982, Georges left school in grade 11 to earn money for his family. At age 19, he was conscripted into the Iraqi army, where he became accustomed to the physical exercise and discipline around which he still organizes his life. After completing his military service, Georges trained with a well-known coach and participated in a few bodybuilding competitions in which he medaled. In 2006, during one of the worst periods of sectarian violence, his coach was assassinated in a terrorist

attack. Georges' friend was shot dead beside him, and Georges was shot in the back. He and his family, like so many other Iraqis during the war, fled north to the relatively safe Kurdistan Region.

After two months in the hospital and one year of physical therapy, Georges returned to bodybuilding. In 2015 and 2017 he placed first in competitions in Erbil. As we sat in the gym office and talked, he gathered his many certificates, trophies, and medals from a display case and spread them across the desk between us. The sun's rays shimmered on the medals and trophies, and Georges smiled as he told us about each one. "I want to do this forever," he said.



Figure 6: Georges' trophies. Copyright by the author.

### *Gyms and sports in the modern Middle East*

Gymnasiums and bodybuilding have contributed to the creation of the modern Middle East in ways that scholars only recently have begun exploring. Historians have

documented the role of sports in producing “fit” and patriotic citizen subjects and in creating new spaces of intimacy. Empires and states were envisioned as strengthened through citizens’ contributions to the body politic through sports. In the 19th century Ottoman Empire, physical education in schools and in private sports clubs, as well as through the transnational circulations of exercise culture, contributed to the creation of a shared physical culture among Jews, Christians, and Muslims (Yildiz 2019). European or American notions of “muscular Christianity” circulated throughout the Middle East, inspiring the “muscular Islam” of scouting organizations (Krais 2019).

Paul Silverstein (2019) notes the tendency to over-attribute the genealogy of sporting masculinity to imperialism and colonial missionary activity. There is an older and broader “ongoing intimacy” between sports and religious movements (483). In Iran, for example, the “ancient” martial arts practiced in the *zurkhaneh* (house of strength) are believed to have religious origins, possibly in Zoroastrianism. The *zurkhaneh* also incorporates Islamic virtues and understandings of the body, which continue to inform notions of modern, virtuous, and masculine Persian subjects (Smith 2016; Ridgeon 2007). “Physical exercise, and even competitive sports, have long been integrated into the daily practices of committed Muslims,” Silverstein observes (2019:483). Sports follow the rhythms of the religious calendar: Soccer offers a welcome distraction from fasting and abstaining during Ramadan (Schielke 2009). At the gym where I worked, one bodybuilder broke his Ramadan fast every evening with a protein shake before working out.

The co-presence of more traditionally masculine sports like bodybuilding with mixed-gender gyms in the Middle East, or the co-presence of the religious with the

secular, is not a bug of “development.” These are features of modernity itself, of ethical self-making and modern state-making. Silverstein observes that,

More religiously committed Moroccan men build their Islamic ethical selves in homosocial settings of dojos and bodybuilding gyms, much as other upper-class Moroccans develop secular aesthetics alongside their visible bodily form in mixed-sex urban fitness centers. In both of the latter cases, athletic facilities are not just body factories but advanced technologies for self-making (2019:484).

Modern Middle Eastern states have excelled at nation-building through sport.

Murat Yildiz argues that the creation of a popular sports culture was “central to the formation of the modern” in the Ottoman era (2019:468). Thereafter, the early Turkish state promoted programs of gymnastics for both men and women to “modernize” the nation and to promote Kemalist values (Özyürek 2006). The Pan-Arab games were organized to advance Arab cultural and political unity (Henry, Amara, and Al-Tauqi 2003) and were modeled after the ultimate spectacle of nationalist sentiment amid international cooperation, the Olympic games (MacAloon 2013). National and international competitions reify national or state boundaries and essentialize the discursive national character of states and athletes within those states. Even nations without states advance their cause in international sporting events: For example, Kurdish nationalism and aspirational statehood are promoted by the Kurdish soccer team depicted in the documentary *Desert Fire* (Losh and Rabas 2016). Likewise, Kurdish bodybuilders and mixed martial arts (MMA) practitioners who live in Europe or the United States drape themselves with the Kurdistan flag at competitions (Kurdistan24 n.d.).

Among sports, bodybuilding exemplifies the cultivation of individual strength and symbolic national strength. Bodybuilding has been a popular sport in Iraq for decades, second only to soccer. In 1972, when bodybuilding in the U.S. was still a nascent, “freak” hobby, Iraq hosted the International Bodybuilding Federation’s World Congress. It was

the same year that Iraq nationalized its petroleum industry. Around 3,000 spectators attended the week-long championships in Baghdad, which were broadcast to millions inside and outside Iraq. The President of the International Federation of Bodybuilders, Ben Weider, memorized and recited an Arabic translation of his opening ceremony speech. Every sentence was met with “overwhelming applause,” and Weider cheered “long live the Iraqi Sportsman!” (Weider).

Recently, re-injections of bodybuilding culture have come to Iraq and the Kurdistan Region through U.S. military presence and international actors working in the humanitarian and private sectors (Dennehy 2017). Many of my interlocutors worked as translators or security personnel with the U.S. military or with NGOs, where they had access to gyms and trainers. Some of my interviewees drew connections between U.S. global power, the strength of its military, and the perceived high-quality of its gym equipment and knowledge of exercise science.

Kenneth Saltman (2006) analyzes military and fitness industry connections in his article “The Strong Arm of the Law.” While “the built body promises safety, security, and freedom,” Saltman argues, the built body also “[contributes] to the militarization of society— a process at odds with democratization” (50). In conditions of war and instability, strength sports offer an appealing “fantasy of security” (53). English language news media perpetuate this fantasy by reporting their surprise at finding bodybuilding in wartime Iraq (Londono 2008). The Western “discovery” of Iraqi bodybuilding is similar to Western media fascination with female Kurdish resistance fighters, and reflects a broader fascination with gender stereotypes of the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 2013) . Perhaps interest in these gender stereotype-reversal stories also stems from a desire to

believe that Iraqis will survive the destruction of wars which Westerners, particularly Americans, brought to the region. In a 2017 *Washington Post* photo essay on Sadr City's female weightlifters, Emilienne Malfatto (2017) writes,

For me, this story is a way to show how different Iraq can be from what we imagine. Yes, it is Sadr City. Yes, it is violent and conservative. But you also have life — in a very strong and simple way. And you also have girls — young women — challenging stereotypes.

Many of my interlocutors also expressed hopefulness at seeing women exercising in gyms and challenging stereotypes. Some, like the journalist, expressed a desire to show how strength can be cultivated despite the enervating effects of war. But bodybuilding itself exerts violence upon the body through grueling training and steroid use. Many of my interlocutors described bodybuilding as backward and outdated. Strength sports like CrossFit and global fitness culture, on the other hand, appealed to those hoping to build a more “modern” society.

### *Fit for statehood*

In recent years, the fitness industry has grown rapidly in the Kurdistan Region. The KRI has become a new regional destination for bodybuilding training and competitions, and several new fitness centers have opened in the city of Erbil. These developments are said to evidence the Kurdistan Region's development and “fitness” for statehood. On the other hand, some of my Kurdistanian interlocutors expressed concerns that mixed-gender gyms might foster illicit relationships, distract young people from their family obligations, and thus destabilize the social order. People who are critical of the social order, that is, critical of the status quo, were frustrated by the “moral panic” surrounding mixed-gender gyms. These critics pointed to moral panic as evidence that



the Kurdistan Region is not “modern” or “progressive” enough, and thus not yet “fit” to become an independent country. Similarly, many of my interlocutors criticized the deepening ethnoreligious, class, and political divides in the Kurdistan body politic. Bodybuilding and gym-going can make visible these divides; or, as some hoped, they can help heal the personal and political wounds of war.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, global fitness culture and bodybuilding emerged from the intersections of war, economic sanctions, displacement, and humanitarian interventions. After the 1991 Gulf War, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France imposed a no-fly zone (NFZ) over the Kurdistan Region to protect the ethnic Kurdish population there. The NFZ effectively opened the Kurdistan Region to international commerce and enabled the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to expand its autonomy and governance of the KRI. The same destruction of the 2003-2011 war that crippled much of Iraq boosted construction in the Kurdistan Region. Umut Kuruüzüm (2018) has shown how the war’s wreckage produced scrap material that was transported north to the Kurdistan Region, along with a growing labor force of internally displaced Iraqis, refugees from Syria, and migrant laborers from Turkey.

Many Kurdish people who had been living in diaspora in Europe and the United States returned to the Kurdistan Region during a period of relative stability and economic growth (2011-2014). Additionally, with the war and subsequent humanitarian relief came employees of international companies, humanitarian agencies, and military personnel, many of whom brought their knowledge of global fitness culture and bodybuilding to the Kurdistan Region. During my fieldwork (September 2015 – July 2017), the Kurdistan Region was experiencing an important, transitional moment: The end of the war against

the Islamic State, or Daesh, was in sight. Many people were looking forward to September 2017, when they could vote in an independence referendum that would gauge support for a Kurdistan state. But for many other Iraqi people, the declaration of an independent Kurdish state would crush any hope of a unified Iraq. Most examinations of sport in nation-building and modernity demonstrate how sports serve as a unifying, productive force in constituting the community or nation. Conversely, what can sports and the sporting body reveal about a state that is said to be disintegrating?

Bodybuilding, of course, has a long history in the building of empire and nation in the Middle East. In twentieth century Iraq, bodybuilding enjoyed a widespread popularity second only to football (soccer). The recent introduction of “global fitness culture” (Andreasson and Johansson 2014) has brought with it criticism of traditional, male-centric and spectacular bodybuilding. Instead of muscles for “show,” global fitness culture promotes “modern” and “functional” strength training for both men and women. In Iraqi Kurdistan, traditional bodybuilding and newer global fitness culture compete in the growing fitness industry.

Three population flows specifically have contributed to the recent growth of the Kurdistan fitness industry: First, the return of many Kurds living in diaspora in Europe and the U.S., where they encountered global fitness culture. The relative stability of the 2011-2014 period encouraged many Kurdish people to return to their homeland. Second, the steady stream of international employees of the humanitarian sector and U.S. military personnel into the Kurdistan Region also brought knowledge of global gym and fitness culture. Many Kurdistan residents have worked as translators or specialists alongside humanitarian and military personnel who had access to gyms and equipment. And third,

the Kurdistan Region has absorbed many people displaced from elsewhere in Iraq, such as Baghdad and Mosul, which were centers of bodybuilding culture. (Historically Erbil hosted small bodybuilding clubs and competitions, although nothing on the scale of the bodybuilding networks in Mosul and Baghdad.) Displaced bodybuilders and coaches brought their expertise and experience to the Kurdistan Region, where some found employment in Kurdish-owned gyms and others opened their own gyms. While the traditional, male-only bodybuilding gyms, like the one pictured below, continue operating in the Region, the growing Kurdistan fitness industry can be characterized by a “professionalization” of bodybuilding, as well as a shift from male-centric exercise culture to one increasingly including females.



Figure 7: A bodybuilding gym near the Erbil Citadel. Copyright by the author.

The rapid growth of the global fitness industry in Erbil is apparent in “Doctors Street,” a commercial area specializing in medical and health products. Prior to the recent introduction of global fitness products, Doctors Street sold mainly standard medical supplies, such as pharmaceuticals, eyeglasses, and wheelchairs. Now Doctors Street contains several shops advertising bodybuilding equipment, supplements, consultations with coaches and nutritionists, and all manner of imported weight loss and muscle gain supplies. Doctors Street shops attract not only bodybuilding enthusiasts but also Kurdistan residents interested in weight loss, a common concern among my female friends at the gym where I worked part time during my fieldwork. For example, I regularly participated in group fitness classes with an overweight teenage girl “Muna,” who followed a nutrition regimen “prescribed” by a Doctors Street shop whose company was based in Dubai.



Figure 8: Inside a bodybuilding shop in Doctors Street. Copyright by the author.



Figure 9: Products at a Doctors Street shop. Copyright by the author.

While most of the available fitness industry supplies were concentrated in Doctors Street, gyms opened across the Erbil landscape. Even some of the oldest quarters of Erbil, such as near the citadel, have bodybuilding gyms. Traditional, male-only bodybuilding gyms were easy to spot by their larger-than-life photos of bodybuilders displayed in gym windows; mixed-gender gyms did not display these types of photos. As the city expanded outward, so did the gyms. During the last few months of my fieldwork in 2017, a CrossFit-style gym called “Lion’s Den” opened on the outskirts of Ainkawa, the Christian township of Erbil. “Lion’s Den” is in an area that soon will no longer be the outskirts if the city continues to expand in that direction. In Spring 2019, another new, large fitness center opened along the recently constructed “120 Meter Road,” which is now the largest of the ring roads encircling Erbil.

*Strength sports for a “modern” Kurdistan*

“That was when my Dad said I had to go out [and leave the gym], because they were always trying to give me hormones, steroids,” Nasir said as he perched on the edge of a boxing ring. I met Nasir while conducting research in secondary schools. He was a lanky teenager and a diligent student who wore glasses and spoke softly. I was surprised to run into him at “Lion’s Den,” a new gym offering CrossFit-style classes and mixed martial arts (MMA). A couple years prior to our interview at Lion’s Den, Nasir joined a bodybuilding gym in Erbil. Initially he was impressed by the spectacle of big muscles, but he grew weary of gym members constantly advising him to use steroids to bulk up his slender body. People did not hide their steroid use, injecting in front of other gym members, including Nasir. He jokingly claimed that some steroid users even injected their dogs to make them bigger. “The people that came there were the low-level people,” Nasir explained, “with bad smell, bad language, bad way of thinking.” He believed “low people” were attracted to that gym because it was small, located in a residential area, and relatively cheap at 40 dollars a month.



Figure 10: MMA training at Lion’s Den gym. Copyright by the author.

Membership fees at “old-style” gyms were about one third of the cost of membership at new, elite fitness centers such as the “Lion’s Den.” Nasir’s father inspected Lion’s Den before agreeing to let his son join. Since joining, Nasir persuaded five of his schoolmates, including one girl, to train at Lion’s Den. “You feel you are strong and no one can touch you. You feel confident,” Nasir explained. “And these MMA sports actually are the only sport that you can feel strong. Not like taekwondo or anything else about feeling light. We concentrate on power and quickness. So you feel nobody can touch you. Not even bodybuilders can stand against them, no matter how big they are.”

Nasir was proud to train with Coach Aashif, a popular MMA instructor and competitor. “I have seen many trainers, like at championships,” Nasir said, “And they were cursing and insulting their players when making any mistake. That’s the opposite of my coach. He encourages us and advises us. [Other MMA coaches] train like a dirty way, a street way. They think that’s the way, but it’s not.” Coach Aashif’s manner with trainees was gentle but firm. He seemed willing to coach anyone who was interested, including some very overweight people and some women, and he was patient with all. The coach’s wife worked as a personal trainer in a women’s gym, and sometimes she trained with her husband at Lion’s Den while their young son ran around the gym clambering over equipment and playing with gym members.

“I don’t know why,” Nasir reflected, “but I’m like the most religious person [at the gym].” Nasir belonged to a well-known Christian family who had immigrated from another country to Erbil. Nasir’s coach also was from outside the Kurdistan Region and a pious Arab Muslim. Nasir explained,

Coach Aashif fasts [during Ramadan] and prays every day. I guess it’s only me and him. It’s either religion or sport. One or the other. I don’t know why Iraq is

that way. They can't combine them. They either leave their religion, or they leave their sport. They can't mix them.

Nasir was not sure why the religion versus sports opposition existed, but he knew about religious strife from his experiences in various private schools. School administrators typically did not allow students to discuss religion, "because you know in Iraq the most sensitive subject is religion," Nasir explained. "It just starts fights everywhere, so they don't [discuss it]."

Coach Aashif's example as a pious person committed to his family, religious practice, and career was especially important to Nasir; the coach was a model for "modern" manhood. The Coach was not embarrassed to be seen spending lots of time with his wife and child, and he openly and seriously practiced Islamic piety, although traditional Kurdistan society considers such expressions of religious piety characteristic of women, not men. Coach Aashif and his followers were practicing a "new" kind of masculinity others have observed emerging in the Middle East (Inhorn 2012) and in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (King 2018) while upholding traditional ideals of male physical strength. The Lion's Den and Coach Aashif represented a new model for physical education in Kurdistan: it was clean, well-equipped, had a "tolerant" atmosphere, and employed certified trainers who drew upon "modern" and "scientific" knowledge circulating through global networks of professional trainers and athletes. Some Lion's Den members formerly participated in bodybuilding but quit. These ex-bodybuilders adopted a new "fitness" lifestyle that prioritized "natural" nutrition over supplements and rejected any substances or practices that harmed the body.

People who exercised at "modern," mixed-gender fitness centers often condemned traditional bodybuilding gyms and their practices, particularly for their



violence. Bodybuilding exerts violence upon the body through intensive dieting and grueling training to “shred” the body. Additionally, the prevalence of steroid use and other questionable “supplements” which may harm the body sullies the sport’s reputation. Many of my interlocutors spoke of the sport, its practitioners, and its gyms as backward and abnormal. Critical discourse also linked bodybuilding to a “lower” class characterized by low level of education and poor personal hygiene habits. Most of all, the self-inflicted violence on the body through training and steroid use disgusted many of my interlocutors. There was enough external violence in Iraq, so why inflict violence on your own body?

#### *Narrating violence and recovery*

Violence is central to many bodybuilders’ narratives. While grueling training looks like self-inflicted violence to the sport’s detractors, for bodybuilders it is a heroic, virtuous effort to overcome the effects of violence perpetrated by others. Georges’ story in the beginning of the paper is one of many tales of survival and recovery through physical exercise and sports. My interlocutors’ embodied experiences of the failing Iraqi state and the emerging Kurdistan state shape their stories about physical training. The periods before, during, and after the Second Gulf War bookend the various chapters of their lives. just as they generally do for the people of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan who suffered through those events.

Violence and displacement permeate “Zayn’s” story: In Erbil, Zayn was known as a friendly and popular bodybuilder and fitness coach for both male and female clients. In his former home in Baghdad, Zayn’s family was known by their prominent tribal identity

which put them at risk. His family lived in Baghdad until the 2003-2011 war, when they became the target of sectarian violence, as well as of US military personnel: In a case of mistaken identity, U.S. troops entered Zayn's home and detained his father multiple times; eventually the family decided to move to the Kurdistan Region. At that time, Zayn traveled to Europe to study exercise science, earning bachelor's and master's degrees. In 2012, he moved to Kurdistan to rejoin his family. There, as an Arab and an outsider, he felt almost constant tension with the majority Kurdish residents. He suffered many unpleasant encounters, which he attributed to his Arab ethnicity and known tribal affiliation.

I visited Zayn and his wife, Hiba, in their home, where Zayn could speak more freely than in the gym. Not only had he suffered racial discrimination; he also was cheated out of medaling in bodybuilding competitions in the Kurdistan Region. Zayn and Hiba told me that they gave up on making a life in Erbil after one particularly disappointing bodybuilding competition: The winner was physically the least impressive, smallest competitor; everyone was shocked when the winner was announced. Later, they heard that the winner had political connections and had bribed the judges, making visible the corruption, discrimination, and failed state that Zayn knew from personal experience. Bodybuilding had been a passion for Zayn, one that allowed him to connect with people from different countries, ethnicities, and religions. The reverse was true in Erbil; corrupt bodybuilding competitions seemed to reinforce sectarian and political differences. Without bodybuilding, Zayn felt stifled. When I last heard from Zayn and Hiba, they were planning to emigrate to Canada.

Georges, the Christian bodybuilder who survived an assassination attempt in Baghdad, believed that bodybuilding had become a more important sport after the 2003-2011 war. Before the war, there was less corruption, Georges explained. The war had exacerbated sectarian differences and weakened state and social institutions. Georges observed that the sport of bodybuilding also suffered because of the war. Judges chose their own trainees to win competitions. According to his award certificate, Georges placed first in a competition, but at the competition, another competitor paid a bribe to be announced as first place.

Other gym-goers shared similar stories of escaping violence elsewhere in Iraq and settling in Erbil, where many felt alienated and frustrated. Gyms and exercise routines offered safe space and “therapy” (one person even used this word in English). Gym therapy was said to remedy not only traumas of war or lingering effects of malnutrition during the sanctions era, but more generally the stresses unique to living in Iraq, one of the perennially lowest ranked countries for quality of living. People linked their bodybuilding and fitness practices with the conditions of their country. When I asked Hadid, the Turkomani bodybuilder, to explain the mentality of bodybuilding, he replied that, first, “people like to be big.” But, he continued, bodybuilding is also a response to “stress, electricity problems, salary problems, and water shortages.” These stressors were unique to bodybuilding in Kurdistan, Hadid argued.

### *Modern fitness in the modern state*

Some of my interlocutors, such as Zayn, discussed the growth, professionalization, and failures of Iraqi and Kurdistan bodybuilding as markers of the strengths or weaknesses of the Iraqi state and the aspirational Kurdistan state within it.

For example, Rashid, the bodybuilder from Mosul, drew connections between the growth of bodybuilding in Kurdistan and the struggling Iraqi state:

I think the bodybuilders here are a bit more educated, especially in the last 5 years. In the past it was much better in Mosul than in Kurdistan. But in the last 5 years it got much better in Kurdistan. They are following the scientific ways for bodybuilding. Here they read more about bodybuilding. In Mosul they just follow the rumors, or something they heard. In Mosul it is like “bro science.” They don’t know who is the source, just by trial and error sometimes. Many guys do the site injections, for localized muscle growth, something really awful, just a swollen area, you can google it. Many guys do that unfortunately. But recently in the bodybuilding university [through the Iraqi bodybuilders association] they tried to stop these kinds of things. They try to prevent many guys from participating in the championships. And sometimes they also do the site injections with the steroids. Which does not work! I don’t know why they do that.

Diana: It’s so bad for you. How old are most of the bodybuilders?

Rashid: Uh huh. For the age, I think it’s from 16 to 30, 35 something in between that. Not all of them are working out to be professionals, but most of them are, like, you know, most of them are passionate about bodybuilding. They are not trying to go for professional [status], but they like to be big. I think it all started when the Iraq championship was held here for the first time in Kurdistan.

Diana: When was that?

Rashid: In 2011 or 2012 it was held in Sulaymanîyah [a city also known as Slemani], in 2013 and 2014 in Erbil. Three years in a row. They are not used to seeing those big muscular guys in Erbil or Suli. They became fascinated about it. Since then, all the Iraqi bodybuilders were here. When it was held here in Erbil, the stage was full. They were sitting on the floor. In Baghdad it is a very popular sport, very popular. So they all came to cheer for their champions, for their friends. The theater was full. Many bodybuilders were walking around the city and being noticed by the people. That was good marketing for them. Since then [bodybuilding] got a much better reputation in Kurdistan.

In 2012, Rashid moved from Mosul to Erbil, where he witnessed the growth of the bodybuilding industry he describes above. Erbil offered not only more “professional” bodybuilding opportunities, but also more safety and freedoms than Rashid had experienced in Mosul:

I loved Erbil so much, because in Mosul we had to be at home at 8pm, not in the streets because it was dangerous. I remember going to the gym [in Erbil] at 8 or 9pm, and I was smiling all the way because I was so happy that I could go out at night and see cars in the streets. I was always smiling. I loved the freedom of going out in the night, because I haven't experienced that, never.

Additionally, Rashid appreciated that many Erbil residents were interested in health and fitness, unlike Mosul, where “nobody works out for health.” Rashid complained that in Mosul, “I haven't seen a single person who cares for this, just caring for being big.” For example, “many people would like to go for a morning run, and everybody would stare at them, like, what the hell are you doing?” Rashid attributed Erbil residents' interest in health to the city's recent prosperity and expansion of the private sector, which brought people and gym culture from all over the world. Rashid also pointed out that globalization proliferated sedentary and stressful desk jobs, which necessitated exercise and increased interest in health and fitness.

Erbil society, though it had progressed much, was not without flaws in Rashid's estimation. Rashid admitted he sometimes encountered “racist” people in the bazaar, for example, because they were “uneducated.” But this did not happen in the gym, he stressed to me; he felt accepted there. Not long after the Islamic State invaded Mosul and surrounding areas, a time during which some of my ethnic-Arab interlocutors experienced anti-Arab sentiments, Rashid had a warm exchange with two Kurdish young men at the gym. One man asked Rashid where he was from, and Rashid replied, “Mosul.” In reply, the Kurdish guy said, “Inshallah it will get better and we can visit you at your home [in Mosul].” To Rashid's surprise, the other Kurdish man corrected his friend and said to Rashid, “No, kaka [sir], *this* is your home.” Rashid was touched by the exchange and said he often reflects on it.

Rashid and Zayn, as non-Kurdish “others,” sometimes experienced racism, but their knowledge of English and expertise in bodybuilding and fitness gave them an advantage in the growing bodybuilding and fitness industries in Erbil. Rashid observed that the majority of resources about bodybuilding and fitness were in English, and many were in Arabic, whereas very little was written in Kurdish. Many coaches and gym-owners displaced from elsewhere in Iraq brought their expertise to Erbil. Although the Kurdistan bodybuilders association exam for personal trainer or coaching certification was written in Kurdish, Arabic speakers like Rashid and Zayn were permitted to write their answers in Arabic.

“Outsider” bodybuilders like Rashid openly critiqued Kurdish “culture” for its sedentism, restricted mobility for women, and fattening, “traditional” oil and rice heavy dishes like dolma. They observed that urbanization and war increased sedentary jobs and stress levels. War and a stagnated economy depressed their clients, and personal trainers struggled to motivate people to set goals and work hard toward them. Rashid and other personal trainers saw themselves waging a difficult war against these forces, against apathy, and against the lingering interest in “outdated” and “backward” traditional bodybuilding cultures. While traditional male-only bodybuilding gyms in Erbil still attract clients, my interlocutors generally described the newer mixed-gender gyms as professional and modern in their preference for “fitness” and not “bodybuilding.”

For my interlocutors, “fitness” was all about living a “modern” healthy lifestyle, characterized by a commitment to gym-going and to proper nutrition. Global fitness culture brought not only health benefits, but also a space for people who felt marginalized in Kurdistan – non-Kurdish residents, youth, and women. Through gym-going, people

enjoyed more mobility and could pursue self-actualization. Gym-going facilitated friendships, significantly across ethnosectarian lines. A pair of female friends, one Christian and the other Muslim, emphasized to me that, although their families pressured them not to associate with people from other ethnoreligious groups, at the gym the women felt comfortable socializing. They regularly spent hours hanging out there, as I observed many young people, particularly women, enjoying the relative freedom of the gym. Fitness centers also facilitated some romantic relationships: One gym owner-manager was proud that his mixed-gender gym had produced some “good marriages” between clients. Gyms offered a space in which mainly young people, who otherwise typically kept their opinions private around older relatives and acquaintances, could criticize social, economic, and political issues.

Furthermore, gyms provided an experimental zone in which people challenged deeply rooted social organization, such as power and status based on tribal affiliation. In one memorable episode, a woman belonging to a well-known tribe and political party was banned from the gym. For some time, she had been antagonizing a foreign worker employed to clean the women’s locker room and exercise area, making demands and ridiculing the employee. When the foreign worker finally informed the gym manager, Amir, he publicly confronted the accused woman in the gym lobby and told her that such behavior was unacceptable in his gym. Furious, the woman loudly threatened that she was from an important family, to which Amir replied that he also had tribal and political connections who would back him. But that was not his point; he did not accept “backward” behaviors, such as using one’s tribal affiliation to flout the rules of his

modern gym. My gym co-workers agreed with the manager's assessment of the situation, and we never saw the angry woman in the gym again.

*Modern gyms make modern subjects*

When Hadid the Turkomani bodybuilder first opened his gym in Erbil, he permitted both women and men to become members and to use the space simultaneously. Hadid's gym was in an older, residential-style building, upstairs from a sweets shop. Hadid managed to cram an impressive amount of weightlifting equipment and some cardio machines into one room, with a small office enclosed in a transparent plastic cubicle. At present, the gym served only men. "Why no women?" I asked, uncomfortable at being the only female in a crowded male-only gym. I was sitting with Hadid and his friend in their tiny office visible to everyone in the gym. Men exercising glanced toward us. Hadid and his friend chuckled at my question. It was "annoying" (مزعج), Hadid said, having to monitor his clients' behavior. He explained that the "large and expensive" gym where I taught indoor cycling charged high membership fees so that it would attract "rich" people who knew how to behave in a mixed-gender space. A gym should correspond to its intended clientele; it should have the appropriate "type" (Ar. نوع also can mean gender). His type of people were the "old" type, men who will "stare if a woman comes to the gym. They will not exercise."

Gyms dealt with the "problem" of gender in two ways: Some gyms operated in shifts, with women (people whose social position is "female" or "female-presenting") using the gym in the morning and early afternoon and men using the gym in the late afternoon and evening. Gyms with separate shifts for men and women were not considered "mixed-gender" or "mixed" (people used the English word "mixed" or



Kurdish “*tékala*”). Mixed gyms typically featured a large hall in which men and women exercised together, as well as a smaller hall designated for women only. During my fieldwork, there were at least five “mixed-gender” gyms operating. Newer, “modern” gyms, particularly mixed-gender gyms where men and women exercised in the same space, offered a template for a modern Kurdistan that values women’s experiences and contributions: Gym-going was said to remedy stressors unique to women, such as childbirth; one woman cited her botched cesarean surgery as evidence of the collapsing state healthcare system (Dewachi 2017) and her primary reason for gym-going. More generally, gym-going provided an outlet for women frustrated by cultural practices that restricted their mobility. Gendered experiences also were linked to “modernity”: Women, and men, typically contextualized gendered aspects of bodybuilding and gym-going within a larger discourse about modernity in the Kurdistan Region.

A “modern” healthy lifestyle was characterized by a commitment to gym-going and to proper nutrition. Global fitness culture brought not only health benefits, but also a space in which youth and women enjoyed more mobility and could pursue self-actualization. Gym-going facilitated friendships, significantly across sects. A pair of female friends, one Christian and the other Muslim, emphasized to me that, although their families pressured them not to associate with people from other ethnoreligious groups, at the gym the women felt comfortable socializing. They regularly spent hours hanging out there, as I observed many young people, particularly women, enjoying the relative freedom of the gym. Fitness centers also facilitated some romantic relationships: One gym owner-manager was proud that his mixed-gender gym had produced some “good marriages” between clients. Gyms offered a space in which mainly young people, who

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Furthermore, gyms provided an experimental zone in which people challenged deeply-rooted social organization, such as power and status based on tribal affiliation. In one memorable episode, a woman belonging to a well-known tribe and political party was banned from the gym. For some time, she had been antagonizing a foreign worker employed to clean the women's locker room and exercise area, making demands and ridiculing the employee. When the foreign worker finally informed the gym manager, Amir, he publicly confronted the accused woman in the gym lobby and told her that such behavior was unacceptable in his gym. Furious, the woman loudly threatened that she was from an important family, to which Amir replied that he also had tribal and political connections who would back him. But that was not his point; he did not accept "backward" behaviors, such as using one's tribal affiliation to flout the rules of his modern gym. My gym co-workers agreed with the manager's assessment of the situation, and we never saw the angry woman in the gym again.

Amir presented his mixed-gender gym as a "clean" and "healthy" space, unlike the male-only bodybuilding gyms marred by steroid use, weightlifters' loud grunting, and Eastern-style toilets that smelled bad. The first attempts at opening mixed-gender gyms in Erbil, Amir explained, lacked "good hygiene" because they continued using Eastern-style toilets and lacked professionalization because steroid use was rampant. Conversely, the intentional design of Amir's fitness center instructs clients in navigating a modern space. For example, Amir said that people will see that the gym "invested a lot of money installing Western style bathrooms" and would understand that gym members likewise

should practice good hygiene. Gym members would complain to me sometimes if a new member did not practice what they considered good hygiene, particularly if a person's body odor indicated she did not use deodorant or wash her gym clothes frequently enough. Especially during the blisteringly hot summer months with infrequent air conditioning, body odor was a problem. Often, the deliberate non-use of deodorants was said to be a habit of pious Muslims who did not believe in using them or was said to be a result of poor education. I frequently overheard gym members evaluating the correctness of others' grooming and behavior.

The mixed-gender design of the space also suggested where and how men and women could interact: A common entrance, reception desk, and shared lobby was open to all. The sleek layout included cushioned chairs for lounging and tables for men and women to sit together if they chose, with flat screen televisions broadcasting sporting events from Europe or the Middle East. This spatial arrangement was very unlike the typical restaurants and cafes which segregated customers into a male-only section and a "family section" intended for males with females accompanying them. Young people often hung about the lobby in mixed-gender groups, talking, enjoying a beverage, casually observing other gym-goers, or taking a rest before or after exercising. From the lobby, separate entrances discreetly led to women's and men's locker rooms and bathrooms.

Adjacent to the lobby was an expansive exercise area enclosed in glass and available for both men and women to use for cardio, weightlifting, and personal training sessions. Passing through the lobby and into the female-only section, women had access to lockers, toilets, showers, a steam room, and an area to apply makeup or style hair. For

a time, a couple women offered nail salon services and hair styling there. Beyond the locker room was the “women’s gym,” a female only exercise room shielded by walls and hallways from the rest of the gym and the unwanted male gaze. On rare occasions and during the off-peak hours, the women’s area would be “closed” and empty of females, so that a man could service a piece of equipment or clean (if the female cleaner was absent). Some women pointed to the smaller space and older equipment as evidence that less importance was placed on the female-only area and female clients. Others suggested that this was because the gym management expected more women to use the mixed space. Amir explained to me that, although government regulations mandated that the gym be gender segregated, and that technically the “mixed area” was a male-only space, in practice Amir and the staff encouraged female clients to use that space.



Figure 11: Weights in the women’s section. Photo by the author.



Figure 12: Defunct stationary bicycles moved from the mixed-section to the women's section. Photo by the author.

Before fitness centers opened in Erbil, the only public access to gyms was in hotels. Women-only gym spaces had become necessary, Amir explained, because female clients could not use the fitness rooms in hotels:

Girls can't go to hotels, you know. You can't train in a gym in a hotel because people might say she is going in the hotel for sex, so you have these little restrictions all over. How are you going to meet [potential romantic partners]? At university? It's a closed-off society. Maybe here they are trying to open up a bit. It's like push and pull. On the one hand, alcohol shops are opening up, and clubs, and still they make the gyms segregated. I just think religion shouldn't have anything to do with business and politics. It should be completely separated.

Amir refers to government regulations which stipulate that gyms must be gender segregated, although at the time of my fieldwork there were, in practice, multiple gyms with mixed-gender exercise spaces.

Amir also complained about the official "bodybuilders' association," which licensed and inspected all gyms. He said this association was unused to dealing with the new, modern fitness centers and knew only how to deal with the traditional male

bodybuilding gyms. The stereotypical view of male bodybuilding gyms, Amir explained, was that they were unprofitable enterprises and fronts for steroid use; one member of the bodybuilders' association even asked Amir for kickbacks in the form of steroids for issuing a license. Recently the association had been pressuring Amir to install two separate entrances for two separate gym lobbies for men and women, and to enforce complete gender segregation. Outraged, Amir said there are "whorehouses operating on this same street" and the government was doing nothing about them while his mixed-gender gym had facilitated some good marriages. (Indeed, not long after my interview with Amir there was a police raid on some of the nearby businesses which employed foreign women, allegedly for prostitution.) Gender segregation was "abnormal" and "culturally forced," Amir argued, and inane government regulations and corruption demonstrated a backward mentality.

My sense is that having a functional, mixed-gender exercise hall was very important to Amir, and perhaps to other mixed-gender gym owner-managers in Erbil, because it validated his vision of a modern gym and a modern society. The gym served as a template for a modernized Kurdistan society, while at the same time relying on "traditional" social structures and cultural practices to maintain order. For example, the mixed-gender space was visible and easy to surveil because it was one large open space enclosed in glass. At any given time, at least one personal trainer was working in the mixed-section, and they reported any undesirable behavior to gym management. One of the employees told me that any time a male gym-goer appeared to focus on watching female gym members exercise rather than focusing his own exercise, a staff member quietly asked the man to stop watching female gym-goers or leave. The mixed-section

space, designed to be “modern” and intended for “modern” clients, was not for “checking-out” other gym members.

Gym management told me they tried to prevent inappropriate behavior by “screening” gym membership applicants. Membership application forms collected information such as education level and employment status. Management also could evaluate potential gym members based on their name and tribal or political affiliation, as these kinds of categories and relationships “are strongly relevant in people’s everyday experience in the region” (King 2018: 305). Often, this information was common knowledge, or it could be obtained quickly and discreetly by asking around.

### *The women’s gym*

During peak evening hours, as many as 30 or 40 people, men and women, exercised together in the mixed hall, with each person usually focused intently on his or her individual training. Conversely, in the women’s only sections of gyms I visited, the atmosphere was relatively quiet, even lethargic: Women hung about the fitness equipment in groups, sitting on weight benches and chatting. Maybe one or two women would be exercising. It seemed to me that in the gym where I worked, the female personal trainers and some members discouraged socializing if it interfered with others’ ability to use space and equipment.



Figure 13: Women socializing in a very small female-only room inside a mixed-gender gym. A camp for IDPs can be seen through the gym windows. Photo by the author.

In my gym, when the women’s area was crowded in the evenings, women who might be there primarily to socialize were displaced by women who came primarily to exercise. Some of the more “serious” members complained to me about “lazy” women who were not trying hard enough and taking up space.

I learned that many allegedly “lazy women” came to the gym to socialize and to take a break from social obligations related to family, neighbors, or guests. The gym (and women’s area especially) was one of the few spaces where young people were allowed (by their family) to hang out for hours, albeit in the confined and monitored space of the women’s section. Some women I met were attempting to lose weight, control their diet, and sometimes make changes to their lifestyle. Many of these women were discouraged, often because of the central role traditional, “unhealthy” foods played in bonding with



family and friends. It was difficult to avoid eating these foods without offending others. I learned from conversations with these women that they sometimes compensated for their unwanted caloric intake by regularly participating in two or three group fitness classes in a row, or by using cardio machines for long periods. (Some of my most insightful exchanges at the gym happened when I hopped on a cardio machine beside a woman who was exercising for an hour or more and was interested in talking.)

Some of the more ambitious women who regularly frequented the gym used the mixed-hall and hung out in the mixed-gender lobby; they seemed to enjoy more mobility in general than their peers who used only the female exercise room. Ambitious women typically were university graduates, from wealthy and well-connected families, pursuing careers and delaying marriage. Often their gym-going stemmed from what I consider a “modern” disposition in which self-actualization was championed, sometimes at the expense of other areas of one’s life.

Many women (and some men I talked with) found it difficult if not impossible to reconcile their personal health goals with cultural practices that restricted their mobility and promoted an undesirable diet; in some cases they were straining relationships with others to a breaking point. From my conversations with these “ambitious” women, an ideal type of “good” person emerged: The ideal, modern Kurdistani female takes charge of her life in whatever ways she can, such as pursuing a “healthier” diet and exercise routine. Higher education, sometimes for the express purpose of delaying marriage, was more accessible and feasible than making changes in other areas, such as moving out of her family of origin’s household and renting her own place. Other potentially contentious individualized acts included wearing Western-style clothing, driving, riding a bicycle,

and pursuing a career. Young women engaged in these kinds of self-actualization activities often found like minded people at the gym, where they formed moral communities to support each other.

### *Exercising for self, society, and nation*

Self-actualization is central to the “ideal” or “modern” Kurdistani young person, though the means of self-actualization vary based on gender as well as class. Becoming a modern person did not necessarily mean abandoning all aspects of cultural or religious identity and practices. Although some people avoided certain traditional foods deemed unhealthy or challenged cultural norms, they nevertheless accepted, and in some cases celebrated, their ethnoreligious or ethnonationalist identities. One of the more radical young women I knew, Tablo, explained to me that she undertook both higher education and physical fitness training “for her country.” When Tablo earned her Masters degree in 2019, she posted on social media that she “did it all for Kurdistan.” Like many Kurdish people of her generation, her family was displaced and she spent the majority of her childhood in refugee camps or communities in other countries. Aware of the high possibility of renewed conflict, Tablo trained at the gym so that she would be physically fit and prepared to “defend” herself and her country. Although Tablo may have been exceptionally positioned and patriotic, I heard many young Kurdistani residents express similarly assertive attitudes toward self-actualization. Many young men and women considered their participation in mixed-gender spaces like the gym as their contribution to improving the health, gender equity, and development of Kurdistani society.



Figure 14: “Women-only” section within a “mixed-gender” gym. Photo by the author.

Gyms provided an experimental space for women, and men, to push boundaries and sometimes to flout them altogether. Most female gym members arrived quietly, only pausing in the lobby to greet acquaintances, and immediately proceeded to the women’s locker room to change into their exercise clothes. For some women, the gym lobby and the mixed-section were their catwalk. (The same could be said of many men who seemed to make a show of their weightlifting and muscle-flexing.) Sometimes a woman arrived wearing a flowing, sequined abaya and gold jewelry. Less frequently, a woman might enter the lobby wearing tight Western-style clothing, stilettos, and sport heavy makeup, manicured nails, and coiffed hair like she had just gotten a blow-out at one of the many salons in the affluent neighborhoods near the gym. After changing into tight leggings and tops, these heavily-made up women might proceed to the mixed-section. There they

selected a cardio machine facing away from the rest of the room. Their ears were enveloped by the large, colorful Beats-style headphones so popular at the time, suggesting that they were not at the gym to interact with anyone (but probably there to be seen). Kurdistan women who worked out in the mixed-section provided fodder for gossip over in the women's section, where many women were nevertheless just as carefully or elaborately groomed.

As I regularly spent hours in the lobby typing-up fieldnotes, I observed the rhythms of the gym. Early afternoon very few people visited; staff paced around, chatted, or played on their phones. A couple women might use the women's section during this time. The gym traffic gradually picked up, peaking between 6 to 8pm. Because men often traveled to and from the gym wearing their exercise clothes, it was difficult for me to ascertain whether or not those men were employed. I also had the impression that employment didn't matter for these well-connected, wealthy youth who parked their luxury vehicles in the best spaces outside the gym. But career-women who entered the gym wearing Western-style professional clothing were easier to identify. Bahoz, for example, often arrived impeccably dressed in pantsuits and heels. She worked as a personal assistant to a high-ranking government official whose staff included several women. Bahoz gushed about how kind and respectful her Kurdish boss was with his female staff; she was proud that he held progressive views.

Despite being ethnically Kurdish, Bahoz once held a very low view of Kurdish culture and Erbil society. She arrived in Erbil in the mid 2000s, after her brother was killed during a wave of sectarian violence and the family fled to the Kurdistan Region. Bahoz was shocked by her new home, a "small village" compared to cosmopolitan

Baghdad, where she was accustomed to going out and mingling with a diverse group of friends and acquaintances. Baghdad was so “free” for Bahoz and her family that her father drank alcohol with his friends in public. However, Erbil at that time had no public places for unchaperoned women to socialize, and public alcohol consumption was shameful. Bahoz spoke only Arabic because all her family had been educated in Arabic and living in Baghdad for generations; she spoke Arabic with her parents, not Kurdish. Erbil residents gawked at her blue jeans and shorter skirts. “They thought I was an Arab,” she laughed.

Bahoz adapted to life in Erbil, dressing more conservatively and learning not only Kurdish language, but also cultural appreciation and political views. Her experience of growing up Kurdish in Baghdad was positive overall, so when her Erbil colleagues and friends criticized former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s regime, Bahoz was quick to defend it. She soon realized that politicking, such as expressing empathy and participating in criticism, was crucial for her career advancement. She smiled wryly, saying to me, “Sometimes you have to go the way of people. Sometimes you have to change.” In Kurdistan society, especially in her government job, Bahoz carefully moderated her speech, dress, and behavior. Bahoz was 30, unmarried, ambitious, and seemed content with how her life in Erbil had unfolded, largely because of how much Erbil had developed in the decade she had been living there.

Development brought restaurants, cafes, and gyms, public spaces where women with means could express themselves more freely. “I think [the gym] is the only place where I really feel free,” Bahoz reflected. Gym members created what Bahoz called a “different society,” in which men did not stare at women, and people belonging to

various ethnoreligious groups and competing political parties exercised politely, if not amicably, together. Bahoz was excited to see similar progress in Sami Abdulrahman Park, a large green space in the center of Erbil with running and walking paths, a rock climbing wall, gardens, fountains, and ample space for picnicking. In the cool evenings, Sami Park offered a fresh, green retreat from the otherwise dusty, polluted, and hot city. Increasingly, women used the park's walking and running paths for exercise and socializing.

The mixed-gender gym represented a possible future for Kurdistan, one in which women might increasingly be accepted in other public spaces and roles. Although Bahoz enjoyed her political job, she was considering shifting to another career. For years Bahoz had struggled to find acceptable Western-style professional clothes, such as pantsuits, to wear in her high-status government job. She dreamed of opening a store specializing in outfitting Kurdistanian career-women. Several shops for men had opened in the past couple years. "Mr. Erbil," for example, offered the latest European fashions for dapper young Kurdistanian men, as well as a barber shop and luxury cafe. Nothing like this existed exclusively for women, who would need such services if their roles in Kurdistanian society continued to expand.

### *Romancing and cloistering at the gym*

My friend Viyan, Kurdish and in her mid-20s, also expressed an interest in opening more female-centered businesses. She had the necessary social and political connections to obtain a business license and attract investors easily, she told me. From the way she dressed and carried herself, I suspected Viyan was important from the first time I saw her sashay into the gym lobby. She belonged to a respected and prominent

tribe. A recent university graduate, Viyan worked for a Kurdish non-governmental organization dedicated to helping young people find employment. She drove herself to and from work, the gym, and mixed-gender cafes where she liked to socialize with friends. Although women increasingly drove cars in Erbil, it was still considered new and still attracted unwanted male attention. Many times, when a female friend was driving and I sat in the passenger seat, men would stare at us at intersections or as they passed us in their vehicle. My friends would apologize, saying it happens to them all the time and they hate it.

Like many young women I encountered at gyms, Viyan described her family as both progressive and protective. Working at an NGO with political connections was commensurate with her status, which also seemed to protect her reputation while driving, gym-going, and cafe-hopping. She dressed tastefully but conservatively. She seemed equally comfortable wearing suits in modern, urban public spaces; wearing slinky outfits at house parties; or wearing a glittering, traditional Kurdish dress in the lush countryside surrounding her ancestral village, which she visited on holidays and weekends. Wherever she was, she acted like she owned the place and played the role of gracious host or patron. Her family trusted her greatly in permitting so much independence, though she sometimes tried to bend the rules.

Viyan was in a secret relationship with Rebwar, a Kurdish guy who also worked out at the gym. If they were at the gym at the same time, they interacted very little, giving the impression they were only acquaintances. They communicated mainly by phone, text, and private social media messages. About halfway through my fieldwork, Rebwar went abroad to continue his education and began acting evasive toward Viyan. He admitted to

her that he was going clubbing and “dating” women, but that nothing was “serious.” He repeatedly asked Viyan to promise that she would only use the women’s section of the gym, so that men would not look at her or talk with her. Outraged and hurt by Rebwar’s behavior, Viyan did the opposite: She ensured that she was seen hanging around the mixed-section and gym lobby, knowing that Rebwar’s friends would report this to him. Antagonizing her long-distance boyfriend was the only power she had in the relationship. She considered visiting Rebwar abroad; her older sister offered to cover for Viyan and travel with her, but not to allow her to stay overnight with Rebwar.

One evening Viyan and I were smoking sheesha (flavored tobacco in a water-pipe) at an expensive, mixed-gender cafe near the gym. We sat in the outdoor area, visible to the main road crowded with Land Rovers. With its expensive restaurants, cafes, and shops, the area was very much a “see and be seen” place. Viyan puffed serenely on her sheesha, talking about her upcoming work projects and her ideas for developing Kurdistan. I mostly listened. Then she mentioned Rebwar; it had been weeks since she said anything about him to me. She had agonized, cried, and confided in me about her woes. Now, in a dispassionate tone, she declared her relationship with him over; her family never would allow her to marry him anyway, preferring a more prestigious match. Before I could formulate a sympathetic response, Viyan gestured to a cafe that had just opened across the street. “We should go there next time,” she said, taking another drag of the sheesha. I recognized that this meant Viyan was finished being vulnerable with me, even if her experimental relationship with Rebwar may not have been severed completely. This was the kind of interaction I learned to expect with my young and wealthy interlocutors: One day they might express something radical to me, and the next



act as if they never said anything out of the ordinary. The mixed-gender gyms and burgeoning mixed-gender entertainment sector were places for experimentation, but perhaps not for implementation.

The gym, rather than being a revolutionary space, reproduced cloistering practices typical of Kurdistan and more broadly the Middle East (citations). Cloistering was achieved through using gender segregated schedules and spaces. Gym management promised hyper-vigilance and removed male members who apparently wanted to “look at women.” Although a group fitness classroom was shared by men and women, during women-only classes the room was locked to keep males out, allowing women to remove their hijab and wear less conservative exercise clothes. I learned how important these practices were to female clients when I once taught a female-only cycling class and forgot to lock the group fitness room door. To my and my female clients’ horror, a male staff member entered with a group of men interested in the gym. The women quickly averted their faces and reached for jackets. I rushed to the door to wave the men out, who were slow to leave. All the spaces in the mixed-gender gym ultimately were under constant male supervision; there was always a risk that something untoward might happen.

Cloistering practices extended to social media. Most young women I met were careful with their social media accounts. Many posted no self-identifying information, using a pseudonym and a stock photo like a rose for their profile picture. Women who posted images of themselves often obscured their faces and those of their friends. Some feared having their images circulated without their knowledge or digitally altered. I heard

cautionary tales about women whose images were digitally-altered by superimposing one woman's face on another woman's scantily-clad or naked body.

A few women I knew at the gym were bold, posting selfies wearing tight leggings and showing their faces, likely to a carefully curated social media audience. Those who could afford the exorbitant shipping rates ordered trendy activewear from Europe or the United States. Fitness instructors and personal trainers featured the latest activewear brands and trends on their social media. Social media increasingly circulates global fitness culture. Many of the gym-going women I knew carefully crafted a modern, stylish persona, constantly remaking themselves with every new opportunity that the city of Erbil presented. Their experimentation remained nonetheless limited and protected through cloistering practices in physical places as well as in social media. Attempts to push back against cloistering practices were risky, as in the Zumbathon story below.

### *The Zumbathon*

Ziyan shares a lot on social media: her latest fitness apparel, haircut, cafe-outing, or social or political cause. Most recently she has shared several clips of her appearances on Kurdish-language talk shows. As with many people, social media is the main platform for sharing her self-actualization efforts. Advertising herself as the “first Kurdish Zumba instructor” and the “first female Kurdish bodybuilder,” Ziyan attracts a strong following, including some detractors. Ziyan's followers loved to tell me about Ziyan's success story: while living in diaspora in Europe she became very overweight and unhappy with her life. She began attending Zumba group fitness classes, lost a tremendous amount of weight, and decided to become a Zumba instructor. Like many Kurds, she returned to Iraqi Kurdistan during the stable 2011-2014 period to make a new life for herself there.

When I first met Ziyar in Erbil, she had been leading female-only group fitness classes, primarily Zumba, at different gyms for a few years. Her classes were popular, and some of her clients followed her from gym to gym. I also began attending her classes; her enthusiasm was infectious. She joked, shouted, called out half-hearted participants, and praised women who were visibly working hard. During class she moved among the women, acting silly to make someone laugh or correcting someone's form. She deftly code-switched between Kurdish, Arabic, Farsi, and English for her diverse clients. Exercising alongside the class participants, she seemed to work harder than anyone, drenched in sweat by the end of every class. She also offered personal training, both at the gym and in private sessions, usually for women who wanted to train in the privacy of their homes. The location tags on her social media posts indicate that most of her personal training sessions are with women living in wealthy residential areas.

I had known Ziyar for a little over a year when her relative, a peshmerga soldier, was killed in the conflict with the Islamic State. Soon after this tragedy, Ziyar organized a "Zumbathon for Peshmerga" charity event. She produced a three-foot tall banner advertising a "female only" 2-hour event, and displayed the banner in the gym lobby. In the days leading up to the event, several women posted supportive comments on the Facebook event page. "My thoughts and peaceful wishes for all and most importantly for the brave lions and lioness[es], the Peshmerga," wrote one woman.

A local, English language radio station promoted the Zumbathon and hosted it in a large parking lot adjacent to the radio station. It was, much to my surprise, an outdoor event: In the parking lot, the organizers assembled a stage with lights. Crew members paced around with audiovisual equipment. To the side of the stage, a couple tables were

arranged for collecting donations and distributing water and snacks. The event banner and donation box flyer requested that people give “with their heart,” suggesting a minimum 5,000 dinar (about 4 US dollars) donation. Judging by the dozens of plates with bananas and oranges, the organizers expected a crowd.

The turnout was hardly a crowd: By 4pm, the event start time, only a handful of women had arrived and stood quietly chatting with their arms clasped across their chests. Beside me, Maha suddenly said, “This country will never change. This is all the people who come to this event? There should be more.” Maha, an Arabic speaker displaced from Baghdad, worked for a large humanitarian relief organization and attended group fitness classes almost every night. “Why do you think more people didn’t come?” I asked.

Maha: Because these things are still new, and many are too embarrassed.

Diana: Because it is outside?

Maha: Yes. Look, there are men around! [Pointing to a large delivery truck now parked at the edge of the parking lot, blocking the view of the event from a busy street] I asked them to put that lorry there so we could have some privacy. [Some of the women chuckle]

Indeed, several men were watching us from the grassy area across from the radio station. The station stood near the intersection of two busy roads. By Western standards, most of the women were dressed modestly in long-sleeve, tunic-length, loose-fitting shirts with loose pants or leggings; however, they felt exposed. Radio station staff asked the unwanted spectators to leave, but the men did not move. Throughout the event, they were joined by a few more male spectators. Ziyah mounted the stage wearing camouflage-print leggings and a highlighter-yellow sleeveless top that showed off her

powerful biceps. She beckoned the participants, now totaling 18 women, most of them Zumba class regulars, closer to the stage. Three women joined Ziyān on stage to lead choreography. Ziyān, in a quieter voice than usual, thanked everyone for coming to the event.

We began marching in place to a drumbeat, imitating Ziyān. The first song had a distinctly militaristic sound. The remainder of the tracklist I recognized from previous Zumba classes. We exercised/danced for two hours with a very short break halfway. As the sun set, the temperature dropped and the stage lights were glaring. A radio station drone buzzed overhead, recording the event. (I never learned whether the footage was made public in any form other than a couple short clips of the stage dancers on Ziyān's social media accounts.) Ziyān led most of the songs, sometimes trading her spot at the front of the stage with another dancer. English and Spanish pop songs included overt references to sexuality, per Zumba's "Latin dance" ethos. "I'm sexy and I know it - I work out!" blasted from the speakers. Another trainer at the gym led us in a dance with an embarrassing amount of hip-gyration, excessive even by Zumba standards. Ordinarily, in the privacy of the women's-only group fitness room, I would not have minded and would have found it to be silly, fun even. With so many strange men around, however, it was uncomfortable and cringeworthy; this spectacle might contribute to the "bad" reputation of Kurdistanī females who behaved in any way deemed too Western or inappropriate. Several of the women took a break during this dance.

By the end of the event, we were sweaty and shivering in the cool evening air. The transparent donations container was conspicuously under-filled. We posed for a group photo on the stage. Several women rallied around a disheartened Ziyān, reassuring

her that the event went well and that more people would participate next time. The group quietly dispersed, and one of the ladies offered to drive me home. She agreed that it was a disappointing turnout and shrugged. I suggested that it was too different from the regular Zumba classes, which were held in a female-only, protected space consistent with other cloistering practices I observed. Despite being advertised as a “female only event,” the Zumbathon was held outside, inexplicably, in a public space, exposing women to unwanted attention. Overt female sexuality was on display: Women, a few wearing tight-fitting exercise clothes, dancing to provocative Western pop songs, and shaking their hips for the peshmerga, the Kurdish nation, and potentially the internet, not to mention the unwelcome males watching from the sidelines.

Although it was a “female only” event, the Zumbathon seemed to be performed for a general Kurdish male gaze during a time of crisis for the nation: On the event banner (depicted above), Ziyān’s active pose mirrors the image of the male soldier bearing a Kurdish flag. The militaristic aesthetic of the event’s opening song and Ziyān’s camo-leggings suggested that the female participants marched in solidarity with the Kurdish nation. While many of the participants were ethnic Kurds, several of the women were Arabs displaced from Baghdad, or Iranians living in Erbil. I had the feeling that everyone was there primarily to support, not the Kurdish nation, but their role model and friend Ziyān.

### *Embodying the nation and gender anxieties*

The Zumbathon drew upon heavily circulated and popular imagery of Kurdish female militia fighting the Islamic State, images popular during my fieldwork. For example, in 2015 Kurdish performer Helly Luv released her English language

“Revolution” music video, which opens with a dramatization of ISIS attacking a village and Kurdish peshmerga fighting back. Female militia members feature prominently in the video. Helly, in a full face of makeup and acrylic nails, alternately marches in official military uniforms and dances in sexy camouflage attire with golden bullet-shaped jewelry and golden pistol-shaped heels. Western media outlets touted her as a “Kurdish warrior-diva” (Fordham 2015) “fighting the Islamic State with songs” (Austin 2015), noting her intentionally provocative displays of female sexuality, such as gyrating on top of a burned-out car amid shelling and machine gun fire.

Western media outlets and audiences, characteristically fascinated with images and stories of females defying stereotypical Middle Eastern patriarchy (Abu-Lughod 2002), played a large role in circulating Kurdish female fighter imagery. It is difficult to say how much of this originated in Kurdistan and how much was (re)circulation of an idea initially presented to a receptive Western audience. Nevertheless, the female fighter image resonated with many Kurdish people: Some of my first Kurdish acquaintances joked that I was in Kurdistan to learn the language so I could join a female Kurdish militia. They went so far as to organize an outing for me and my husband to practice firing weapons and dine with a couple of peshmerga soldiers. Sometimes I heard people speak about female Kurdish combatants with admiration. In the bazaar in the city of Slemani, I noticed a couple shops selling memorabilia of Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ). One seller displayed a large photograph of a rifle-bearing Asia Ramazan (Viyan) Antar, a famous female fighter killed in action, and, for many people, a symbol of the Kurdish cause and women’s rights.

It is well-known that nationalist discourses commission women as mothers, laborers or fighters in nation-building. Women are called upon to bear and to educate future citizens, to ensure the reproduction of an interiorized, sacred “culture” (Chatterjee 1993), and to perform modernity and signal the nation’s progress (Kanaaneh 2002; Özyürek 2006). Ziyan’s Zumbathon linked Kurdistanian women’s participation in the emerging fitness industry to the cause of the Kurdish nation and more subtly to women’s emancipation: Women not only contribute to the national cause, but also could and should do so in very public ways which defy traditional cloistering practices. Female participants, such as Maha, commented on the public nature of the event and how the low turnout reflected the conservative public order and failures of state-led modernization.

Although the Zumbathon event did not generate as much buzz and participation as its organizers hoped, social media offers an efficient platform to link a person’s individual cause(s) the national cause. During the time that I was getting to know Ziyan, she was getting more involved in the bodybuilding scene. She was training with a coach specializing in the sport and planned to compete in an international bodybuilding contest. Ziyan already promoted her Zumba classes and personal training sessions on social media. She also began posting frequently about her bodybuilding training: She demonstrated exercise methods; shared videos of herself working with her coach; posted professional photos of her flexed muscles; linked articles and video clips in which she was interviewed about her training; explained her strict diet; and promoted the supplements she took. In many of her posts, she reminded her audience that she was “the first female Kurdish bodybuilder.” The “Kurdish” aspect of that identity came to the fore in the months leading up to the Kurdistanian independence referendum.



During the last months of my fieldwork, many people were talking about the upcoming referendum for Kurdistan independence scheduled for September 2017. The referendum would demonstrate how many Kurdistan residents would support declaring independence from the Iraqi federal state. In August, Ziyān updated her facebook profile picture: It was one of her professionally-shot bodybuilding photos in which she faced a gym mirror wearing a sleeveless shirt that showed off her muscles. Like many Kurdistan people at the time, she applied a popular pro-Kurdistan independence filter to her profile picture. At the base of the filter were stripes in the colors of the Kurdistan flag red and an outline of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq with a sunburst. The caption reads “Yes for Kurdistan independence.” Ziyān also wrote a message in Sorani Kurdish for her followers:

As a sportswoman I say yes for independence, yes for the referendum, because success requires freedom and independence. I also want the time that I participate in a sports competition [bodybuilding] outside the country to say in a loud voice ‘as Kurdistan I participate.’ I will say ‘I am Kurd and Kurdistan.’ Not by the name of Iraq will I participate.” (Author’s translation from Sorani Kurdish)

Ziyān’s posts are, of course, consistent with countless examples of the sporting body’s emblematic portrayal as a competitor as fighting for the nation. Kurdish athletes living in Europe and the U.S. drape themselves with the Kurdistan flag and are admired back in Kurdistan. When I interviewed Hadid, the Turkomani bodybuilder and gym owner, I asked if there were patriotic sentiments at competitions or in the gym. “There is *iHtram* (respect),” he replied. “They respect the peshmerga by doing one minute silence for the martyrs before competitions. Sometimes they show the Kurdistan flag at international competitions.”

Ziyān’s participation in the national cause, however, was met with ambivalence. Loyal followers like Bahoz praised Ziyān’s strength and determination:

You see even more women are getting involved. They are paying attention to their muscles. They want to tone their body and be in shape. I see people visiting the protein shops, to get proteins, supplements, and vitamins. I think it's good. And in Kurdistan we have many athletes, and they are participating in the league, in bodybuilding championships abroad. And you know Ziyān, [smiles] she is a very good example for women. She's interested in bodybuilding, and her ambition is to be a champion.

Diana: That's really cool. Is she a model, an inspiration for you?

Bahoz: She inspires me. You feel there is a power inside her. It's not like she just wants to show off her body to people, like "I am a woman and want to show my muscles." There is something, an energy, a power. She really inspires me.

Others criticized how much attention Ziyān drew to her less-conservatively-clothed body. People posted negative comments on social media. Some people gossiped about her private life, speculating about how her bodybuilding and career might affect her marital status (she was not married).

Ambivalence about Ziyān often resulted from anxieties over her muscled body appearing "too masculine." Some women did not participate in her classes or want to train with her for fear of gaining too much muscle. They preferred another female personal trainer, Fairouza, who was not a bodybuilder. Although Fairouza did strength training in addition to cardio, she worked to maintain her curvy figure rather than to "shred" and build muscle mass. Presenting traditionally feminine was a shared concern among female clients and instructors: Both Ziyān and Fairouza regularly visited salons to maintain their blown-out and highlighted hair, substantial makeup, and 100-dollar acrylic nails. Both posted professionally shot photographs of themselves modeling sexy clothes, again to a curated social media audience.

For Kurdistanī females, the culturally ideal gendered body is cultivated through traditional expressions of femininity, domestic roles, and a particular aesthetic. Whereas

some of my female interlocutors aspired to the svelte body popularized by global fitness culture, others desired the hyper-curved figure popularized by reality television and social media influences (e.g., the American celebrity Kardashian family). Slight muscle-gains were acceptable for women but becoming too muscular was deemed unattractive. Likewise, the ideal Kurdistan female body must be protected. Long-standing cultural practices of cloistering restrict women's mobility in an effort to protect sexual "purity". Cloistering practices greatly hinder achieving the kind of body and individuality valorized by global fitness culture and by Western culture more generally. Global fitness culture promotes an ideal type of person produced through self-actualization that prioritizes an individual's physical health and resulting self-image. Self-image hinges upon health markers, such as weight or muscle-to-fat ratio, as well as upon a cultivated aesthetic according to one's gender and diet and exercise program (e.g., weight loss or bodybuilding). Messaging about health and fitness are also heavily individualized, placing the responsibility of achieving this lifestyle squarely on the shoulders of individuals.

Cultural practices like cloistering and homemaking, however, restrict women's ability to pursue self-actualization through going to gyms for exercise and socialization, especially in mixed-gender gyms. Cultural norms for hospitality and etiquette require women to be available in the home for the majority of the day. Everyday women spend hours preparing meals for the family and for guests; meticulously cleaning the home, especially in anticipation of social visits; and receiving and entertaining guests. Insisting on eating a non-traditional diet, eating at different times, or being absent from the home in order to pursue physical fitness all conflict with appropriate (gendered) behavior.

Kurdistani women, especially unmarried women, said their families worried about their reputation if they were away from the home too much. How could the family ensure their daughter would be well-regarded in the community if she is away from home too often, or does not eat like the rest of the family, or avoids social visits in order to maintain her diet and exercise routines?

Ziyan's participation in the male-dominated realms of bodybuilding and Kurdish ethnonationalism generated anxieties. During the months leading up to the referendum, I observed women both in conversation and on social media linking their individual causes, such as pursuing a career or fitness regimen, to national causes, like independence or developing the society or country. In that liminal period, heightened female visibility and mobility were tolerated if not celebrated: An independent Kurdistan would be a pluralistic and progressive society (unlike Iraq, as some of my interlocutors emphasized) in which the "first female Kurdistani bodybuilder" could be a national hero (albeit, an ambivalent one).

For a time, women like Ziyan increased their mobility by participating in the nationalist causes of independence and developing the nation. They did so by pursuing projects of self-actualization through education, careers, or hobbies, all of which increased their participation in the public sphere, decreased their time in the domestic sphere, and in many cases delayed marriage and children. The global fitness industry had arrived and evolved rapidly in Erbil, and a subset of Kurdistani women had played a big part in it: They convinced their relatives to permit them to join a gym, to travel to and from the gym, and to wear Western-style exercise clothing such as leggings. Of course, there were usually conditions. Some families permitted gym-going only if the gym had

women-only section; in some cases, families mandated that they only use the women's section. A woman might be permitted to travel to the gym with other women or to be chauffeured by a male relative or hired driver. Many women arrived and left wearing conservative outfits, changing into and out of their Western-style exercise clothes in the women's locker room. It seemed to me that even marginal freedoms led to greater expectations about women's position in Kurdistan society. Women looked to the examples set by female personal trainers like Ziyar, although attaining a highly individualized and public lifestyle like Ziyar's required sacrifices many people were not willing to make, especially after the transitional moment passed.

With the national cause decoupled from personal projects of ethical self-formation, the differences between competing ethical positions in contemporary Kurdistan became clearer. On the one hand, nationalist and Islamic ethical positioning typically cast women in more conservative roles as wives and mothers of the nation or religious community (Adely 2012; Hegland 2009; Joseph 1991; Kanaaneh 2002). During periods of social change or consolidation of power, states and institutions may elevate these "traditional" roles to national importance, and even expand them by including women in development. During such transitional moments, the values and goals of the state, civil society, and international actors overlap and can appear united in common cause, such as developing the nation and well-being of its citizens, and in common sentiment (a broadly humanist ethos).

During the conflict with ISIS, Kurdish ethnonationalist sentiment skyrocketed, as did distaste for conservative Islam for its associations with ISIS. Kurdistan women became central to the narrative of the Kurdistan Region as a counterpublic more

progressive than its neighbors (the rest of Iraq, or the Islamic State). For example, at Erbil's first bicycle marathon, officials gave speeches that noted how the Kurdistan Region was safe and progressive enough to include female cyclists (more about this marathon appears in the following chapter). In this "progressive Kurdistan" narrative, the ideal gendered Kurdistan body and the ideal gendered modern citizen overlapped. But after the failed referendum and the collapse of Kurdistan territorial expansion, the ideal body and ideal citizen clashed. Women like Ziyan, who had thrived during the liminal, transitional period, found their experimentations with mobility less welcome.

As scholars have noted (Das 1995), after the liminal, revolutionary moment passes, women in post-revolutionary societies often revert to their former roles as wives and mothers and in jobs traditionally performed by women. In the time since the failed independence referendum, I have noticed my female Kurdistan acquaintances gradually sharing less nationalistic and forward-looking content on social media. Instead, they have been posting more expressions of everyday, status quo femininity (new clothes, hair, makeup, etc.) in the usual social settings (home, salon, social gathering, etc.). Some seem to have decreased their gym-going or talking about their careers. A couple women, whom I have stayed in touch with since returning to the U.S., have told me that they have lost their motivation for self-improvement. Some have married. Of course, these behaviors are not attributable solely to the events following the referendum, which admittedly I have watched from a distance since concluding my fieldwork in July 2017. But if social media is any indicator of shifting attitudes, then it is significant that most of my interlocutors have fallen silent on these topics.

When the transitional moment passes (or fails), it becomes clear that these new, “modern” spaces like gyms and ethical practices like bodybuilding were not radically pluralistic spaces, but spaces in which people attempted to minimize the powers of family, sect, and state and to assert autonomy. I see the spaces and practices described in this chapter as something akin to a reform movement; in this comparison, the “modern” fitness center stands in for the “state”. In reform movements, people often continue to draw upon gender norms and social structures, which are, nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously incorporated into state power and effectively reproduce patriarchy. “While the state may seem to liberate women from private patriarchy, it may also cooperate with certain conservative constituencies to perpetuate this control,” Al-Rasheed argues in her work on the Saudi state (2013:4). The state may incorporate a “tribal ethos” into its framework, acting as national protector of feminine “honor” (Das 1995). Suad Joseph (1991; 1999; 2000) also has shown how state apparatuses, such as citizenship regimes, are predicated on notions of gender. Modern states in the Middle East conceptualize citizenship and govern family life with reference to patrilineal kinship (King 2018). Thus, both society and state have been mutually constitutive in reinforcing the boundedness of identity categories, and all that those categories entail, in legal codes and in social practice.

### *Ethical life in breakdown*

In this chapter, I have argued that bodybuilding and gym-going in Iraqi Kurdistan offer their practitioners two paradigms for thinking about ethical life, euphemized as “modern” and premised on radical autonomy, in Kurdistan: On the one hand,

bodybuilding and gym-going frame experiences of sectarian political cultures and the “failed” Iraqi state. In this narrative, the traditional male bodybuilder with muscles cultivated for “show” represents the old nation-building paradigm of Middle Eastern states. Kurdish bodybuilders are celebrated as heroes at home and abroad, where they carry the Kurdistan flag into international competitions. Hosting bodybuilding competitions in the Kurdistan Region has elevated its status, as it continues to behave like a state and aspires to statehood. So, the old bodybuilding as nation-building paradigm still carries weight.

Conversely, the new Kurdistan body politic my interlocutors envisioned would be pluralistic, tolerant, and modern, just like global fitness culture. Global fitness culture offers “real” or “functional” strength training to both men and women who exercise together in “modern” fitness centers, which symbolizes the aspirational “modern” and “pluralistic” Kurdistan state. Mixed-gender gyms would replace the old nation-building paradigm of bodybuilding. That hyper muscular bodybuilding paradigm was dismissed as a site of dirty, smelly gyms, outdated methods, dangerous steroid use, and ethnic, religious, and gender discrimination. It was all about “show” and not about “real strength” or “functional fitness” like in CrossFit. In this narrative, bodybuilding was as fake and corrupt as the Iraqi state.

“Modern” gyms offered a space where people “didn’t talk about religion and politics,” as many people said to me, because in the gym “they don’t matter.” But until that vision is realized (if ever), ethnic, religious, and political divides matter still. They matter in ways that foreign intervention and war have created or exacerbated, leading to a world that for many has “become unbearable,” as Jarrett Zigon (2018) has described



societies experiencing breakdown. Zigon argues that one way of dealing with breakdown is to cultivate “an ethics of dwelling,” which is “the response to an existential imperative emerging from a world that has become unbearable as a result of a particular situation that has led to the breakdown of this world.” In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, bodybuilding and fitness (as they are understood and practiced there) result from breakdown and a subsequent struggle to recover. Bodybuilding and gym-going offer people and society a path to recovery. Many of my interlocutors described their participation in global fitness culture as their contribution to building a better society. Through training in mixed-gender, diverse, and “modern” gyms, people removed themselves from the pressures of sectarian political cultures and from gender and ethnic discrimination. They advanced a pluralistic vision for Kurdistan with the mixed gym as a template for a strong, equitable civil society and an inclusive future Kurdistan state.

Bodybuilding and fitness cultures exemplify how state power is being remade in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although bodybuilding may seem backward or outdated to some, its performance of mastery and power appeals to the strong current of Kurdish ethnonationalism in the KRI. On the other hand, the expansion of fitness culture in Iraqi Kurdistan may seem like the mere encroachment of global capitalism, a new hobby for wealthy Kurdistan people. My sense is that, more deeply, global fitness culture and mixed-gender gyms tap into desires to “modernize” Iraqi Kurdistan and to create a more just and inclusive society.

Writing about Israel and Palestine, Jasbir Puar (2017) has illuminated how state power is configured through a debility – disability – capacity complex. War and displacement have weakened the social and political bodies (and in some cases,

individual physical bodies) through the process of “debility.” These same conditions of war, however, enable the championing of recovery. In Iraqi Kurdistan, bodybuilding and mixed-gender gyms are “capacity” success symbols of the strong/modern citizen in the patriotic/aspirational Kurdistan state. In this way, bodybuilding and gym-going are used, on the one hand, to frame experiences of the “failed” Iraqi state and sectarian political cultures. On the other hand, bodybuilding and gym-going are used discursively to champion the aspirational “modern” and “pluralistic” Kurdistan state. People seek to work out the weaknesses of self and society through virtuous practices of bodybuilding and training in mixed gender gyms. And yet these very ethical practices are engendered by the state and social breakdown which have made them both possible and necessary.

## Chapter 5: “There is no future”

*“Go and look at all the failures, disappointments, blood and suffering in this city...My dear brother, imagination is not a path, as you would have it. Rather, it is a secret door we run through when our houses are set alight.” – Bakhtiyar Ali, I Stared at the Night of the City*

### From my field notes, January 2016

In the cafeteria, 12-year-old Naza sat by herself with her head hung over her bowl and juice box. I pulled up a chair and sat beside her. We made small talk for a few minutes. Suddenly, Naza said, “Miss, do you think things will ever get better here in Kurdistan?” Her eyes were large and solemn. My heart ached to hear her question.

I thought for a moment and said, “That’s a good question. Can I hear what you think first, and then I will tell you what I think?”

Naza replied, “My parents think we should go to America. If my dad can get the *iqama* (residency permit) there, we will go. Maybe we won’t have much money there, but it is safe. Last year I heard a bomb and thought maybe my dad died. There was a bomb near these cafes. There was a car that drove up to the [U.S. Consulate] and when they saw it coming, they made the bomb go off. I was at home and heard the sound and felt the house move like this. [She made a shaking motion.] I was afraid to move in case the house fell. My dad was out of the house and I didn’t know where. Then I stood up and went outside and saw some smoke. I started crying and said maybe our dad was hurt. He was out of the house. I didn’t know where he was. My [older] sister saw me crying and said I should stop crying, that it was nothing. She has no feelings. So, I called my dad, and he was ok. But the street with all the nice cafes that my mom says are like Europe, they were all destroyed. We went to see them. Mom said that it was too bad because that was such a nice street and now all those cafes are gone.”

I listened and waited for Naza to say more. When she didn’t, I said to her, “My wish, my prayer, is that Iraq would have peace.” Naza looked at me expectantly. I hesitated. After a moment, I continued, “I think Iraq is a wonderful country. I mean, most of the people here are so nice, so welcoming, so lovely. The land is rich with oil, but the people are poor. There are so many problems, fighting over the oil, over the money, over the land...”

Naza interjected, “Yes, we watched a documentary about Mesopotamia, and this girl in the documentary said, ‘This land is cursed.’”

I waited. Naza’s eyes were so large, so sad. “I don’t want to go,” she said in a small voice. “I don’t want to leave this school or my friends.”

### Field note, February 2016

I went to the school cafeteria and ordered a pizza. I asked a group of three girls, seventh graders, if I could join them. They brought up the topic of diaspora. The most vocal of the

girls said, “This country isn’t good anymore. It was good, but they’re making it bad for us. It is expensive to live here. **This country has no future.** That’s why so many people are leaving.”

Field note, March 2016

Rezan [ninth grade] saw us from a distance and walked over to join us. I told Rezan, “We were just talking about the *komalayatî* class.”

Rezan said brightly, “Oh I love that class, Mr. Karza is so good to us. At first, I thought he was strange, but I really like how he teaches us.” Rezan does participate more than any other student in her *komalayatî* class; she asks many questions. “We learned about a man who pushed a rock up a mountain, but it kept falling back down,” Rezan explained. “Mr. Karza said to keep trying to push the rock back up, it is not hopeless. He said not to give up just because of the government and the problems in our country.”

Then Rezan mentioned that she will be leaving the school, either for Ishik or one of the British schools.

“Why?” I asked, surprised.

Rezan said, “**There is no future here for us.**”

“Do you want to leave Kurdistan?” I asked.

“Yes, maybe to Canada because there is no future here. The political situation is hopeless here.”

“What is the voting age here [in Kurdistan]? I asked.

“18,” she replied. I asked her if she will vote when she is 18. “Probably not,” she said, “because it doesn’t matter.”

Field note, April 2016:

Chira, grade 8: If our country stays like this, **we probably don’t have a future.** Our country is kind of selfish and dirty.

Ahmed, grade 8: Miss, all these bad situations happen from no teamwork. All of Iraq doesn’t help its people, its environment, its population, anything. They just work for themselves.

Chira: Miss, when he said there is no teamwork: People have lost hope so much, if you tell them we can work together, [they say] no. People have no hope. **The problem is we don’t have a future here.**

Ahmed: All the people will go to other places and leave this place. Miss, now the situation is very bad. There are peshmerga fighting, and people are leaving. **I don’t think there will be a future.** After 100 years, maybe there won’t be a country,

Field note, May 2016

Gulistan, grade 10: Yeah, a lot of them are talking about moving, hoping to move, wishing to move. Because the things that are happening now, there is no hope that is gonna get better. Nobody knows what is gonna happen. It's not safe. The politicians are all playing with each other. And the politics, no one is willing to help unless it is benefitting for their own selves. It's politics. It's dirty. Nothing is clear about politics. **You don't know your own future**, so many are trying to move.

Field note, June 2017

Diana: Yesterday, the government announced they are going to have an independence referendum in September.

Abbas [male, 30s, security contractor]: This is to make people busy, for some reason only [the government] knows. This came out of nowhere.

Diana: What about the future of the rest of the country?

Abbas: **Oh no, no future. No future.** I think in the end, it will be a federal thing. Shia will take their side. Sunni will take their side. The central government will stay, at least in front of the world, as one government. I think it will be just federal areas like Kurdistan.

Throughout this dissertation, we have witnessed people grappling with various models for ethical life. Because ethical behavior in the present is typically premised on certain conceptualizations of the “future,” interlocutors deliberate over their present moral obligations regarding that future. Based on their view of the world, they debate the merits of action or inaction, with reference to a this-worldly, “immanent frame” (Taylor 2007), or to a transcendent one. Competing or overlapping ethical regimes pressured and pulled people in different directions toward different conclusions. They wrestled with complexities, contradictions, and confusions. They spoke of doubt and hope. They said there is a future, or there is no future. More of them concluded the latter. In this chapter, the interlocutors do most of the talking. Much of their ethical deliberations involved “myths” about multiple pasts, presents, and futures.

This chapter listens to interlocutors recount their experiences in three types of spaces – education, work, and fitness – and reflects on how the “failures” of state, society, and even “modernity” itself led to deep personal disappointments. The spaces interlocutors inhabit are said to be, or at least aspire to be, modern, inclusive, or pluralistic. The people who create and inhabit these “pluralistic” and “modern” spaces express hopes that their efforts contribute to the betterment of individuals, their communities, and their country. In Chapter 3, for example, Kurdistan Civilizational School (KCS) co-founder Yakub Boutros explained how KCS was intended to create a “shared ethic” that would help rectify “sectarian” practices that begin in childhood, like when the Iraqi government segregates schoolchildren according to perceived ethnoreligious identity but, in many cases, still subject all the students to Islamic majoritarian values.

This was the nature of Deena’s K-12 education. Deena, an Assyrian Christian woman in her mid-30s, believed that a university education would help people become “open-minded.” Although Deena describes some positive experiences, her repeated encounters with “sectarianism” at university and in her workplace lead her to conclude that interfaith, cross-cultural, or political dialogue in Iraq is futile. Instead, she withdraws into a small circle of like-minded friends with whom she can share her opinions, and she finds another sphere in which to work on self-cultivation: the gym.

Ashti, introduced in this chapter, is a Kurdish woman in her 40s, who, despite her limited formal education, has read widely, learned multiple languages, and lived in Europe. She described feeling divinely “called” to return to Kurdistan, where she hopes that she can contribute to Kurdistan’s development. She expected that globalization and

development in the years that she has been away will have increased access to knowledge and opportunities to improve oneself, one's community, and one's country. In her job as a teacher in a government-run school, she finds instead youth who express resignation and lack motivation. She concludes that the deteriorating education system is partly the fault of the government, which seeks to make its citizens docile rather than empowered. Ashti wonders why she was "called" to return to a hopeless place, where she waits for a "future that is already here." The field note excerpts, vignettes, and lengthy quotes in this chapter allow interlocutors, in their own words, to describe the sense of failure in society, state, and modernity itself. While some interlocutors summon the resources to generate hope for a future, others cannot or do not, resigning themselves to making do in a "stagnant" present and looking toward an uncertain future, or worse, no future.

### *The myth of Sisyphus*

In one *komalayatî* (social studies) lesson, the teacher, Karza, told the class a story in which a poor man had three apples. He bit into the first apple; it had a worm, so he threw it aside. He bit into a second apple, and it also had a worm, so he threw it aside. Then he turned the light off and bit into his third apple. Why? Karza asked. A few students suggested answers. A boy in the back of class said, "Because he is poor and hungry and has to eat, so he doesn't want to see the worm in the third apple." Karza smiled and pointed to the boy in the back. "Is happiness inside you or from outside?" Karza asked. The students were unsure. He then asked the students what they wanted to be when they grew up. He also asked the students what they wanted to see in their country after ten years. Some students said they did not know, while others named high-status jobs like doctor or engineer.

The teacher's questions prompted many students to share frustrations about Kurdistan and Iraq; some insisted things would not improve. In response, Karza wrote "Albert Camus" on the board and related Camus' essay on the myth of Sisyphus. Camus writes,

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor...

Karza asked the class what most people would do if they were Sisyphus; would they keep pushing the rock back up the mountain only to see it fall again? One girl insisted that no, most people would not keep trying. Karza disagreed, arguing that most people would keep trying rather than give up or self-destruct. He encouraged the class not to give up even though problems in their government or country seem impossible to solve. Karza's philosophy is summed up in the conclusion to Camus' essay:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn... It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men... All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him... This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy (1991: 23-24).

Life ultimately may be absurd or futile, Karza told the class, but the person who realizes this futility is freed to be the master of his personal fate. Karza's lessons implicitly critiqued attitudes of resignation about Iraq's problems, and instead offered



encouragement to confront those problems. He admonished students to reject ignorance, to turn on the light and look at the worm in the apple.

For the students, Karza modeled how an intellectual approach, including reading widely and thinking critically, offered an alternative way of learning, and thus living an ethical life, that was not governed by religion, cultural rules and social expectations, or by ethnonationalism. His lessons were a radical departure from the traditional authoritarian culture of classrooms in government schools and in some private schools. At KCS, notably I observed this authoritarian style of teaching mostly among the ethnic Kurdish teachers who were trained in government teaching colleges. These teachers seemed very like the ones I observed in government schools. Far from a tyrant in the classroom, Karza modeled humility. Saryan, a girl in grade 8, said, “[Karza] cares about history, and he cares about educating himself. He has a library full of books...And he cares about learning, teaching the students, and he’s trying to improve as a teacher. He tells us to let him know if he makes a mistake.” Although I do not know why Karza did not return to teach the following year, I suspect it may have something to do with his unconventional pedagogy. Choosing to turn on the light and see the worm has consequences.

### *Facing a (non)sectarian future*

The myth of Sisyphus was not the only myth that appeared in lessons at Kurdistan Civilizational School. The Grade 10 English Literature students spent most of the semester studying C.S. Lewis’ *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, a retelling of the Cupid and Psyche myth. The class typically read and discussed one or two chapters per week. (I found that students’ English comprehension levels varied, though most students

were able to understand the plot of the novel; students whose entire education had been taught in the English language at KCS demonstrated exceptional reading comprehension.) The novel is set in a primitive, pagan society in which the protagonist, Orual, and her sister Psyche live. In the first part of the novel, Orual gives an account of her life documenting the gods' injustice toward her. The second part, narrated by an older Orual, is a reconsideration of her accusations against the gods and a realization about human self-deception and fallibility vis-a-vis the gods. Like most of Lewis' work, the book contains Christian themes and is essentially a redemption narrative in which the main character experiences a conversion from a state of unbelief in the goodness and rightness of the gods' actions to a state of belief. I had read the book a few years prior to my fieldwork, and my sense is that these themes are likely evident to someone from a Christian background.

Grade 10 Literature class was, however, taught by a Muslim teacher to a majority Muslim student body, which resulted in some unorthodox interpretations of Lewis' book. Generally, elements of the book that seemed thematically Christian were interpreted broadly as moral lessons without any acknowledgement of or reference to the Christian content. Jamila's approach to teaching *Till We Have Faces* primarily as a nonsectarian morality tale permitted her to approach any potentially sectarian religious content within a broader narrative, one which might be shared by "believers," that is, theists in general. Perhaps her framing accords with an Islamic concept, "People of the Book," which recognizes Islam's kinship with other monotheistic religions with holy texts.

In one lesson, Jamila handed students a paper with an image of a sculpture of Psyche and Cupid. On the other side of the handout was a summary of the myth of Cupid and Psyche. Jamila directed her students to examine the statues' faces.

Jamila: It's not always about how we look. If someone is gifted with beauty, but they are ugly inside, you will see the ugly. Our faces reflect who we are. You know how when you see someone, maybe another student and you tell your friend or your Mom, 'oh she is so beautiful,' but your mom says 'no she is just ok.' Why do you think she is beautiful? Because of how you feel about her. What about Orual? What does she want, in chapter 1?

Zayn: To meet with the gods.

Jamila: Yes, exactly. She wished the gods would answer her questions. She wanted a court, a judge higher than the gods themselves, because she thought she would win if she could present her case to them. Why? Because she felt her life was unfair. [A student said this was because her mother died when she was young and her father was hard, and because she was considered ugly.] Last time, we agreed that we cannot blame the God for the things that happen. So now tell me this: Why can't we see our God? [The students hesitated. She raised the pitch of her voice.] We are analyzing the story. Try to understand it and enjoy it. That doesn't mean we are feeling the same way as Orual or we are C.S. Lewis.

Serbest: What makes us so special that we should see God?

Jamila: Ok, that is one way to look at it.

Serbest: He is everywhere, but He can't show himself to everyone. He shows himself to special people only, like saints and prophets.

Jamila: Why can't I see the gods and have an argument with them? Why can't I discuss my case with them? That is what this story is about. Do we blame or appreciate...?

Hawar: You know what I believe? Each of us has a part of the soul from God, right? My theory is that when you talk to some good person, you see God in that person.

Gulistan: Or if you have a friend who lives far from you, you can talk to them through praying, through thinking of them.

Layla: It is impossible to see God when someone is running away from Him.

Jamila, approvingly: Exactly. If I feel his presence, his being, I won't care if I can see him or not. I already know him and see he is there. For Orual, she didn't have faith. She has a lack of principles and such confusion in her life. That's why she wants to see the gods. For me, I know he's there listening to me.

Hawar: Miss, it's always about faith and trust!

Jamila: You won't need to face him...

Hawar: You can see him in any good thing, in your father, in your mother...

Jamila: She [Orual] was confused, questioning the being of God. Now we know what the story is based on: faith versus reason. How is this related to the title?

Rida: Face and faith are the same thing. If you have a faith, you have a face to meet God.

Jamila: If we have a face, we are toward the light. But if we don't have a face, we will run to the shadow. We can't see God until we have faith in him. We're not able to believe in him until we have faith, a face...Augustine said that 'Running away from God is like running away from the sun. As you run from the light, you run into your own shadow.' What does this mean?

Layla: It's like when Adam and Eve sinned and they hid, they were living in their own shadow.

Jamila, hesitating: But that was because they had shame because they sinned, not because they didn't have faith.

Georges: You regret the sins at the end of your life, when you die.

Hawar: You don't see God in your mistakes until they become a disaster. Because after your whole lifetime you see the disaster.

Jamila: What is the simile here? 'God is like the sun.' Why does it take a whole lifetime?

Serbest: You create the shadow and go to the dark side by not following God in the light. Then you must pray.

Jamila nodded.

Thomas: At the beginning of your life, you are an innocent child, like a blank slate. But gradually you go away from the light and you realize your mistakes.

Belend: When your life ends you go back to the light.

Jamila: All these answers are wonderful. You all get a bonus point. God is the light. When you go off his path and run away to your own shadow, away from his rules, it takes a long time to know your mistakes. That's why the old people are the wisest. Have you ever noticed how the old people say, 'Please listen to me. Do not do this or that and these

consequences will happen. Avoid these bad things.' How do they know? Because they have lived their whole lives and know.

Hawar: There are some people as well who never pray all their life until they are old.

Jamila: Yes. Sometimes we are in the light, and sometimes we are in the shadow, as Thomas said.

Throughout the semester, Jamila presented the novel as a morality tale whose protagonist modeled both desirable and undesirable behaviors. Once she ascertained that her students had understood the plot, Jamila tended to focus episodically on characters' moral behavior, rather than to consider the larger character arcs, particularly of the protagonist. The novel's protagonist radically alters her interpretation of events; parts one and two of the book present nearly opposite interpretations of the protagonist's life and her relationship to the gods. Rather than analyzing how the relationship between humans and the divine changes throughout the novel, Jamila portrayed this relationship as static. For example, when discussing the concept of fate, one of the key themes of the novel, Jamila led students in a discussion about the ethics of trying to know and alter one's fate or destiny:

Jamila: Do you want to know what is going to happen?

Students: Yes!

Jamila: How will you know? Do you use horoscope, Zodiac?

Hawar: Yes, I read a lot of them.

Yakub: Someone I know went to see a prophet...

Jamila: Not a prophet, a seer...

Yakub: ....a seer, and he told him what he ate, if the electricity would go out...

Jamila: You do not need a seer to know the electricity will go out in Iraq! [class laughs]

Layla: No, no, it's like this guy who went and learned who he is going to be friends with, what will happen in his life, like this!

Jamila: No, I mean lucky numbers, reading horoscopes, like this...

Zayn: There was one that said in 10 years I will be a millionaire...or go to prison [class laughs]

Jamila: You will graduate university and go straight to prison! [more laughter]

Serbest: Some people look at the coffee...

Hawar: My uncle is obsessed with that!

Jamila: [Pause] Why do you think God didn't make us know our fate?

Serbest: Miss, it's a surprise! [laughter]

Jamila: What will happen if you know? There has to be a reason....

Zayn: You will try to change it.

Jamila: Yes, if I know I am going to be in a car accident, I will never go in a car again. Or a plane accident, I will never travel anywhere.

Yakub: You will give up living.

Jamila: So that's why we cannot know.

About one year after this lesson, a KCS student died tragically in a car accident. When I heard the news, this conversation immediately came to my mind.

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During the semester I spent in KCS, I joined Grade 10 for at least one of their lessons almost every day. I usually sat in an extra desk in the back of the classroom, often close to students Ashur and Rasim. Ashur and Rasim made an odd pair. They preferred to sit in the back of the room where they could whisper comments to each other throughout

their lessons. Ashur was a gangly kid who listened to his teachers with rapt attention, leaning forward in his desk and seemingly hanging on every word, though he did not speak aloud as often as his peers. His friend, Rasim, was even quieter; he did not like his classmates referring to him as “the next Einstein” or “nerdy.” Rasim tended to recline in his desk chair and sometimes put his head on his desktop; whenever a teacher called him out, he would demonstrate that, much to the teacher’s surprise or consternation, he had been following the lesson all along.

Both boys were children of university-educated parents from Assyrian Christian families. Their families had lived in the Christian township of Ainkawa for multiple generations, and the boys shared intellectual and religious interests. During class and in conversation with their peers, Ashur and Rasim appeared reluctant to express their opinions. I was puzzled by their reluctance and silence, particularly when their courses included overtly Christian content. During the weeks Grade 10 studied the novel *Till We Have Faces*, I watched the boys closely. I expected that, as self-identifying Christian students, Ashur and Rasim would at least contribute to the discussion, especially when opportunities arose to “correct” their peers’ and teacher’s understanding of the book. Both boys usually remained silent.

This was because Jamila, their teacher who identified as Muslim, did not solicit the boys’ opinions as “Christians” studying a “Christian” novel. Rather, Jamila framed the novel broadly as a morality tale. On one hand, Jamila’s broad ethical framing of the novel facilitated class discussions about morality: Fictional characters served as proxies through which students and their teacher could discuss morality, rather than directly discussing students’ actions, which were the subject of much gossip. For example, one

fictional character forcing another character to do something led to a broader discussion about obeying parents and individual choices. Although Jamila conceded that there were some appropriate contexts for students to make individual choices, she ultimately led the class to conclude that obeying one's parents and having respect for social norms is the general rule. After all, teaching general morality and ethics, not just "the Christian ethic," was one of the stated goals of the school, as one of the school's co-founders said to me in an interview in 2012.

On the other hand, discussing moral lessons from the novel also may have facilitated school authorities exercise of power over the students. Throughout the semester, I observed Jamila seeking information about students' personal lives, such as romantic relationships. Students said it was obvious that Jamila had favorites, and they speculated about which students shared gossip with their teacher. Sometimes, I was told, Jamila intervened in students' "private" affairs, such as by sharing the information she gleaned with other authorities in the school or with students' parents. Later in this chapter, I discuss Jamila's "game" called "confession chair," in which she prompted students to answer questions about (im)moral behavior (e.g., "Have you ever kissed anyone?") in a "truth or dare" format.

Toward the end of the semester, I interviewed Rasim and Ashur individually. When I mentioned *Till We Have Faces*, Rasim said, "It's phenomenal. This book is maybe the one that most has impacted me, maybe because I'm a Christian. Most of the students don't understand it. They don't understand that Orual was a sinner and she repented and was put right with God." I asked Rasim why he did not share his



interpretation of the book with his classmates; did students typically not discuss “controversial things” like religion among themselves?

He replied, “If someone talks about religion in our school, there is gonna be a fight, ninety percent.” (Recalling my group interview with grade 9 students that resulted in a scuffle between students, which is described in Chapter 3, I had to agree with Rasim’s assessment.) Rasim continued, “Some of my friends do, but if people, like in grade 11, talked about it, for sure there would be hatred and eventually lead to a brawl between them.” When I asked Rasim if anyone in authority ever told him or other students not to discuss certain subjects, he replied no, that students had learned to avoid these topics from experience.

When I asked Rasim’s friend Ashur about controversial topics in the school, Ashur replied in a similar manner, saying, “I don’t talk much about religion with other students. I don’t want to get in trouble. If you are a Christian, especially.” Considering that the private school acknowledges its foundation in “Christian classical education,” and that Ashur self-identifies as “Christian,” I found his answer surprising. When I pressed him to say more, Ashur explained that he “discussed religion with Rasim mostly, but if I talk with anyone else, I am afraid I’m hurting them. Because I would make them feel bad about things. So, I avoid it.” I had assumed, incorrectly, that students identifying as Christian might feel comfortable discussing Christianity in the school. I asked Ashur why he thought the school administrators included Christian content, such as *Till We Have Faces*, in the school’s curriculum:

Ashur: I don’t think we should have read this book here. It is mostly about Christian faith, although Ms. Jamila was giving us other moral tips. I didn’t want to share what I was thinking when I was in class. The discussion...well, she skipped some big important stuff. She wasn’t talking about the hidden themes that C.S. Lewis wrote about.

Diana: What would have you said?

Ashur: What I was thinking...the things in chapter 7. It was so emotional for me to talk about it. It presented something, like, bits of hope that nobody thought of. Like, you heard about Halabja and the chemicals [genocide]?

Diana: Of course.

Ashur: Many people sacrificed themselves to save their children.

Diana: The theme of sacrifice is what you are talking about?

Ashur: Yeah.

Diana: What do you mean about the hidden themes that Lewis was writing about?

Ashur: They showed more about how Orual's thinking was, like, wrong. Although she is talking a lot, Orual is most likely wrong. She is trying to prove she is right. But what if you are doing the wrong thing in every step you are [taking]? She didn't walk with what the gods gave her. She just thought she is right. Many of us do that and think we are doing the right thing and we're not.

Both Rasim and Ashur emphasized that the novel's protagonist, Orual, is a "sinner" and is "wrong." Ashur explained that readers should see themselves in Orual and realize they also are sinful. In class discussions, however, I did not hear this language applied to the protagonist. Instead, their teacher, Ms. Jamila, seemed to interpret Orual as an admirable character, praising her as an example of a strong female leader, rather than as a foolish, misguided sinner as Ashur and Rasim understood the protagonist. Jamila instead presented the characters' actions as generalized moral lessons. For example, she critiqued one character for his talking about "praying to the gods" despite the character's avowed atheism. "Many disbelievers are still using these words," Jamila told the class. "They don't believe, even today, but they still say '*inshallah*' and '*Allah kareem.*' They don't mean it but still say it." Jamila often asked students to imagine themselves in ethical dilemmas like those of the novel's characters, prompting the class to interpret

characters' choices as "right" or "wrong." While unbelief and hypocrisy were condemned, the teacher praised the protagonist for her individualism and perseverance.

I have discussed grade 10 students' lessons about *Till We Have Faces* at length because these lessons exemplify how contests of values play out in a space that is said to be "pluralistic," but which continues to be shaped by "sectarian" cultures. Religious beliefs and political opinions are negotiated in spaces portrayed as inclusive and secular, spaces such as a classroom containing a plurality of ethnoreligious identities. Although discussions may be intended to include and welcome all viewpoints, the way a teacher frames and guides the discussion can reinforce majoritarian views. In the examples above, the value of individual autonomous choice is superseded by the higher values of filial piety and respect for social and religious norms. Striving to ascertain or to alter one's "fate" or "destiny" is interpreted as a sacrilegious challenge to God's sovereignty. In these and other lessons I observed in KCS, individual agency is celebrated so long as it does not threaten dominant social and religious norms. Conversely, students in classes taught by displaced Christian teachers were encouraged to exercise their individual agency to change the course of their lives and the future. My intention here is not to generalize about theological differences between Christians and Muslims, but rather to point out how students might be pulled in different directions as a result of competing values in the school. In this way, a fictional, Christian-themed story about an individual's radical conversion is reframed as a non-sectarian morality tale in which characters' identities are static and Islamic majoritarian views are reinforced.

Andrew Bush, another anthropologist of Iraqi Kurdistan, has examined similar negotiations of religious differences within a Kurdish household comprised of a non-

observant Muslim and his pious Muslim wife and daughters. Bush observes that the family members accommodate one another's religious differences by creating a general "Islamic atmosphere" that does not make demands on the unbeliever. Bush describes a popular form of morality tale which praises the "virtue of not asking" about another person's religion. Because the protagonists and audience of these morality tales are Muslim, Bush infers that the "virtue of not asking" is regarded as an "Islamic virtue." He notes that not asking about another person's religious identity is a "tendency widely available to Muslims and non-Muslims to affirm religious plurality in Ottoman societies." Thus, practicing this (Islamic) "virtue of not asking" contributes to maintaining the "natural superiority" of Islam (2017:523). At societal and state levels in Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2015) also has explored negotiations of religious differences. She argues that secular practices of legal separation of public and private and of politics and religion can intensify and threaten religious identity rather than protect it. Mahmood suggests that secular state practices, not only in Egypt but in general, inadvertently "consecrate majoritarian religious values and norms within the laws of modern politics" to the detriment of religious minorities (197).

Grade 10 students Ashur and Rasim recognized their classroom was not as liberal and inclusive a space as it might appear to others. They recognized majoritarian views being reinforced in lessons and felt they could not offer alternative views which might be interpreted as a challenge to authority and a threat to the public order of the school and society. The "virtue of not asking" may have dissuaded Ashur or other students from saying anything that might suggest their peers or teachers were wrong, which could make people "feel bad," as Ashur said. Although the school self-identified as "Christian,"

religious and political dialogues in the school often reflected (and suited) the ethnoreligious majority comprised of Muslim Kurdish administrators, teachers, and students. Not only Christian students, but also Arab, Bahai, Mandeian, and Turkoman students told me that they generally kept their religious and political views to themselves while at school.

### *Unmasking the self*

Although KCS' founders may have intended the school to be more overtly "Christian," by the time of my fieldwork, the school seemed to offer a vaguely theistic approach to cultivating ethical life, one that emphasized autonomy, good character, and moral agency. KCS students have cultivated a generally liberal, romantic notion of the self as independent and enlightened. This "self" appeared in many lessons I observed, and often the self was the desired object/subject and site of intervention of classroom lessons. For example, sixth grade KCS students wrote and performed a theatrical sketch for their end of the school term ceremony before an audience of family members and school administrators. In the sketch, a boy walked around the stage announcing, "every kind of mask for sale." He waved paper masks inscribed with words like "success," "smart," "confident," and "classy." Four students approached him and purchased masks. The fifth student to approach him criticized the buyers. "You don't need these masks," she told her fellow students. Another girl protested, "But you can't just go around with your face uncovered." Another student said, "Yeah, I got my mask from my parents." The girl playing the role of conscientious objector continued, "Don't get me wrong," she said. "I've worn a lot of masks in my life, but I got tired of my closet full of identities. A while back I threw them all out." The students were silent and looked at one another. One

by one, they dropped their masks and walked off stage. A student stepped forward to narrate, saying, “As it is shown, the only character who was brave enough was the unmasked one. She had the right reasons... We don’t have to fake who we are.”

The autonomous, “true” self, which appears throughout Jamila’s presentation of *Till We Have Faces*, and in the above “masks” sketch, is one site where ethical positions clash. The romanticized liberal “fiction” (Rose 1996) of the radically autonomous self is at odds with inherited identity categories. The sketch nods to inherited identity categories when one student commented that he had “got [his] mask from [his] parents.” In Kurdistan, like much of the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, the dominant form of kinship is patrilineal, a type of unilineal descent by which a person’s ancestry is traced through the father’s line; a person at birth inherits the religious and ethnic identity of his or her father. Patrilineal reckoning also is preserved in personal status codes (PSC) which govern family life, stipulating who can marry, divorce, inherit, and pass on citizenship to children (Efrati 2005; King 2010, 2015; Mahmood 2012; Makdishi 2014). The Iraqi state, and the Kurdistan Regional Government within it, uses this system of patrilineal reckoning to assign religious and ethnic identity categories to citizen-subjects. Citizens are expected, by the state and the community alike, to adhere to inherited identity categories for life. The Iraqi state recognizes a limited number of identity categories, all of which are ethnosectarian, such as Muslim Kurd, Chaldean Catholic, and several others. There is no official recognition of atheism or of religious categories other than those authorized.

The trope of unmasking the true self also appeared in the truth or dare games students frequently played in the classroom and outside the school. I spent most of my

time with the tenth-grade class, who often played truth or dare, as well as a game called “confession chair.” Their literature teacher, Jamila, introduced grade 10 to this game, in which a student was selected to sit in the chair and answer four questions truthfully. Most questions concerned crushes or hypothetical romantic relationships. Sometimes students were asked to name favorites, to confess lies they had told, or to share personal regrets. Jamila presided over the confession chair, although she also played the role of co-conspirator, gossiping about students and teachers. When I asked students in private how they felt about the confession chair and truth or dare, some dismissed the games as pure fun, a distraction from a stressful schedule of studying and examinations. Other students told me that they suspect their teacher used the game to inform the administration, going so far as to separate students alleged to be romantically involved.

Nevertheless, students also played truth or dare games at private social events. On one occasion I went on a picnic with the ninth-grade class, an event unsanctioned by the school. I was the only adult present, though students often regarded me as something between an authority figure (an adult but not a teacher) and a student (technically I was a student, was young, and, according to my Kurdistan friends, appeared even younger). When the students decided to play truth or dare, they invited me to join. The questions they asked one another were about romantic relationships, real and hypothetical. The mood was rowdy, and the questions were more provocative than usual.

When my turn came, I asked an Assyrian Christian girl named “Arbella,” truth or dare? She chose truth. “Imagine you really loved someone,” I said to Arbella, “but that person was outside your religion. Would you still marry?” The students fell silent. A couple boys complained that it was not a good question. Arbella smiled gravely and

thought for a moment. Then she replied, “No, no I wouldn’t.” Some of the students gasped. A girl asked, “Really? Even if you really love him, you wouldn’t get married?” Arbella shook her head no. Later I apologized to Arbella, because I thought my question in front of her peers had made her uncomfortable. She smiled broadly and said, “No, I really liked your question. No one has ever asked me this before.” I suspect this is because many women would not have much agency in a scenario like the hypothetical one I described.

The students’ truth or dare questions about hypothetical, private relationships were only “fun” as long as they are ignored the ethnosectarian categories and other criteria that would make such relationships impossible for many people. “Dating,” generally understood to be private a relationship, is still largely a fantasy for young people in Kurdistan. When I posed a truth question about marriage and religion – and by extension ethnicity because religious and ethnic categories are linked – my question drew attention to the students’ limited agency regarding their own futures, as marriage is a public, collective process in which a young person may have little agency. My question seemed to frustrate the students, resulting in uncomfortable silence, some voiced complaints, and some students’ avoidance of me thereafter. I broke the rules of the game and shattered the illusion of their supposedly liberated selves.

Marrying outside one’s religion or conversion are conceivable events, but unlikely. In one case, they were even the punch line of a prank. A Christian student named “James,” with the help of his friends convinced his teacher, Sara, that he had become an atheist, only to disclose that it was a prank after the teacher started crying and asked to contact his parents. When I asked James to tell me about the prank, he expressed



surprise that his teacher actually believed it. For the students, such a scenario was almost too ridiculous to believe; for their teacher, the alleged deconversion was too potentially disastrous to dismiss. Nevertheless, several students also told me in private that they had become agnostics or atheists, but that they could not openly identify as such.

On the one hand “unmasking,” confessional games allowed students to experiment with social prohibitions. They also demonstrated the expressive creativity, the critical thinking, and the “open-mindedness” that KCS celebrated. In this way, the games represent the sense of expectancy for change in politics in the Kurdistan Region – they are participatory, democratic, transparent, and courageous. On the other hand, the games are also a means by which school administrators and teachers surveil students. In this way the games echo fears about governmental deception, corruption and social chaos. The school administration, under scrutiny from the Ministry of Education, parents, and the community, exerts pressure on the students to remain in their inherited identity categories, disciplining them through restrictions about romantic relationships and forbidding talk about beliefs using a discourse of “morality and religious neutrality.” At the same time, the liberal education after which the school is modeled contributes to an understanding of an autonomous self, able to make a break from inherited identity categories – maybe not bureaucratically by changing one’s government-issued identity card or by marrying outside one’s ethnosectarian group – but nonetheless a self which is able to carve out an interior life motivated by a personal creed of “to thine ownself be true.”

I have discussed the conceptualization of the “self” present in many lessons at Kurdistan Civilizational School because the “self” is imagined in those lessons impacts

how people possible “futures.” The liberal education model of KCS produced students poised to challenge the current political system that restricts personal liberties. Youth coming of age in KCS speak and act as emerging independent, enlightened selves, largely due to the school’s liberal education that encourages students to form their own ideas through analytical discovery and what might be described as a “theistic,” verging on “secular” ethos. Shifting notions about self, society, and state in the Kurdistan Region converged on Kurdistan Civilizational School. KCS, through a combination of its “classical Christian” educational philosophy, its diverse teaching staff and student body, and government curricular requirements, became a venue for contesting values in a pluralistic society. But the kind of citizen-subjects KCS produced and the kind desired by the Kurdistan and/or Iraqi state were at cross-purposes. The Kurdistan government required that KCS, despite being a private Christian school, teach Kurdish nationalist and Islamic content to produce a particular citizen subject. KCS uses some Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) curriculum, such as in their Mavi Mirov (Human Rights) and Komalayati (Social Studies) courses, which included Kurdish ethnonationalist and pro-Islam content.

Throughout my time in KCS, students criticized majoritarian views, such as Kurdish ethnonationalist or pro-Islam content in their courses. Rather than attributing flaws solely to failures of government, students attributed failures more often to society. “Society” was seen as more responsible for reproducing “backward” restrictions regarding gender, politics, and religion. Teachers also pushed back against ethnonationalism, political Islam, and the state of cynicism and resignation that resulted in emigration. In the following chapter, Sara, a displaced Christian teacher at KCS,

appeals to shared humanity and brotherly love. Students received these appeals unevenly, especially those resistant to the idea of a rehabilitated Iraqi state. Some students were quick to point out flaws in the Kurdistan Regional Government, as well, or more broadly in society, while other students denied these flaws. In Chapter 3, “They Don’t Love Iraq”, we observed a student arguing with his Civics teacher, Mariam, and refusing to accept Mariam’s political and social criticism because “no one has hurt [him]”. Further contributing to students’ doubts are the experiences of minority students like Muna, who also appears in Chapter 3. (She is the girl displaced from Baghdad and chosen by school administrators to perform the Kurdish national anthem in front of the school, who knew that Muna did not understand Kurdish.)

The Kurdistan government faces a similar predicament to the cross-pressures upon Kurdistan Civilizational School: As the Kurdistan Region reaches toward statehood, it desires to demonstrate on the global stage that it can tolerate difference in a liberal, pluralistic society. The future Kurdistan state is discursively envisioned to be a multicultural, tolerant enclave in the Middle East, contrasted with the nearby Islamic state that is forcing people to convert. I believe this is why KCS students’ games and pranks – and the perhaps school itself - are permitted to be pluralistic, but nonetheless surveilled: The radically autonomous “self,” that might result in romantic couplings across sectarian lines, or the pranks about religious conversion are performative and provisional. These modes of role play and confession are low-stakes games, a way for students to experiment with subjects or practices ordinarily forbidden, such as student sexuality, beliefs, and politics. The games allow students to experience an alternative or fantasy self, a person untethered from kinship units, confessional groups, and the state. They

point toward a possible future where such performances could become everyday realities. If then, and until then, KCS students are stuck in a country with a long history of conflict and uncertainties, and they are subject to kinship units, confessional groups, and a state which work to keep people within their inherited ethnosectarian identity categories.

Considering the uncertainties and pressures youth face, it is not surprising that many concluded “there is no future” for them or for their country. In a group interview with Grade 10 students, I asked about their future plans, which led to a discussion of their country’s problems:

Diana: Do you plan to stay here, in this country?

Ishtar: I would say me, as a [Assyrian] Christian, I will be kicked out as soon as possible from this country.

Diana: Really?

Ishtar: I don't believe that there will be any Christians by 2020 in this country.

Serbest: It's impossible for the Christians left here.

Layla: I don't want to start anything here. I just want to finish high school and leave.

Serbest: [Christians] will stay.

Ishtar: I'm not talking about [Christians] will leave on their own. They will get kicked out.

Ashur: I believe the opposite of what they are saying. It's like [you all] are predicting the bad stuff, not predicting the positive side. Why would anyone leave this to go somewhere they are not even successful and don't even know? For many people, they don't know it is better for them to live in a society where they trust people than to go and try and adapt [to life abroad]. Not many people know English as we talk now. They will have a lot of trouble communicating. Two of my friends in France, they have trouble communicating. Ishtar was predicting that we are going to have more miseries than now. But if the world is with us, against the bad people...?

Ishtar: For me, I am wanting to leave this country before I [turn] 18.

Meena: I am going to stay.

Ishtar: Why? If anything happens [Meena] has a Dutch passport, and she is gonna leave. She will die [if she stays] here.

Meena: It's where I'm from. Why would I leave it? My heart is here.

Ishtar: I love my house. I love this place, but there is no safety. And I don't believe that there will be anyone like me, just like my grandparents were forced to leave their cities and towns by ISIS, just like they thought they would stay forever there, and they left, so I am leaving too. They are forced to come here [to Erbil] without a house, going between my aunt and our other aunt's house. And I don't know where we are going to go. Where is the furthest place, the safest place from here?

Many KCS students, especially ethnoreligious minority students such as Ishtar, had lost hope that the cycles of war and sectarian violence in Iraq would end. Their reflections on experiences in school mirrored their doubts about the country. The school's founders and administrators envisioned the school to be an inclusive, pluralistic space that would be a first step in rectifying some of Iraq "sectarian" practices like segregating students according to their ethnoreligious identities. KCS would teach and model shared ethical values, which all people could and should strive to realize. Students' experiences in the school, however, led them to doubt. There was persistent gossip that teachers were treating students unequally. Sometimes students told me their teachers were doing one thing in their private lives but telling students to do another; it was hard to accept morality lessons from someone behaving hypocritically.

It also was difficult for students to believe that teachers' or administrators' avowed desire to include all perspectives was genuine or even possible, considering the majoritarian Islamic and Kurdish ethnonationalist aspects of KCS. If students could not express alternative views or share experiences that challenged others' beliefs, then what was the point of discussion? If open discussion was not possible in the value pluralistic

space of KCS, then outside of KCS, they were unlikely to find or to create spaces and dialogues where shared values could be realized through debate. In their criticisms, students linked the failures of pluralism in the school to the failures of society and state. If value pluralism was not tenable in an ethnically and religiously diverse school based on liberal education, then perhaps not all values are tenable in society or state. Was it because the school had internalized the problems of society and state, or was it because the classroom experiments with liberal pluralism failed?

### *Deena's disappointment*

When I recall all the disappointed, weary young adults questioning whether they “had a future” in Iraq, I often think of Deena: A Chaldean Christian, in her mid-thirties yet unmarried, university-educated, and thoughtful, but bored at her desk job. In the evenings, she exercised at the gym where I taught indoor cycling, which is how we met. Little by little, Deena told me about disappointments she had suffered and about unfulfilled family expectations. Her dark brown, almost black eyes suited her melancholy nature; when she smiled, however, her expression could be warm and reassuring. Other women at the gym looked up to Deena. She was a success story, having lost a considerable amount of weight after changing her diet and working with a personal trainer. When women approached her for advice, she gave instructions and encouragement in her quiet, serious manner. On social media she shared photographs posing beside or hugging her young nieces and nephews, commenting that they “made her life better.”

Deena was one of three siblings born in Ainkawa, the Christian township of Erbil. All three siblings have remained there well into their adult years. Deena described her family as valuing education, but never pressuring Deena or her brother and sister to succeed in school or toward any particular field of study. Her sister dropped out in her last year of secondary school. “Why?” I asked. Deena explained,

She decided not to complete it, and she was very, very smart. You know, at that time we had, I don’t remember which war, it was the 1996 one [the civil conflict between Kurdish political parties KDP and PUK]. You know, they delayed the exams two or three times. And one time they did the exam, and later you should do it again. So, she was very sad, and she said I will not study anymore. She said in this country everything is bad. She never thinks positive about it. And our parents never pressured her or forced her to study, which is bad. You know, she was thinking everything is bad in this country, and we will do nothing in this country.

Deena and her sister both worked clerical jobs; their brother worked as an engineer. I asked Deena to tell me more about her experiences in grade school:

You know, in my school, you know I was not that happy in the school. I had friends, and I was happy with them. But the way of teaching, the teachers were very tough, using bad punishments, and they were always comparing between the students, and like stupid, in a stupid way. Instead of making us love each other, they were teaching us how to hate each other, how to get jealous of each other. Until university, I didn’t see any teacher respecting his students, or taking a good way with us. Except one teacher...She was very good. She was very nice. She was treating us like her kids.

Deena’s description of her education does not romanticize her childhood or the quality of her education, unlike some members of her generation (e.g., Sara or Naila who appear in Chapter 3). She frames her relationships with her generational peers, particularly in educational settings, as a series of failures stemming from narrow religious views, political ideology, and social expectations. For example, Deena expressed annoyance at the pro-Baath party content of her primary and secondary school textbooks:

Ok, at that time, Saddam was there, so we didn't have much freedom. And also, the books were all praising Saddam and history...When the teacher was coming [into the classroom], we would stand up and say something about Saddam. Then she would say good morning. Always the first ten minutes, they were saying how Saddam was good, and what he did for the country, and his party. But history - we had a different kind of history. We had [lessons] about Islam, about the different ages, the *khalifa*, about the Baath party, about everything.

Deena's pro-Baath and Islam lessons excluded Chaldean Christian history or culture, subsuming her heritage within a national Iraqi identity. Whereas I heard some Chaldean or Assyrian Iraqi Christians speaking nostalgically about a unified, Iraqi national identity, this identity was not commensurate with Deena's thoroughly Christian heritage and experiences living in the Christian majority township of Ainkawa. She did not speak wistfully about a lost, unified Iraqi past. Her primary and secondary school population consisted of about 90% Christians and 10% Muslims, including a few Muslim teachers, as one might reasonably expect in Ainkawa:

Diana: I guess because your school was in Ainkawa they had a class on Christianity?

Deena: Yes, and also for the Muslims. But I learned about their [Islamic] history, nothing else. And they were talking about the good sides, and the battles, and how brave they were. This kind of thing. You will not learn anything if you just follow their books. If you need to know, you should search [for] yourself.

Diana: Is that what you did?

Deena: Yes.

Diana: Where did you find information? What did you find?

Deena: You know I found - I am friends with people who are not believing on Facebook and social media - so I am learning a lot of things from them.

Diana: Not believing which religion?

Deena: You know, I'm not sure if I believe or not. I haven't decided yet. You know, I was born like a Christian, and they did the baptism and everything when I was three months or less than three months. So, we were used to - we were



Christians - Jesus, Mary, God, this kind of thing. What do you call it? *Al-Ruh al-Quds*?

Diana: Holy Spirit.

Deena: Yes, and we were believing in that a long, long time. It's not easy to leave. But when I see all the bad things, I am losing my belief. Even here [gestures, indicating the office building where she is employed] they are asking me, "What [religion] are you?" I am saying, "I am a human being like you." They know I am a Christian from [her Christian surname]. And they say, "Oh, you are a Christian." And they start. I don't like these kinds of things. I don't like to be treated like this. Religion is something personal between you and God. Why should you interfere in my life? Why should you come and tell me to convert? But if someone is telling [Muslims] to convert, they will get crazy, like, you are doing something very bad to them, and they will maybe kill you.

Diana: What kind of things do they say?

Deena: You know, my first day in university, a girl came to me and said, "Why don't you convert to Islam? Otherwise, you will not be able to go to heaven." And I said, "Why?" And she said, "Because Islam is the last religion. Because God gives you the mind to think and to know you should convert. Because Muhammed was the last prophet." And I said, "Come with me, and let's go to the jail and see how many Christians are there and how many Muslims are there." And she said, "That is right, because Muslims are the majority. If you go to Europe you will see Christians doing crimes." I said, "But you are talking about our country, religion in our country. Who is killing and taking our rights? I think they are Muslims, baby, not Christians. Then why should I come to join your religion?" Another guy came to me and said, "You know you are saying 'Jesus is God,' and this is a big sin." So I told him, "If I say Jesus is God or the pen is god [holding up a pen on her office desk], I am affecting you? I'm forcing you to follow me? I'm saying bad things to you? But you are now, like, disturbing me when you are inviting me to your religion." Then one of my friends came to me and said, "Let's leave this subject, and come, let's go and have fun." After that, many [Muslim] people are like, "Ok Deena, you are going to church, so please pray for me." They ask God to guide you. To guide you to *their* religion. They mean that, but they don't say it. Now I say thank you. That's it. I don't go into deep conversation with them, because I know they will not understand. Diana, not only Muslims are like that. Also Christians, they think Muslims will hurt them. I have many good Muslim friends. But my Christian friends sometimes ask me, "How can you be friends with Muslims? How can you go out with Muslims?"

Diana: What do you say?

Deena: I say they are human beings like me.

Later in the interview we returned to the subject of Christian-Muslim relations.

Deena: You know, when I went to university, I was even kind of worried to talk with Muslims or to mix with them. Because they were always saying Muslims are like something bad, don't mix with them. But when I mixed with them they were not bad, they were human beings like us. You know, because Ankawa was a closed society, Diana, we didn't mix that much with Muslims. We had one or two Muslim neighbors, but they were talking Chaldean [language] like us, and they were very mixed with us, and we didn't feel anything bad about them. We had some girls in Ankawa, they left their families and married with Muslim guys. So this thing was like, these are bad women, and the woman who is selling her[self] is better than these women. So that is why they were always saying, "Don't be close to Muslims, because they will cheat on you, steal from you, kill you, do something bad to you."

Diana: What does your family say exactly?

Deena: The family just, you know, say, "Don't talk to them (Muslims)," and that's it.

Diana: Nothing bad happens if you are friends with Muslims?

Deena: Nothing bad. But you know, if a Muslim girl converts to Christianity, bad things will happen to her. Maybe she will be killed. But not a Christian who goes to (converts to) Islam.

Diana: Really? She will be killed?

Deena: They have to, Diana, because we don't have civil marriage here. If she married a Muslim guy, on her ID she will be Muslim. But she has the right to stay with her religion, with herself and with her God. But I think even in Christianity we don't have civil marriage, so she is not able to stay in her religion and marry a Muslim guy, because she is not marrying him in church. Even if she stays, the society will look [at her] as a bad girl.

Diana: I haven't heard that women who marry a man from a different religion have to change their religion on their ID...

Deena: Also a man. But now you know, now in Kurdistan I think many people are converting and nothing bad is happening to them, but they are still very worried. I have many friends, they converted to Christianity, but they don't tell [others] about this. They are very worried. I have one friend who is a Kurd, and some Arabs who want to, and many Farsi, Persian people.

Diana: Can you tell me about how your friends converted?

Deena: One of my friends was studying about Islam, and he didn't like the way - he said it is all about revenge and killing, so I need to have some love in my life, not like this. And the other one said she was fasting. It was Ramadan, and one day she was reading Quran. After that, she wanted to know what does [the classical Arabic text] mean, because she was Persian [and did not know Arabic]. And when she knew what it means, she said ok I am stupid. How am I a slave to this kind of God? They don't respect me as a woman. So she said ok, the devil is coming to me (tempting her); I should keep him very far [waves hand]. So she said after that, again, I tried to pray, I couldn't. Then again, I was thinking this is the devil; I should keep him away. She said I was watching the Jesus movie, and I thought, after, you know in the end it is written, "If you believe me, follow me." She said when I closed my eyes, I just wanted to follow him. I started to follow him. But some people are using this kind of converting for getting residency abroad, in other countries, and some of them are using it for their personal issues. So I don't know if they are honest or not.

Diana: Do you know many people who say they are atheist or agnostic?

Deena: Yes.

Diana: Would you say that is common here?

Deena: No. Also they don't say [they are atheist or agnostic]. They are worried. If they don't believe - even you see, they are going to mosque, they are going to church, because they are worried if people know about [their beliefs] they [will] not [be] respected any more. I have a friend who is a doctor, a respected guy, good guy, helping everybody, but he doesn't believe now. But you will see him every Friday in the mosque praying with people. Because he is worried, he cannot say.

Diana: So you think people can change their religion here?

Deena: Of course, but it depends on the religion. It depends. You know people don't feel that secure, or they don't feel they will be safe if they change it. Otherwise, many people will do. But it is happening. Many people are changing their religion.

Diana: How do you know that?

Deena: I know because I have friends in the [religious group that meets privately and through social media]. Ok from there I know many people are converting their religion.

As Deena described examples of people "changing their religion," her tone

remained skeptical, such as when she pointed out that some conversions may be an effort

to secure refugee status abroad. Conversions were doubtful and difficult; they did not necessarily signal any positive changes in a person, much less in society. In Deena's narrative, conversions and deconversions flowed from a critique of the insularity of Christian-majority Ainkawa and her primary and secondary education there. Likewise, she observed how Muslims, among other ethnoreligious groups, also were isolated, poorly educated about minorities, and thus ignorant about many of their fellow citizens. Misinformation was rampant. Failures in religious pluralism continued at the university level, when interfaith dialogues between students broke down over efforts to convert rather than to "understand," as Deena concludes.

And Deena was committed to understanding others. Over the years, but particularly at university, Kurdish people frequently asked Deena why she did not learn Kurdish, and why she seemed to "prefer" Arabic and Arabs. "Why do you Christians never learn Kurdish?" a fellow student asked her. When a Kurdish teacher at university offered to help Deena, she began assimilating more with Kurdish society:

We had a Kurdish teacher, he was telling me that I was very bad in Kurdish. He promised me that if I start talking Kurdish, he will help me a lot. I started making friends with Kurds. So, I was very happy. They were good, good people. Not like they were saying before about them, that they are bad, that they are hurting me. [Kurdish people] helped me a lot, really. So, I started [speaking Kurdish]. For two years I didn't dare to talk with people. I was just talking among friends. After that I could. It was like English. I will make mistakes, and they will make fun of me.

Diana: But that's the only way to learn, to make mistakes, a lot.

Deena: Of course.

Diana: What do you think about Kurdish society here?

Deena: I think I will let the [individual] person to live and decide. I think there are many good and bad things. They are sociable, they are friendly, especially to foreigners. They are simple. In the same way, at the same time, I think they have two personalities. The other one is they are hating, especially Arabs. They also

hate, sometimes, foreigners. [Lowering her voice] This is something stupid about Kurdish society: Most of the people hate Arabs.

Diana: I've heard that a lot.

Deena: And they are crazy about Islam.

Diana: What do you mean?

Deena: I mean they are Muslims, very Muslim [clenches fist]. How? This religion came from Arabs! If you hate Arabs, and you are talking badly about Arabs, why are you following this religion? If you ask them, they will say, "No, it didn't come only for Arabs, but for all the world, to save them from sin, to show them heaven is good."

To demonstrate her point about foreigners, Deena told me how a former Kurdish employer mistreated an Ethiopian woman employed to clean the office and serve tea or coffee to guests. Deena said the woman was harassed and deprived of a place to sleep and adequate food. Like other foreign domestic workers Deena saw when visiting friends' houses, the Ethiopian woman was made to clean multiple locations, rather than the one location stipulated in her contract (if there was a contract). When Deena protested such mistreatments, people responded by asking, "Why? She is a low-level person." Such comments disheartened Deena greatly; she said she cried often during that period of employment. She eventually left this job, disgusted and disappointed.

Throughout our conversations, Deena leveled criticisms both at Muslims and Christians. Repeatedly, she pointed to a deep current of hate and misunderstanding:

You know from deep inside, both societies hate each other. Christian society hates Muslim, and Muslim hates Christian. But the people who are afraid in Christian society and the people are trying to be nice in Muslim....They don't respect the religion of the other. The Christians are not showing that they are afraid, and the Muslims are not showing that they are nice, gentle.

The narrative that emerged from my conversations with Deena linked educational shortcomings, failed interfaith dialogues, and deep-seated fear and mistrust with a failing

state. With many anecdotes about disappointing experiences, she explained her loss of faith in her religion, her society, and her country. Additionally, doctors had diagnosed Deena with an autoimmune disorder.

You know, I was always eating, eating, eating, oily food with sugar, with a lot of chocolates with a lot of sweets. I was saying, “Ok who cares? I will die.” I lost hope. “Ok I will die. Who cares? Let me enjoy life.” This is very wrong. Very wrong.

During this low period in Deena’s life, a coworker introduced her to a nutritionist located in “Doctors Street,” the Erbil commercial district specializing in medical services and products. The nutritionist offered Deena a free health assessment, noting her age, pulse rate, blood pressure, diet, measurements, and body composition. “They had good advertising,” Deena noted, smiling wryly. After the health assessment, Deena began eliminating oily and sugary foods from her diet. She also joined one of the newly opened gyms in Erbil, the one where I coached indoor cycling. This gym appealed to her because it employed “knowledgeable” personal trainers, and the facilities were clean and modern, with a mixed-gender exercise hall; Deena, nevertheless, preferred to exercise in the women-only section of the gym.

Now I’m eating healthy and exercising. I made a very big change. I lost about 21 kilos. So everybody can do it. You just need to make a decision and start. You know, I was always saying I will start tomorrow, after a month, after I don't know how much, but I didn't.

Deena became a health enthusiast, encouraging several of her friends to join the gym and begin a fitness and diet program. As she moved out of one ethical position in which she felt ambivalent about family and religious obligations, she entered another, in the company of her diverse friends at university and at work. As Deena spent more time away from the domestic sphere, where she had little choice about her diet and daily

routine and could not talk about her personal beliefs, she found another sphere in which she could order her ethical life. Her daily routine at the gym and the relationships she formed there formed an important part of her social, and ethical, life. Her new ethical positioning made a difference to some extent, though it has more likely “reshuffled” her ethical life, rather than “transformed” it (Gibson 2019:578).

### *Ashti’s great expectations*

Ashti was one of my Kurdish language tutors and key interlocutors. She was in her early 40s when I met her in 2016. Ashti grew up in a small town near Kirkuk. Her father and mother worked together to run a small, successful business. When Ashti’s father died, his brother pressured Ashti’s mother to marry him so he could inherit the business. Ashti’s mother refused the marriage proposal to her late husband’s brother. (She later married a different man.) When Ashti’s mother refused her brother-in-law’s marriage proposal, Ashti’s paternal uncle took her to live with his family. Ashti said that he was a harsh man, and he forbade her to continue with her formal education. She completed only four years of school, from age 7 to 11.

But Ashti was smart and motivated, and she had a kind relative who brought her books from Baghdad every time he visited. She taught herself Arabic, Kurdish, and English through a combination of dictionaries, books in various genres, and exposure to language through television. She especially enjoyed reading philosophy. By the time she was a teenager, she realized she did not believe Islam. Around age 20 she married and gave birth to a daughter. For a time, the family lived in Europe. There Ashti became a Christian and felt what she described to me as a sense that the Holy Spirit was calling her

to return to Kurdistan. She separated from her husband and returned with her teenage daughter to the Kurdistan Region. Although Ashti was a convert to Christianity, she maintained her identity as a Muslim around her family and coworkers, such as by celebrating Islamic holidays and wearing hijab. She told me that she did this both for her safety as well as out of respect for the “Kurdish cultural” practice (as opposed to a “religious” practice) of loosely covering the hair with a scarf.

Back in Kurdistan, Ashti worked for many years as a teacher in a government school, and she developed a successful side business tutoring students and teaching Kurdish and Arabic to foreign NGO employees. Her reputation as a skilled teacher spread, and she was hired to tutor some members of a rich and powerful family. This family gave Ashti the opportunity to start a private school with their financial backing. Ashti politely declined because she did not want to become implicated in what she perceived to be a corrupt system of patronage. She remarked to me that she thought she did the right thing, but she wondered what her life would have been like if she had accepted the offer. Sometimes she thought about returning to Europe, she said, because things had become so bad in Kurdistan. She was depressed to see the continuing decline of the education system. She felt the youth had no hope.





Figure 15: A history lesson for a girls' class in a Kurdish language (government) secondary school, February 2017. Photo by the author.

During the economic crisis, when people were not receiving their salaries, some government teachers refused to teach their lessons. Ashti, however, continued teaching at a government high school for girls in a poor community, where she had worked for several years. She could have obtained a lucrative position at a private school, but Ashti said she felt loyal to the government school and her students. I often accompanied her as she drove to and from her school in “Betala.” It was in a rural area, located along a dusty highway crowded with oil tankers lumbering to and from Turkey. The town began some 30 years before as a camp for Kurds displaced during the regime of Saddam Hussein. Eventually the camp residents built permanent structures. By the time of my field work, the town had expanded to include Arabic speaking IDPs and a school for their children. A sprawling, gated camp for Syrian Kurdish refugees bordered the town, but reportedly there was little mixing between the town residents and the camp residents. The area was a far cry from the nearby, densely populated Erbil, with its modern shopping malls,

restaurants, and businesses. Betala was, as a Kurdish university professor described it to me, one of many “empty places” created by a history of displacement and poverty.

In the rainy season, dust turned to mud, and dark clouds hung low over the flat earth. Sometimes we sat in gloomy silence as Ashti drove us to and from school. Other times, we conversed. As my language tutor, Ashti often maintained a formal manner with me, but sometimes, after a dispiriting morning at the school, she would drop her formal demeanor and ask me, “Diana, what should I do?” It surprised me to see these shifts in Ashti’s demeanor. In the classroom she was a vigorous, demanding, inspiring teacher. I watched as she taught the 11<sup>th</sup> grade girls’ class English literature. Their textbook, which appeared to have been adapted from a British school text, offered summaries of “Great Books” written in simple English. They had been reading a summary of *Great Expectations*. Ashti encouraged the girls to learn from Pip’s example, that they did not need a rich benefactor or high status to improve themselves. The parallels between the fictional story and Ashti’s life were remarkable, but she rarely, if ever, disclosed any personal information to her students. Instead, she exhorted them to do their best in school, because if they could read, especially if they could read Arabic or English, so much more of the world would be open to them.

While teaching about *Great Expectations*, Ashti often looked in the direction of Sahîn, one of her best students. Sahîn excelled at English, unlike most of the girls in the class. She was the only girl who ventured to ask me simple sentences in English; the others said they knew only greetings, despite their five years of English classes. None of their teachers, except Ashti, were conversant in English. Ashti asked Sahîn to explain to her classmates how she had improved her English skills; Sahîn meekly said that she

studied a lot and watched English language movies, paying careful attention to the pronunciation. In private, Ashti told me that she was especially concerned to bolster Sahîn's confidence. Sahîn's mother was a cleaner for the school, which was a very low-status job and a source of embarrassment for Sahîn. Sometimes Sahîn stayed behind after the school shift ended to help her mother clean. Together, they swept the dusty classrooms and wiped down the old UN-donated desks with their chipped, bright blue paint, covered in students' pencil-carved graffiti. Like most girls in her community, Sahîn finished her morning shift at school and returned home for a second shift helping her mother with household chores.

One afternoon, after the morning school shift ended, I walked past *Daiki* Sahîn (mother of Sahîn) tending a vegetable garden beside the school. *Daiki* Sahîn stood up to greet me, wiping her dirty hands on her loose dress. It was early May, but the noon sun was already intolerable. She invited me to walk with her to her home, which was very near the school. Like other homes in this community, the sturdy house was built of cinder blocks on a dirt lot. We passed through the front gate into the small courtyard where we greeted her mother, Sahîn's grandmother, reclining on a cot in the shade of a tree. *Daiki* Sahîn led me into the *jurî mîwan* (guestroom) and instructed me to sit on the *döshak* (cushion) nearest the freestanding AC unit blasting cold air.

Through the open door leading to the kitchen, I saw Sahîn and her elder sister mopping the tile floor. They put their mops down to come greet me in the guest room. Her elder, married sister rested one hand on her pregnant belly as she sat on the *döshak*, and Sahîn managed a quiet smile. Sahîn's sister eagerly asked a series of questions, which Sahîn answered for me. I smiled, realizing that Sahîn had been listening carefully

to everything I had said in the prior weeks. I invited them to sit with me, but Sahîn said they should return to their chores.

Their brother Ardelan, about ten years old, came into the guest room and flopped onto one of the cushions to watch the flat screen tv. With sprawled limbs and listless expression, he watched an American movie, *The Edge of Tomorrow*, a violent dystopian film with the tagline “Live. Die. Repeat.” From the cushion, Ardelan used a remote to decrease the volume and instead read the Arabic subtitles. Daiki Sahîn entered the room with a plate of salted cucumbers and scolded the boy for turning the volume too low. He complained that he did not understand the English. Daiki Sahîn replied, “But our guest understands English, right?” As I sat in the guest room, Sahîn mopped the same section of floor more than once as she glanced through the open door toward the television, listening to the film. Sahîn’s sister beckoned for her help as she crouched over the chicken kebab roasting on a low grill. Sahîn’s days were filled with housework, but she found time to study for her exams - and to watch English movies when she could.

Ashti was acquainted with the kind of life Sahîn led outside of school; Ashti’s own childhood was even more restricted. I could see that Ashti became discouraged with her apathetic female students who had more resources than Ashti ever had, such as their formal secondary education and access to the internet. When, during a break in between classes, I asked a cluster of girls about their dreams, some expressed a serious interest in journalism or teaching. Others joked about becoming movie stars and the like. Sahîn listened to her classmates. She exhibited interest in English and in religion class (Islam), but she was otherwise quiet, obedient with her chores, and diligent with her exam

preparation. Most of the girls told me they expected to marry soon after graduating high school, and that there was nothing else for them in their future. Why study?

On our return trip, I shared this information with Ashti. She seemed deflated. Yes, she agreed that most of the girls would marry soon after graduation. Many would fail their exams. She complained that the weak government curriculum and religion had made people stupid and docile. Ashti could not understand why she had been “called” to return to Kurdistan, where she saw so little opportunity for transformation. She was waiting for her daughter, Kani, to graduate from university before they emigrated, but perhaps they should leave now? she asked me. Would they be accepted in the United States or Canada? What if Donald Trump was elected president? Many times, we discussed how she and her daughter might emigrate. Inevitably these conversations would end with Ashti saying she could not shake the feeling that she was supposed to stay. So she stayed.

Ashti diligently taught her government school lessons without a salary for months. Although she stayed busy teaching private lessons in the evenings and on weekends, she never declined to help me with language tutoring, translation, or to meet at my home or a cafe to talk. With her savings, she had bought a two-story, recently constructed house halfway between Erbil and the school in Betala. It was a pleasant, peaceful neighborhood. They tried to live a healthy life, Ashti said. They exercised and ate fresh food, hoping to alleviate Ashti’s recurring stomach ulcers. In the evenings, they watched Arabic or Turkish language series or movies. Kani was a polyglot like her mother. She was a third-year dental student in the best dental program in Erbil. Two

years remained in her dental training, so she and Ashti resigned themselves to at least two more years in Erbil. When I left the field in July 2017, Ashti and Kani were still waiting.

### *Brave New Kurdistan*

Each year the Erbil International Book Fair is held in the event hall at Sami Abdulrahman Park. One afternoon, not having any interviews to do or places to go, I dropped by the fair. Dozens of booksellers set up booths, and hundreds of people were milling about. The view inside the hall was strikingly different from the view outside: In any given street or shop in Erbil, it was uncommon to see very conservative Islamic fashions such as those associated with Salafi Islamists. Every now and then, I passed by a woman in all-black niqab (veiled except for her eyes) rather than in colorful Kurdish clothes, hair peeking out from a loosely-wrapped headscarf. Typically, women wearing niqab were accompanied by a man with a long beard and wearing ankle-length robes, rather than the traditional loose shirt and baggy *sharwal* pants Kurdish men usually wear. More Westernized styles like blue jeans and t shirts also are popular, especially with youth. Inside the book fair, the street scene was reversed; while the majority of pedestrians wore traditional Kurdish clothing or Western-style clothes, the majority of the book fair attendees wore conservative Islamic dress. Booth after booth was stacked with publications about Islam: Beautiful editions of the Qur'an, books on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), writings by popular teachers, guides to living a proper Islamic lifestyle, and children's morality tales. Almost all were in Arabic.

To my surprise, it was difficult for me to locate booksellers offering anything about Kurdish history or culture. Specifically, I was looking for books by Kurdish novelist and intellectual Bakhtiyar Ali, whose quotes appear at the beginning of each

chapter of this dissertation. A few sellers offered books in English, mostly for learning English. Amused, I stopped to photograph a display featuring a book in Kurdish about revolutionary leader Mullah Mustafa Barzanî placed beside a book about newly elected American President Donald Trump. A journalist and some curious male attendees asked to photograph me or take a selfie with me beside said books. I politely declined.

I paused at a booth with books advocating the views of controversial Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen. As I crouched to see the titles at the base of the shelf, from behind me a timid, polite voice asked in English, “Miss, do you want to know more about Islam?” Two boys around 8 or 9 years old stood behind me, grinning. They had attended the local Gülen school for boys and were pleased to see a foreigner interested in their school subjects. After a friendly chat and exchange of emails, I gathered my purchases (I finally had found the lone bookseller with Ali’s works), eager to remove myself from the stuffy, crowded hall and return to the version of Hewlêr I felt I knew better.

Over the next few days, I casually described my book fair experience to various Kurdistanian acquaintances to observe their reactions. Many seemed to know what I was going to say before I said it, sighing or waving their hands dismissively as soon as I mentioned Arabic or Islamic books. Private school students complained that the fair offered so few books in English. But the complaint most adults held in common was that the fair evidenced a worrying, growing interest in more conservative forms of Islam.

Deena, who appears earlier in this chapter, was one of those worried adults. I saw her almost every evening in the women’s section of the gym where I taught indoor cycling. As I told her about the book fair, she stopped her hand weight exercises and

dropped the weights on a nearby bench. “You know it scares me, all those strict, very hard Islamic books, the thinking, what it is doing to the people,” Denna said, making a clenched fist and shaking her head. “You should pray for us, Diana, really. You will get to leave this place, but we have to live here. Sometimes I think we should all just leave.”

I replied, “I hope you can make a life here, because if you all leave, what will happen to this place? To this country?” She looked at me with a resigned expression and repeated, “You know, *you* get to leave this place, but *we* have to live here.” After a pause she added, “At least there is somebody [meaning me, the anthropologist] who knows what our life is...” she trailed off and went back to her hand weights. I left the gym that evening with a heavy, guilty weight in the pit of my stomach.

A couple days later I met up with Ashti, my Kurdish teacher and key interlocutor, at a cafe inside a Western-style shopping mall. As I described the book fair to her, I mentioned that most of the books were written in Arabic or about Islam. She smiled knowingly. Many times, Ashti had shared with me how she feared the growing influence of conservative Islam in Kurdistan. I also mentioned that the fair had very few books in English for sale. She asked which ones, and for some reason, George Orwell’s *1984* was the first one that came to my mind. Ashti was familiar with *1984*, which did not surprise me considering how widely she read and how she was concerned with governance and freedoms. She asked could I recommend any other books like *1984*.

“Well, there’s *Brave New World*,” I replied. “It is about a future state in which people only care about being happy, about their comfort. They don’t read books or talk about ideas.”



“Like Kurdistan!” she exclaimed, smiling with recognition at the similarity between the novel and her life. Her smile slowly faded. For a moment, she watched the traffic passing outside the café, then turned to me and said, “But the future is already here.”

*Field note, 3 Feb 2016*

Suddenly Naza said to me, “Do you remember when I asked you if this country has a future, and you told me you wanted to hear what I thought first. You didn’t tell me what you really think.”

I admit I hesitated. Then I said, “This country doesn’t have a future as long as it is influenced, or controlled, by more powerful countries.” I used the metaphor of a pawn on a chessboard and said that throughout history the people of this region have been used by their more powerful neighbors. Naza seemed to be agreeing with me. Her friend, Rewan, was frowning and shook her head.

“I don’t think so,” Rewan said. “I think this country has a future.”

## **Chapter 6: “Bits of hope”**

*“My dear Ghazalnus, I am neither a philosopher nor a poet. I am a hunter of masterpieces. I know what kind of city I can build, but I need your powers on my side from the outset. The realm I am dreaming of cannot be built without the poets, the ghazal writers and the great singers of this city. What do you want? Tell me which mansion you covet in this city - which field, which farm, which woman, which impossible thing, tell me. Together, you and I shall build a city drawn by your imagination and my power.”*

*“I can’t,” Ghazalnus said. “Forgive me brother, I feel that you want us to create something that would conceal the filth and beauty of this city. If you want my imagination to come to your aid, don’t try to stop us from seeing all that is ugly. The imagination is a beautiful journey, but it should not make humans forget about disaster.” - Bakhtiyar Ali, I Stared at the Night of the City*

### Philosopher kings

In the above excerpt from Bakhtiyar Ali’s magical realist novel, *Ghazalnus in the Gardens of Imagination*, a Kurdish politician called the “Baron of the Imagination” pleads with the protagonist, Ghazalnus. The Baron desires to harness Ghazalnus’ imaginative abilities to build a more powerful and beautiful city. Ghazalnus refuses to help the politician because such a dream city would mask the “ugly,” cruel reality of life in contemporary Kurdistan; there is beauty and truth too precious to entrust to politicians (called “barons” in the novel). The barons have created terrible things, such as a “book of death” that the Baron of the Imagination has hidden in the luxury district “Nwemiran” (“new royalty”). Nwemiran fittingly is the home of the political elite who have become wealthy through graft, and, as I mentioned in the dissertation’s introduction, it is likely that the fictional neighborhood is modeled after an actual luxury residential development in Erbil called “Dream City.”

Throughout the novel, Ghazalnus’ followers investigate the barons’ corruption, documenting in a book what they have learned about evil, as well as about the power of

the imagination. In the novel's conclusion, one of the characters reveals that this book is the one the reader holds. Breaking the "fourth wall," he addresses the reader directly,

And you, too, who have entered the garden, it does not matter how you came by this book, but please do us one small favor: don't let it fall into the hands of the barons...Please don't let it fall into their hands. The peace of us all depends on it (542).

I see in Ghazalus' refusal and the novel's conclusion a condemnation of the Platonic "philosopher-king." In Book 5 of *The Republic*, Socrates suggests that the utopian city requires a ruler who is both philosopher and king: "Until philosophers rule as kings in their cities...so that political power and philosophy become thoroughly blended together...cities will have no rest from evils...nor, I think, will the human race" (Reeve 2004:166). The Baron of the Imagination, who is, by his own admission, "neither a philosopher or poet," seeks to unite his brute political power with Ghazalus' wisdom and creative powers, together ruling as philosopher-king. But to do this, Ghazalus argues, would create a city that hides ugliness, and more importantly, suppresses dissent.

It is this aspect of the philosopher-king, a tendency toward totalitarianism and authoritarianism, that political and social philosopher Karl Popper condemned in his critique of "historicism." (To be clear: I am not situating my dissertation in political or philosophical literatures or debates; throughout I make brief references as I have found a handful of theorists outside anthropology useful to think with about my ethnography.) Popper argued that, if the main function of the social sciences (or in the novel's case, the imagination) is to comprehend the social and political "laws" guiding human development, then this view of knowledge and politics eventually leads to centralized government control of individuals and large-scale social engineering with potentially disastrous results:

Social revolutions are not brought about by rational plans, but by social forces, for instance, by conflicts of interests. The old idea of a powerful philosopher-king who would put into practice some carefully thought-out plans was a fairy-tale invented in the interest of a land-owning aristocracy. The democratic equivalent of this fairy-tale is the superstition that enough people of good will may be persuaded by rational argument to take planned action...The real outcome will always be very different from the rational construction. It will always be the resultant of the momentary constellation of contesting forces...All social engineering, no matter how much it prides itself on its realism and on its scientific character, is doomed to remain a Utopian dream” (2002:42)

Popper’s observations also recall Jacques Derrida’s critique of the “engineer” versus the “bricoleur,” as I discussed in Chapter 1. The bricoleur combines and creates with whatever is at hand, which is why the French *bricoleur* sometimes is translated “handyman.” Levi-Strauss contrasts the bricoleur with the engineer, who has the training and resources to construct a new cultural whole rather than to repurpose materials and tools. The engineer, however, is a “myth,” as all discourse is bricolage (Derrida 1978). People “make do” in their everyday lives as they “make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (De Certeau 1984). Throughout this dissertation, conflicts of values often appear as struggles between would-be “philosopher-kings” or “engineers,” such as politicians or administrators, and the “bricoleurs” who comprise the majority of Kurdistan society.

In this last chapter, I tentatively draw together magical realism, some (brief) political philosophy, and my interlocutors’ narratives for the ways in which they can help us understand a society grappling with sectarianism and value pluralism. By “sectarian” I do not refer to the mere fact of diversity, or of the politicization of identities, but rather how diversity and identity politics have created the conditions in which the people who appear throughout this ethnography experience contests of values. How the Ottoman

empire and contemporary Middle Eastern states have regulated and “tolerated” religious difference continues to shape how people understand identity in contemporary Kurdistan. Recall that the Ottoman Empire permitted religious communities some self-governance through the *millet* system (Baer et al. 2009; Makdisi 2017). As anthropologist Andrew Shryock (2009) observes in his conversation with historians Marc Baer and Ussama Makdisi, scholars often have treated “Ottoman tolerance as a virtue” and have disregarded how the Ottoman state was “a violent, hegemonic imperial formation in its own right” (936). Makdisi (2017) notes that the significance of the Ottoman *millet* system was not about “tolerance” or “intolerance,” but that different communities lived side by side through imperial and state formations (53).

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the states that emerged were built largely on the same system of regulating difference via the patrilineal conferral of ethnoreligious identity (King 2018). The Iraqi state employs the logic of patriliney to assign ethnoreligious identities to its citizens and governs them accordingly. The education sector, for example, is organized according to ethnoreligious identity, assigning students to schools based on their perceived identity and first language. Cultivating a “shared ethic” across segregated communities with segregated schools proves difficult, as we saw in the case of Kurdistan Civilizational School. In my interview with Yakub Boutros, a co-founder of KCS, Boutros argued that creating a shared ethic, and what I would call a “pluralistic” space, is necessary to counteract practices of “separation” based on ethnicity and religion that reproduce “sectarian” political cultures.

I must acknowledge, again, that the concept of “sectarianism” is problematic: Scholars of Iraq and the Middle East have tended to focus on the politicization of

collective identity categories, sometimes inadvertently reproducing the illusion of clearly bounded religious and ethnic identities. As Ussama Makdisi observes, “the idea of sectarianism, and the sectarian, has come to haunt the modern imaginary of the Arab world in much the same way that the idea of racism has haunted the modern imaginary of the USA” (2017:25). Makdisi and other contributors to the edited volume *Sectarianization* (Hashemi and Postel 2017) locate the emergence of sectarianism in the form which we recognize it today in the nineteenth century Ottoman empire. Scholars like Suad Joseph (2008) and Ussama Makdisi (2008) have demonstrated how sectarianism is a historically specific form of social differentiation, practiced for political purposes within state level organizations. When I speak of “sectarian political cultures,” I am not referring to a thin and reductive concept of “sectarianism” as something ancient and intractable plaguing contemporary Iraq, although power struggles between sects are as old as empires. In the past couple centuries, the Ottoman Empire, British Mandate governance, the Iraqi state, and foreign interventions have instrumentalized sectarian difference in enduring ways.

In this dissertation, interlocutors have described the ways in which “sectarianism,” as an enduring form of social differentiation instrumentalized by the modern state, negatively impacts their lives, such as by limiting whom they can befriend or marry, or the spaces in which they can participate or feel welcome. Sectarian categories are inherently unstable. People experience pressures to stabilize these categories and commit to them as a dominant, or hegemonic, form of identity. My interlocutors described pressures from family members, from neighbors, or other authority figures to identify only with their inherited ethnoreligious identity categories

(i.e., not to convert) and not to associate with people belonging to other groups. Of course, many people I knew came from families which were critical of such “sectarian” practices, but their association with some people and participation in some spaces was constrained, nonetheless.

### Generating hope

In the past couple decades, political and developmental discourses that portray the Kurdistan Region as a progressive haven characterized by “tolerance” and “multiculturalism” have proliferated. On the one hand, “tolerance” discourse, or “radical affirmation” of religious difference is nothing new for the region, as it seems to be an enduring feature of post-Ottoman societies (Bush 2020). Undoubtedly, the war with the Islamic State and the ongoing political conflict with the federal Iraqi government in Baghdad intensified tolerance discourse that portrays the Kurdistan Region as a counterpublic, a positive other to Iraq or to the Islamic State. However, the experiences of many people I knew, especially members of ethnoreligious minorities, demonstrated the limits of “tolerance.” In many cases, what people at the margins of Kurdistan society experienced might be considered a thin form of tolerance – providing refuge but withholding rights.

In Kurdistan, just as in Iraq, people are citizens because first and foremost they belong to a group that is a state-recognized ethnoreligious identity category, whose membership they inherit through patrilineal kinship. For this reason, Kurdistan “citizenship” (were there an independent Kurdistan state) would not be offered to the many refugees and internally displaced people residing in the Kurdistan Region,

thousands of whom probably will remain there the rest of their lives. The Kurdistan Regional Government is not likely to recognize these long-term residents as citizens, or to extend them to benefits afforded citizens, but will continue to consider them as displaced citizens of the Syrian or Iraqi states. While the Kurdistan Region has absorbed hundreds of thousands of people and supported them at great expense, this conception of citizenship has helped the KRG to deflect some of the financial burden by referring displaced Iraqis to the federal government in Baghdad to which they are still citizen-subjects. I witnessed such deflection firsthand when I attended regular “Education Cluster” meetings. In these meetings, members of the Kurdistan government, the Erbil Governorate, and numerous local and international organizations frequently debated jurisdiction and responsibility for various populations of refugee or displaced schoolchildren. Generally, people who fled areas outside the Kurdistan Region’s borders, such as Christians, Muslims, Arabs, and Yezidis, and who now lived in the Kurdistan Region, were considered to fall under the Iraqi federal government’s jurisdiction. When relief organizations who worked in education approached Kurdistan government for permissions or funds, often they were referred to the central government in Baghdad, or vice versa. It seemed some relief organizations were engaged in a constant back and forth between the two governments. Being “tolerant” of multiculturalism can be very expensive.

About tolerance, and more generally about the limits of freedoms in Kurdistan, my interlocutors frequently criticized the Iraqi and Kurdistan governments, their society, their communities, even their own family and friends. As my interlocutors have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, there is no consensus on the nature and extent



of “tolerance,” either as it is experienced or as it “should be” in contemporary Kurdistan society. Why, then, do conceptualizations of tolerance feature so often in political and modernization discourse, and in interlocutors’ assessments of the state? Tolerance, and the quality of life it protects, is central to how effectively a society or state can generate “hope” for the “future.” Ghassan Hage (2003) suggests that we conceptualize societies as “mechanisms for the distribution of hope.” “The kind of affective attachment (worrying or caring) that a society creates among its citizens is intimately connected to its capacity to distribute hope,” but capitalist and neoliberal regimes “have contributed to the ‘shrinking’ of this capacity” (Hage 2003:3, cited in Miyazaki 2004).

In his book, *The Method of Hope*, Hirokazu Miyazaki examines how hope is produced through various kinds of knowledge and is “predicated on the inheritance of a past hope and its performative replication in the present” (2004:139). For much of the twentieth century, Iraqi leaders effectively drew upon the territory’s history of many, great civilizations, from the emergence of the state in ancient Mesopotamia, to the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, to the modern Iraqi state. Generations of Iraqi children learned in school that their country inherited the achievements and pride of these civilizations. They were told that their ethnic and religious identities are part of this collective heritage, and that the diverse communities residing in the country comprised a unified, national Iraqi identity.

Minority interlocutors who came of age before the 2003 invasion sometimes spoke nostalgically about the vision of Iraq they were presented with in school, or the Iraq that they experienced in childhood. In Chapter 3, Sara and Naila lament the loss of Iraqi identity, good citizenship, and neighborliness. Others, like Deena in Chapter 5,

remain critical of the Baathist ideology they encountered in childhood. Iraqi nationalist ideology also effectively focused citizens not on ethnic or religious difference but on developing Iraq's natural resources to the benefit of all. "There is only one future in the nationalist developmental imagination," Sara Pursley notes, and that is toward becoming a "developed country" (2019:217-218).

When Iraq's unified "nationalist developmental" future was dismantled by the 2003 invasion, the "future" became multiple and uncertain. Throughout the dissertation, I have used the heuristic "ethical positions" to describe ethical regimes that frame human experience within their narrative grasp. Ethical positions operate according to different temporalities – different pasts, presents, and futures. In thinking about how people were cross-pressured, pulled in different directions toward different frames, I have found it useful to make a two-by-two matrix to illustrate. My intention is not to reduce complexities or render people as if they only live according to one "position", but to offer points of reference or the boundaries of ethical positions. In Chapter 1, I described how interlocutors position themselves vis-à-vis various collectivities, ideas, and the state. Below, I have made a simple diagram to represent a spectrum of possible ethical positions based on what I heard interlocutors say and what I observed them do. I use this diagram as a way of thinking about how people negotiate various ethical positions, and not as a set of rigid categories in which to "type" people. Along this matrix, one measure is "immanence" versus "transcendence," and the other is "action" versus "inaction".

Table 1. Ethical positioning

<p><b>Immanent action</b> present with agnostic future</p>	<p><b>Transcendent action</b> future-oriented present</p>
<p><b>Immanent inaction</b> present without future</p>	<p><b>Transcendent inaction</b> fate-oriented present</p>

“Immanence” refers to a view of the human condition in the natural world, unaided by anything supernatural. “Transcendence” refers to a view of the human condition in a world both natural and supernatural. “Action” refers to the degree to which any ethical position directs a person to “do so something” in the present. Conversely, “inaction” refers to how an ethical position is said to minimize or to absolve the human necessity of “doing something” in the present. Along these axes about immanence and transcendence, and action and inaction, are different conceptualizations of the “future,” or of “no future.”

“Immanent action” is present in Karza’s pedagogy in Chapters 2 and 3. In his social studies lessons, he presents students with an ethical life premised somewhat on existentialism, exemplified by the myth of Sisyphus: The act of applying oneself in the endless present, action which is itself a source of meaning that is also agnostic about any future. Karza presents his philosophy as a noble, ethical response to the difficulties of life in Iraq, and he encourages his students to find meaning in the act of not giving up. It is also present in the relief work I observed among some Kurdistan young people. In April 2017, I joined the first meeting of a new relief organization created by Kurdistan youth. “We are a secret group,” Rizgar, the lead organizer, explained at the organization’s first

meeting. “No one needs to know who we are. We don’t want to be in the news. We don’t need the government. We don’t need to be an NGO. A group of people who are committed can do a lot. That’s our purpose.” Rizgar addressed the small group gathered around an outdoor café table,

If people can just see what is happening - there are 1.8 million refugees and IDPs here, and there is a lot of shit - excuse my language - but there is a lot of shit. It is not pretty. It is difficult to see, the kind of poverty, the suffering. And some of it really fucked me up. It did. But then when you see you can actually help people, that you can make a difference, then you don’t feel hopeless.

Rizgar told the group about how he met the family of a girl with a hole in her heart. He asked the mother if he could take a photo with the girl to post, because he wanted people to “see her, to see that this isn’t something out there, this problem is here, and we have to do something. The government, the NGOs, they won’t do it,” he said. “We can’t just wait around for them to...If people could just see this, touch it, feel it, they would believe it. They would understand that they can do something,” he said. “Am I crazy? Do you believe?” he asked us, looking from one to another.

With “immanent action,” belief is generated through empirical evidence, “seeing, feeling, and touching” as Rizgar said, or, as in the metaphor that Karza used, turning on the light to see the worm in the apple. It is an ethical positioning that can inspire action while remaining agnostic about any “future,” because meaning and hope are generated in the present, where they sustain daily life, essentially pushing the rock back up the mountain in the eternal present. This ethical positioning can be very effective in difficult conditions, like war or a “failing” state, because, unlike nationalism and modernization narratives, it is not dependent on any “future” in any teleological sense.

Proponents of immanent action reject what I refer to as “immanent inaction,” characterized, perhaps unfairly, as “giving up” and “doing nothing.” In *Ethnographies of*

*Waiting: Doubt, Hope, and Uncertainty*, Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja write about how “waiting” is an “unstable object.” They argue that, “Waiting is not to be found merely in the absence of action but in an uncertain terrain where what is hoped for may or may not occur. Periods of waiting release diverse affects ranging from hope, enthusiasm, and urgency to apathy, paralysis and lethargy” (2020:16). Immanent inaction may manifest as epicurean “eat, drink, and be merry,” but I think it is more likely a sense of helplessness or hopelessness resulting from harsh conditions and with conscious reference to an uncertain or absent future that has been displaced by disaster.

If “immanent inaction” is an ethical position, it is subject to the same criticisms of the anthropologies of “virtue ethics” and “the good,” which I discussed in Chapter 2. If people are focused on survival and have limited agency, a model of ethical life that is premised on conscious, moral deliberation and action does not leave people living in “immanent inaction” any “ethics” to speak of. Rather, as critics of virtue ethics point out, there are moral opportunities in the mundane, “ordinary ethics” of daily life. Very few of my interlocutors might be said to inhabit the “immanent inaction” ethical position, largely because I spent time around people who not merely surviving and had resources at their disposal to “do something.”

“Transcendent action” in this dissertation is most obvious in the “missional” behavior of the founders of the Kurdistan Civilizational School. Motivated by religious faith, the present is inflected with the supernatural as people work toward a “known” future. Transcendent action also is present among interlocutors like Deena, who found a way to survive through their participation in some sphere, such as the gym, and who sometimes encouraged other people to take up the same set of practices for their benefit.

Additionally, nationalism and modernization discourses also resemble transcendent action. These discourses conceptualize the present as the site of continuous intervention, so that a desirable future will one day be realized, whether that is a “developed” or “modern” country, or an independent state.

Finally, “transcendent inaction” conceptualizes the present as the site of moral obligations, such as adhering to religious or cultural practices that make a person “good,” with reference to a telos, such as paradise. For this reason, “transcendent inaction” is often characterized, perhaps unfairly, as “fatalistic,” as it seems to ignore potential this-worldly action, in the political realm for example, because it is focused on a preordained future. Transcendent inaction is present in tenth grade literature teacher Jamila’s presentation of the novel *Till We Have Faces*, as described in Chapter 5. She interprets the protagonist’s demand to have an answer from the gods as arrogant and blasphemous. In this context, she leads her students in a discussion about why humans should not “try to know their future,” which is to demand an answer from God. Instead, humans are instructed to live upstanding moral lives in the present, without attempting to interfere with “fate.”

Of course, “ethical positions” are heuristic devices I use to think about how people conceptualize the world and their place in it. Ethical positioning is about how people position their own roles and responsibilities in relation to family, community, nation, or state. In my analysis, I have tried to be careful to not to place interlocutors squarely into any of these types of “positions.” First, people rarely, if ever, participate in only one type of ethical behavior, such as religion, although they may aspire to do so. Second, I have tried to center interlocutors’ interpretations of their ethical lives as they

articulated them to me. This stylistic and analytical decision, while I believe it more accurately renders the people I met in all their complexity, does return us to a long standing concern in anthropology: To take care not mistake “obligations,” or “oughts,” or “the good.” I referenced this debate in my discussion of ethics in Chapter 2.

Like “the good,” concepts of “hope” present a similar problem for anthropologists. Cheryl Mattingly and Uffe Juul Jensen (2015) write that,

Hope has long been regarded with great suspicion in social theory. And perhaps nowhere has the skepticism been more clearly directed than to people’s moralities, their beliefs about the good and the right, about individual responsibility and the cultivation of a self. Actors may have their hopes and dreams but these are not to be taken at face value (41).

By now, it should be clear that ethical positions may operate according to different conceptions of time and have different ways of reconciling pasts, presents, and futures. In *Anthropology and Philosophy: Dialogues on Trust and Hope*, the editors reflect on the temporalities of hope,

Trusting and hoping alike are conjectural modes of understanding. They relate to the practical identity of human beings as persons. Who can I trust? What may I hope? Although both trust and hope are related to factual understandings of past experiences, they equally imply a move toward the future that depends on the imaginary anticipation of the imminent. They concern future states that exceed the immediate control of the person trusting or hoping. But whereas trust typically concerns near and probably futures that mostly meet our expectations, hope may very well paint a scenario of a possible and radically different future (Liisberg, Pedersen, and Dalsgård 2015:1).

Ethical positioning is impacted, of course, by emplacement in space and time. In Iraq, cyclical violence, corruption, and foreign interventions have, no doubt limited the kinds of ethical positions people can take. At the same time, however, the potential advantages of relative political and economic stability, and interest in creating a more “tolerant” and equitable society and state, have amplified and intensified ethical mobility. Some people, positioned by wealth and status, were more mobile, and perhaps more anxious, than

others. For some interlocutors, the ability to move between different kinds of spaces with different sets of values increased the feeling of being pulled and pushed in different directions. I concede that these conditions may not constitute “value pluralism” in the strictest sense of the concept, as offering “an account of the actual structure of the moral universe” (Galston 2002:30). Rather, the contests of values I observed were more like the moral pluralism of Isaiah Berlin. Galston writes of Berlin, “He depicts a world in which fundamental values are plural, conflicting, incommensurable in theory, and uncombineable in practice – a world in which there is no single, univocal summum bonum that can be defined philosophically, much less politically” (ibid.).

Of course, conflicting values in the form of religious difference have long coexisted in Kurdistan, regulated by empire or by state and not without violence. However, ethnic and religious identity categories have effectively bounded sets of values, committing people to adherence, or at least the appearance of adherence, to those values and attendant practices ascribed to their community, and only their community. In the modern state, bounded identity categories have limited many forms of action or belonging, including religious (de)conversion, intermarriage, inheritance, and citizenship. What made contests of values in Kurdistan relevant to many of my interlocutors was not just that values are multiple, conflicting, and incommensurable, but that they also were *available* and *possible* for some people to adopt, but not others. Moving between ethical positions presented and multiplied choices and obligations, which seemed to me to be a source of anxiety for many of my interlocutors. How effectively people moved between or took different ethical positions, and how effectively they realized the values attending



those positions, has enormous consequences for generating hope. About conceptualizing “hope,” Mattingly and Jensen write,

We will speak of hope not as simple optimism or faith in some ‘happy ending,’ but as something darker and morally demanding. Paradoxically, hope is on intimate terms with despair. It asks for more than life promises. It is poised for disappointment.” “For these families, hope emerges as a strenuous moral project...Thus, cultivating a hopeful stance intimately involves an ongoing conversation with embittered despair. To hope is to be reminded of what is not, and what might never be. (2015:38-39).

Hope is made possible, or impossible, by governance, tolerance, and access to resources.

Value pluralism, and contexts that approximate it, offer the possibility of an “otherwise” in contemporary Kurdistan. The ability to rank-order values in new ways has been made more possible by a unique set of conditions in Kurdistan: On the one hand, there are stabilizing conditions of “modernity,” “modernization” discourse, and nationalism, such as the conceptualization of historical-linear time and the recontextualization of women in “revolutionary time” and “reproductive time,” and children as the “eternal future” (Pursley 2019). On the other hand, there are the destabilizing conditions of foreign interventions, the spread of global capitalism and neoliberalism, cycles of violence, and the perceived “failures” of the Iraqi and Kurdistan states. The convergence of these conditions has had tremendous effects on ethical life, on how people conceptualize time and space in the nation and in the state, their relation to “modernity,” and their resulting moral obligations. The chief of these obligations for many people, it seems, is the moral obligation to hope, which Mattingly and Jensen argue is bound up with “views of what it means to live a good life, to be a good person” (2015:39).

Based on one’s ethical positioning, moral obligations and the ability to cultivate hope vary. Immanent action encourages moral striving in the present that is agnostic

about the “future” and not predicated on any telos. Immanent inaction’s “displaced” or “lost” national or state futures makes the cultivation of hope difficult. Both transcendent action and transcendent inaction direct people toward a telos, although one’s moral obligations regarding the future vary according to conceptions of “providence” or “fate.” One sense of “fate” was the “judgment day” some of my interlocutors occasionally evoked. Perhaps because my field work occurred during the conflict with the Islamic State, apocalypse and judgment seemed experientially nearer. Mariam, the civics teacher, used the concept as a way of critiquing bad governance and of creating a sense of urgency to persuade her students and their generation to take action, either to prevent or to forestall the coming “judgment.” Mariam said,

Since 1991, when I was 7 or 8 years old, I kept hearing about the “judgment day.” People were saying what was happening was the judgment day. This is always the case when something bad is happening. For example, the Armenians after World War I said that it was the judgment. One day it will be judgment day for you. You don’t know and I don’t know when. So, I just live my life and try to know what is going on.

She admonished her students to keep up with news reporting, especially about the rest of Iraq, despite many students’ claims that Iraq was “not their country.” In the day of judgment, however, they would be held accountable for their moral choices, for what they did, or did not do, for their families, communities, and country. No one knew when that day would arrive, so everyone should “try to know what is going on” and to do their best. In her lessons on the Iraqi Constitution and the contemporary political situation, Mariam often spoke of the uncertainties and urgencies of time:

This is the difference between people who learned from the past and those who did not. If we go back to ancient times, we were more developed then than now. Imagine it: We are blessed in this country because we are part of this land, but we are cursed, too. For example, I am 33 years old. My mom keeps worrying about me, about my grandchildren. If we stay here there will be no future, she says. Shall we go or shall we stay? Shall we act or shall we be like a people just

watching, waiting? But we have this faith in each one of us. It will make us have hope.

Yakub [sneering]: *Inshallah* (God-willing)...

Mariam [seriously]: Yes. [with emphasis] Inshallah.

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In this dissertation, I have endeavored to describe a view of ethical life in Kurdistan in a way that does not reduce it to “grand schemes” (Schielke 2010b) like religion, or nationalism, modernization, or secularization. These “grand schemes” appear throughout my dissertation and haunt my analysis whenever my interlocutors evoked them, often presented as binaries, in their critiques of society and state. Although people challenged conceptualizations of the “sectarian,” the “modern,” the “nation,” and the “state,” their interpretations nevertheless tended to reproduce elements of the same problematic discourses. By relying heavily on ethnography, such as extended vignettes, transcripts of conversations, and lengthy quotes, I hope I have preserved many of the complexities, the contradictions, the uncertainties, the failures, and the triumphs of people who respond to a “moral obligation to hope” in the face of extraordinary circumstances. My use of the heuristics “ethical positions” or “ethical positioning” has not been to type people or to reduce expressions of moral life to neat categories, but rather to provide the reader with some points of reference that are present in interlocutors’ ethical lives as they narrated their lives to me and as I observed them.

I especially have attended to ethical life with a focus on Kurdistan young people, whom I have grouped into two cohorts: teenagers and young adults. Children and youth (0-24 years) comprise nearly half the population of the Middle East North Africa Region

(“MENA Generation 2030” 2019). In Iraq, almost half the population is under 19 years old, and about one third is between 15 and 29 years old (World Bank 2020). The anthropology of children and youth studies in the MENA region is a relatively new and growing subfield and one that offers many unexplored areas for research. For example, in spending time with a variety of young people, including “emerging” adults, my research sites expanded beyond the familiar domains of nationalism like schools, and considered spaces in which youth have formed communities of ethical practice such as bodybuilding, various forms of fitness and sports, and humanitarian work.

Moral and nationalist discourses, in portraying youth as the “future of the nation” also unduly burden young people, who by virtue of their youth, lack social and political agency and have limited resources for exercising the little agency they do have. The enormous youth presence at recent protests across Iraq is not just a sign of their lack of jobs or political frustrations; it is an exercise of their agency to fullest by putting all they have on the line – their lives. I hope that, by attending to how young people narrate their experiences, they can be appreciated as moral agents *now* and not as *becoming* or *future* agents. They are moral agents acting in the present and represented in the ethnographic present in this dissertation. They offer so much more than merely signifying a yet unrealized and uncertain future. I hope they know that their thoughts, opinions, questions, actions, disappointments, and hopes all matter to me, and to many people appearing in this dissertation, not just because they are “the future.” We care for them and want the best for them, and in caring, we may generate some hope for the future. Listening to the narratives of people in search of not just “liveable lives,” but in search of “the good,” is

crucial for cultivating hope. Generating hope is crucial, not only for our interlocutors, but also for our discipline of anthropology, with its own troubled past and uncertain futures.

We may find, as Ashur said, “bits of hope that nobody thought of.”

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## Curriculum vitae

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#### EDUCATION

- 2011 M.A., Social Sciences (MAPSS), University of Chicago  
2010 B.A., Anthropology, *summa cum laude*, The University of the South

#### PROFESSIONAL APPOINTMENTS

- 2021 Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology (Spring semester), University of the South, Sewanee, TN  
2019-2020 Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology and International and Global Studies, University of the South, Sewanee, TN  
2017-2018 Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of the South, Sewanee, TN  
2016-2017 Visiting Doctoral Researcher, University of Kurdistan-Hewlêr, Kurdistan, Iraq

#### AWARDS, GRANTS, and FELLOWSHIPS

- 2018 Federal Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship for Sorani Kurdish, Indiana University Summer Language Workshop  
2017 Alternate for AAUW American Dissertation Fellowship Program  
2016 P.E.O. Scholar Award, P.E.O. International  
2016 Conference funding, European Association of Social Anthropologists and Wenner-Gren Foundation  
2016 Conference funding, Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Wenner-Gren Foundation  
2016 Doctoral Student Travel Funding Award, University of Kentucky  
2016 Conference Funding, Graduate Student Congress, University of Kentucky  
2015 Dissertation Enhancement Award, The Graduate School, University of Kentucky  
2011-2014 Daniel R. Reedy Quality Achievement Fellowship, University of Kentucky  
2011 Critical Language Scholarship for Arabic study in Tunisia, U.S. Dept. of State  
2010 Merit-based tuition scholarship, University of Chicago Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

#### PUBLICATIONS and WORKS IN PROGRESS

- 2021 Journal article, "Bodybuilding and Building the Body Politic in Iraqi Kurdistan," in preparation to submit to *American Ethnologist*  
2016 "Exercising my Kurdish," *The Polyglot*, Indiana University  
2015 *Review of Nation and Identity in Iraq* by Sherko Kirmanj, *Kurdish Studies* 3(2): 227-229.  
2012 "Fictive Kinship and the Anthropologist's Position," *Anthropologies Project*  
2011 "Right(s) Back to Where We Started? Human Rights and Anthropology," *Anthropology News* 52(2):23.